

Trailers and Trouble? An Examination of Crime in Mobile Home Communities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether the amount of crime in mobile home communities is greater than the amount of crime in other types of neighborhoods and to determine whether the difference in crime levels is significant even after controlling for multiple other variables. Using official crime reports and other data from Omaha, Nebraska, the study finds no significant difference in population-weighted crime rates between blocks with mobile home communities and other types of residential blocks. Multivariate models show that the presence of mobile home communities did not significantly affect crime rates. The implications of these findings for land use policy are explored.

Introduction

Mobile home communities (also known as manufactured housing communities or trailer parks) are often portrayed negatively. Historically, mobile home dwellers have been accused of not paying their fair share of taxes (Clark, 1972; Cowgill, 1941; Hager, 1954). Individuals living in residential neighborhoods near mobile home communities often perceive the trailers as ugly and the lifestyle of the inhabitants as questionable; consequently, they believe the communities diminish the value of their homes (Bair, 1971b; Wallis, 1991). Decades of this antipathy have resulted in these mobile home communities being relegated to blighted areas by municipal zoning boards, or not allowed at all (Bair, 1971a; Bair, 1967; Drury, 1972; Worden, 1963).

Despite the persistence of this negative stigma, academic research focusing on crime and life in mobile home communities has been virtually nonexistent. This lack of research is especially surprising in the field of criminology, in which crime has been analyzed in urban neighborhoods (for example, Sampson and Groves, 1989), rural areas (for example, Barnett and Mencken, 2002), and public housing complexes (for example, Ireland, Thornberry, and Loeber, 2003), all of which

have features in common with mobile home communities. Guided by the social disorganization perspective, which often directs ecological studies of crime, this article examines the crime rates in and around mobile home communities in Omaha, Nebraska. Two research questions are particularly salient. First, how does the rate of crime on residential blocks with mobile home communities compare with the rate of crime on residential blocks adjacent to mobile home communities and with all other residential blocks?¹ Second, if significant differences do exist, do they remain significant when controlling for other variables selected for consistency with the social disorganization perspective?

Research on the spatial distribution of crime spans two centuries. In the 19th century, researchers discovered that they could detect meaningful patterns in the concentration of delinquents and crime by using ecological techniques (Balbi and Guerry, 1829; Mayhew, 1861). The work of the Chicago School sociologists in the early 20th century helped advance similar ideas in the United States (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie, 1925; Shaw and McKay, 1942). Shaw and McKay, in particular, argued that poor, constantly changing, and heterogeneous areas lacked the regulatory capacity to enable residents to achieve their common goals. They described this inability to regulate behavior as social disorganization (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Many subsequent works have used this theoretical perspective to guide inquiries into the correlations between crime and disorder (for example, Barnett and Mencken, 2002; Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush, 2001; Sampson and Groves, 1989; Warner, 2007).

A common theme for many of these works has been a focus on urban neighborhoods in large cities, often characterized by a population composed of primarily minority residents. Much less attention, however, has been given to poor neighborhoods that are traditionally composed of non-Hispanic Whites. This lack of attention is not necessarily a function of oversight by criminologists. Poor neighborhoods with predominantly non-Hispanic White populations are an anomaly, especially in large cities. For example, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) found no neighborhoods in Chicago, Illinois, that were of low socioeconomic status and had a population that was at least 75 percent White. Thus, the current study is novel in analyzing a type of neighborhood that is often of lower socioeconomic status and traditionally White (McDonnell, 1975). The study presented in this article may well be the first study that has examined crime in mobile home communities. The research results will try to illuminate whether processes that lead to crime in poor urban neighborhoods with primarily minority populations have similar effects in poor neighborhoods with primarily non-Hispanic White populations.

Mobile Home Communities: A Closer Look

Most scholarly work on mobile home communities is out of date, and references to crime in these unique neighborhoods are nonexistent. Because little prior research on mobile home communities is evident, knowledge of these neighborhoods can best be derived from U.S. Census data, various trade publications that explore the evolution of this housing option, and a small number of

¹ Residential blocks were defined as those blocks with a population of at least one individual, according to the 2000 Census.

academic publications that seek to explore life in mobile homes (Benson, 1990; Cowgill, 1941; Johnson, 1971; MacTavish and Salamon, 2001; Marsh, Thomson, and Collins, 1982; Miller and Evko, 1985). The following sections detail what is known about these communities from these varied sources.

History of Mobile Home Communities

Mobile homes began to appear in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. They started as automobile accessories, slowly transforming into stand-alone units that were used as permanent residences, often by older residents (Wallis, 1989). Mobile homes became more commonplace during the buildup to World War II, when the federal government installed these structures to accommodate the influx of workers who migrated to various cities to help in the nation's wartime manufacturing effort (Hager, 1954). After World War II, a fundamental shift in the demographics of the traditional mobile home resident occurred. Instead of housing mostly transitory workers and retired people, mobile homes became a means for younger, less educated, less affluent individuals, who may have been excluded from the conventional housing market, to obtain housing (French and Hadden, 1968; Marsh, Thomson, and Collins, 1982; Wallis, 1989).

As mobile home parks began gradually resembling traditional neighborhoods, President Richard M. Nixon recognized their status as a viable form of housing in 1970 (Pappas, 1991). That year also marked the first time that mobile homes were counted in the population census. In 1976, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) implemented a standard for mobile home safety and construction that all manufacturers were required to meet (Wallis, 1991). Ostensibly, this standard resulted in the vehicular aspects of the mobile home being deemphasized. The term *mobile home* is, consequently, a bit of a misnomer, because many of these units are permanent structures that are difficult, if not impossible, to move.

Mobile Homes Today

Mobile homes still represent a viable and popular form of housing today. According to the 2000 Census, 8.8 million mobile homes have been installed in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). They represent 8.4 percent of the owner-occupied housing units and 4.3 percent of the renter-occupied housing units in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). To clarify the perspective of these figures, mobile homes comprise the second largest percentage of all housing units in the United States after single-family detached units (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Mobile home communities have traditionally been homogeneous in terms of race and class (Cowgill, 1941; Edwards, Lemmack, and Hatos, 1973; French and Hadden, 1968; Fry, 1979; Johnson, 1971; MacTavish and Salamon, 2001; Wallis, 1991). These communities are usually home to White residents who are employed, or were employed, in blue-collar occupations (Edwards, Klemmack, and Hatos, 1973; Johnson, 1971; MacTavish and Salamon, 2001). Compared with the wider community, mobile home residents have lower incomes and education levels (Hart, Rhodes, and Morgan, 2002). Mobile home communities seem to be isolated from the wider community as a culmination of decades of restrictive zoning practices and overt hostility (Edwards, Klemmack, and Hatos, 1973; Johnson, 1971).

Social Disorganization Theory

Public housing communities and mobile home communities have important features in common. Studies of crime in public housing complexes are often based on a social disorganization/systemic model (see Dekeseredy et al., 2003; Ireland, Thornberry, and Loeber, 2003; McNulty and Holloway, 2000). High levels of poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity were expected to result in high levels of crime. This theoretical model has been supported with research that often indicates higher crime rates in and around public housing developments. Roncek, Bell, and Francik (1981), for example, found that blocks in Cleveland, Ohio, with public housing projects had more index crimes² compared with blocks without public housing. Dunworth and Saiger (1994) found that areas with public housing developments in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, California, and Phoenix, Arizona, had higher reports of violent crime than areas without public housing (see also McNulty and Holloway, 2000; Newman, 1972). Although the populations of public housing and those of mobile home communities differ in race and/or ethnicity, the residents have in common undesirable locations, isolation from community services, lack of land ownership, and demographic indicators of disadvantage.

Undesirable Locations

Restrictive zoning practices have severely limited the number of mobile home parks, virtually excluding them from residential areas and often relegating them to undesirable locations on the periphery of cities (Bair, 1971a; Bair, 1967; Dawkins et al., 2008; Drury, 1972; Worden, 1963). If mobile homes are permitted in close proximity to residential areas, it is often in the least desirable areas near flood plains, industry, or blighted properties (Wallis, 1991; Worden, 1963). Worden (1963) noted that these zoning decisions were often justified on the grounds that mobile home communities create sewage disposal problems, cause school overcrowding, or severely diminish surrounding property values. Geisler and Mitsuda (1987) argued that restrictive zoning practices reflect a conflict between economic classes because upper class, affluent homeowners seek to control “lower class” mobile home residents by relegating them to undesirable locations.

The practice of continually allocating only blighted land for mobile home parks leads to a vicious cycle (McDonnell, 1975). Negative sentiment toward mobile home parks is manifested in restrictive-zoning practices that relegate mobile homes to undesirable areas. Placing mobile home parks in these undesirable areas reinforces the notion that these neighborhoods represent substandard communities (Wallis, 1991). Many communities adamantly oppose the development of this form of housing (Geisler and Mitsuda, 1987).

A similar pattern exists for public housing. McNulty and Holloway (2000) reported that many public housing projects were relegated to already poor, segregated, and impoverished parts of U.S. cities. Ireland, Thornberry, and Loeber (2003) found that many communities strongly oppose building or maintaining public housing.

² The eight crimes (homicide and non-negligent manslaughter, robbery, forcible rape, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny/theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson) the Federal Bureau of Investigation combines to produce its annual crime index.

Isolation From Community Services

Both public housing and mobile home communities are often isolated from essential city services, especially the police. For public housing, physical isolation is exacerbated by a difficult dynamic involving the residents, the police, and the public housing authorities (PHAs) that manage the units. Holzman, Kudrick, and Voytek (1996) found that confusion exists over the ownership and governmental responsibilities involving public housing. Police officers and PHAs often do not share information about problems that may be occurring, and residents may be dissatisfied, fearful, or distrustful of police (Holzman, Kudrick, and Voytek, 1996; Popkin et al., 1995; Skogan and Annan, 1994). Venkatesh (2000) labeled public housing projects as “cities within cities” that are virtually cut off from the larger community.

A similar level of isolation has affected mobile home residents for decades (Miller and Evko, 1985). Mobile home residents may be isolated from routine police patrols because many of the streets in these complexes are maintained and managed by the park owner instead of the city (Newcomb, 1971). As a result, police are less likely to patrol the neighborhood unless the park owner specifically requests or arranges for police patrols (Newcomb, 1971).

Lack of Land Ownership

PHAs own and manage their housing units, leaving little proprietary interest for the residents (Holzman and Piper, 1998). Bowie (2001) argued that the lack of property ownership among public housing residents exacerbates the crime problems in these communities. The situation in mobile home communities is similar regarding land ownership, but certain differences in terms of unit ownership exist. Most mobile home dwellers own the units in which they live but rent space or land from the development owner (Miller and Evko, 1985). A small percentage of mobile home residents who live in mobile home parks own both the unit and the land on which the unit is installed. These developments are referred to as “mobile home estates” (Newcomb, 1971). Excluding such estates, most mobile home dwellers do not own land, thereby decreasing the stake these residents have in the community (MacTavish, Eley, and Salamon, 2006).

Similar Demographics

Besides race and ethnicity, the demographic profiles of public housing and mobile home developments are strikingly similar. Populations of both public housing (Raphael, 2001; Rosenbaum and Harris, 2001) and mobile home (MacTavish and Salamon, 2001; Miller and Evko, 1985) communities are characterized as having lower incomes. According to HUD, the average annual income for public housing residents in the United States is \$13,453 (<https://pic.hud.gov/pic/RCRPublic/rcrmain.asp>). In 1999, the median income for mobile home households was \$28,041 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In contrast, the median household income for all households was \$41,851 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Similarities also exist in terms of age distribution. Most heads of household living in public housing are between the ages of 25 and 44 or are over the age of 62 (Bowie, 2001; see also Holzman, 1996). This age distribution is quite similar to mobile home households, which usually consist of young families or retired individuals (Wallis, 1989). A final demographic similarity involves educational status: both populations have less formal education than the general population has (Holzman, 1996; Wallis, 1989).

Data and Methods

This study uses data on crime in Omaha, measured using official reports from the Omaha Police Department from 2000, 2001, and 2002. Crime data were geocoded using MapInfo Professional 9.5 and then aggregated to the residential-block level. The data for most other variables came from the 2000 Census. With the exception of median income, mobility, and overcrowding, those Census variables were also tabulated at the residential-block level of analysis.³ These data are available on the Census Bureau's website (<http://www.census.gov>). Between 2000 and 2002, the city of Omaha had 15 functional mobile home communities encompassing 32 city blocks; this collection of communities represented a sufficient number for conducting the following analysis.

Unit of Analysis

This study used a residential-block-level analysis. The block represents the smallest unit of analysis for which census data are tabulated (<http://www.census.gov>). Many advantages exist in using the block as a unit of analysis. The block's small size makes it a closer approximation to a neighborhood than census tracts or ZIP Codes, which are too large to facilitate interaction, encourage role obligations, or possess a unique rhythm like that found in street blocks (Appleyard, 1981; Jacobs, 1961; Roncek, 1981; Taylor, 1997). Larger units, such as census tracts, also tend to have greater variability regarding socioeconomic status and housing condition (Roncek, 1981).

Identifying Mobile Home Communities

The study ultimately identified 15 mobile home communities by using the phone book, accessing the Mobile Home Village website (<http://www.mhvillage.com>), conversing with manufactured housing dealers, and conducting discussions with city government officials. Researchers visited the sites to pinpoint the exact location of the development. They used city records to verify that those sites were functional mobile home communities between 2000 and 2002, the same period used for the crime data. All 15 communities studied met the definition of mobile home parks, in that multiple units are placed on the same property (Hart, Rhodes, and Morgan, 2002). The smallest community contained 10 mobile home units; the largest had close to 300 units.

Researchers, using MapInfo Professional 9.5, geocoded the locations of the 15 mobile home communities, which encompassed 32 street blocks.⁴ They also identified 67 blocks directly adjacent to, but not in, mobile home communities to assess any possible crime diffusion effects occurring in the areas immediately surrounding mobile home communities.⁵

³ Census data for median income, mobility, and overcrowding are not available at the block level but are available at the census-group level. Each block group contains, on average, 15 blocks. Data measuring the median income, mobility, and overcrowding for each block group were therefore imputed to all the blocks therein.

⁴ Of the 32 blocks, 25 were entirely composed of mobile home communities. The other 7 blocks were partially composed of mobile home communities; that is, other types of housing stock could also be found in those 7 blocks.

⁵ Adjacency was defined using Queen's contiguity, which defines a location's (or block's) neighbors as those areas (or blocks) with a shared border or vertex. Empirical examinations of public housing have found the presence of these structures may affect levels of crime in surrounding neighborhoods (see Holloway et al., 1998; Massey and Kanaiaupuni, 1993).

Variables in the Analysis

Multiple variables were examined during the course of the study. The following sections will discuss how the dependent and independent variables were measured as well as why they were included in the analysis.

Dependent Variables

This study used two outcome measures of crime. It measured the violent crime rate per 1,000 residents by adding the total frequency of homicides, assaults, sexual assaults, and robberies for each block from 2000 through 2002, dividing that number by the total number of residents per street block, and then multiplying by 1,000. The study measured the property crime rate by adding the total frequency of burglaries and auto thefts for each block from 2000 through 2002, dividing that number by the total number of residents per street block, and then multiplying by 1,000.⁶ To avoid short-term fluctuations and produce more stable measures, the crime data from 2000, 2001, and 2002 were combined into one measure. This common technique has been used in prior research (see Roncek and Meier, 1991). Both crime rates were then transformed for the multivariate analysis, using their natural logarithms to help normalize the distribution of both variables.

Independent Variables

The study researchers then undertook a multivariate regression analysis of both violent crime and property crime rates across all city blocks. The two primary independent variables of interest are (1) a dichotomous indicator of whether a block had a mobile home community and (2) a dichotomous indicator of whether a block was adjacent to a mobile home community. The study also included an interaction term representing the product of the dichotomous presence of a mobile homes variable and the percentage of owner-occupied housing as an additional independent variable in an alternative multivariate analysis. This variable was included to ascertain whether home ownership had a distinctive effect in mobile home blocks. The analysis also included two dichotomous indicators of whether a block had a public housing structure or whether a block was adjacent to a public housing structure.

The study, which used 12 additional variables based on census data from the year 2000 in the multivariate models, included median income, racial heterogeneity, and mobility as the fundamental social disorganization variables (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Racial heterogeneity was measured as 1 minus the sum of the squared proportions for each racial group represented in the 2000 Census. This measure of heterogeneity is based on five major groups: Whites, African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. Mobility was operationalized in terms of the percentage of residents who lived in a different house 5 years before the 2000 Census. The study also included additional proxy measures of disadvantage or social disorganization, including vacancy rate, percentage of owner-occupied housing, percent African-American residents, percent Hispanic residents, percent single mothers, and overcrowding. The study measured overcrowding as the total percentage of households with more than one occupant per room. The percentage of males 15 to 21 years of age and the percentage of residents 65 years of age and older were included

⁶ Ideally, all eight index crimes would be included in the analysis. The data for larceny/theft and arson, however, were not available.

to control for characteristics of the population. The study included area of the block to control for differences in crime that might be occurring because of the size of the block. Studies commonly use all these variables in studies that explore the ecological correlates of crime (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997; Warner and Pierce, 1993).

Findings

Exhibit 1 provides descriptive statistics of violent crime and property crime rates and census indicators across blocks with mobile home communities, blocks adjacent to mobile home communities, and all other residential blocks in Omaha. The average median income for block groups with mobile home communities (\$37,690) in 2000 was lower than the average median income for block groups adjacent to mobile home communities (\$40,160) and for all other residential block groups (\$44,530). The average percentage of African-American residents (0.68) on blocks with mobile home communities was substantially lower than the average percentage on blocks adjacent to mobile homes (5.84) and on all other residential blocks (15.24). The average mobility rate (or the percentage of residents living in a different house 5 years before the 2000 Census) on block groups with mobile home communities (48.54) was higher than the rate recorded on adjacent block groups (44.94) and on all other residential block groups (44.50) in Omaha. Finally, blocks with mobile homes had larger average areas (29.68) and older populations (17.38 percent of

Exhibit 1

Distribution of All Variables for Blocks With Mobile Homes, Blocks Adjacent to Mobile Homes, and All Other Residential Blocks in Omaha, Nebraska

Variable	Mobile*	Adjacent**	All Other Residential Blocks***
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Outcome			
Violent-crime rate ^a (2000-02)	51.52 (234.31)	49.22 (249.28)	53.10 (443.20)
Property-crime rate ^a (2000-02)	150.43 (584.41)	330.79 (846.16)	132.23 (749.84)
Explanatory			
Racial heterogeneity	11.70 (14.26)	14.04 (17.03)	20.07 (19.67)
Median income ^{b, c}	37.69 (8.32)	40.16 (11.22)	44.53 (22.89)
Mobility ^b	48.54 (7.11)	44.94 (10.49)	44.50 (14.87)
Vacancy rate	6.40 (9.09)	1.98 (4.35)	4.55 (7.77)
% Owner-occupied housing	78.65 (21.07)	66.16 (36.46)	68.81 (31.60)
% Female head of household with children under 18 years of age	8.26 (7.21)	7.38 (14.33)	8.59 (11.72)
% African American	0.68 (1.44)	5.84 (13.24)	15.24 (27.55)
% Hispanic	6.60 (15.19)	3.10 (6.95)	7.01 (14.17)
Area of block (acres)	29.68 (71.76)	28.71 (46.65)	8.61 (16.49)
% 65 years and older	17.38 (11.27)	14.92 (18.82)	13.40 (13.58)
% Males 15 to 21 years of age	2.90 (3.28)	3.31 (3.90)	4.81 (5.08)
Overcrowding ^b	4.34 (3.93)	4.48 (4.77)	3.73 (4.68)

SD = standard deviation.

* N=32. ** N=67. *** N=6,045.

^a Per thousand population.

^b Measured at the block-group level.

^c In thousands of dollars.

population 65 or older) than did adjacent blocks (28.71, 14.92 percent) and all other residential blocks (8.61, 13.40 percent).

Blocks with mobile homes had an average of 51.52 violent crimes per 1,000 residents from 2000 through 2002. This crime rate compares with an average of 49.22 violent crimes per 1,000 residents on blocks adjacent to mobile home communities and 53.10 violent crimes per 1,000 residents on all other residential blocks from 2000 through 2002. Blocks with mobile homes had an average of 150.43 property crimes per 1,000 residents from 2000 through 2002. Blocks adjacent to mobile home communities had an average property crime rate of 330.79 per 1,000 residents and all other residential blocks had an average property crime rate of 132.23 per 1,000 residents. An analysis of variance test indicated no statistically significant differences in the average rates of violent crime and property crime among blocks with mobile home communities, blocks adjacent to these communities, and all other residential blocks.

The study researchers then conducted separate regression analyses of the natural logs of property-crime and violent-crime rates across all street blocks in Omaha.⁷ The results of the property-crime and violent-crime analyses appear in exhibit 2. The results of alternative models of property crime

Exhibit 2

Coefficients From the Regression of the Natural Log of Property Crime Rates and the Natural Log of Violent Crime Rates for Street Blocks in Omaha, Nebraska

Variable	Property Crime (natural log)		Violent Crime (natural log)	
	b ^a	t-statistic	b ^a	t-statistic
Presence of mobile homes	- 5.82	- 1.86	2.92	0.98
Adjacent to mobile homes	2.96	1.35	- 3.50	- 1.67
Presence of public housing	7.00	2.24*	6.32	2.12*
Adjacent to public housing	3.02	1.56	6.16	3.31*
Racial heterogeneity	0.06	3.80*	0.06	3.98*
Median income ^{b, c}	- 0.01	- 14.66*	- 0.01	- 8.49*
Mobility ^b	0.01	0.44	0.02	1.06
Vacancy rate	0.13	3.94*	0.09	2.86*
% Owner-occupied housing	- 0.18	- 18.18*	- 0.14	- 14.39*
% Single mothers	- 0.01	- 0.54	0.02	0.66
% African American	0.08	7.42*	0.13	12.49*
% Hispanic	0.03	1.39	0.01	0.30
Area of block	0.12	9.55*	0.10	8.48*
% 65 years and older	- 0.03	- 1.56	- 0.04	- 2.21*
% Males 15 to 21 years of age	- 0.01	- 1.10	0.08	1.76
Overcrowding ^b	0.30	4.56*	0.43	6.94*
Intercept	4.71*		2.11*	
Adj. R-squared	0.30		0.29	
N = 6,144				

* $p < .05$.

^a Unstandardized b-coefficients have been multiplied by 10 to avoid miniscule numbers.

^b Measured at the block-group level.

^c In thousands of dollars.

⁷ In the analysis, researchers also used spatial lag models, which take into account spatial autocorrelation. Those results virtually mirror the regression results reported here. The spatial lag model results are available on request.

and violent crime containing the same independent variables plus an interaction term of mobile home community with percentage home ownership appear in exhibit 3.

As exhibit 2 indicates, the dichotomous variable for the presence of a mobile home community was not a statistically significant predictor of the natural log of property-crime rates or violent-crime rates in Omaha. The dichotomous variable measuring whether a block was adjacent to a mobile home community also failed to reach the standard of statistical significance in both models. The three strongest predictors of property-crime rates were the percentage of owner-occupied housing, median income, and the area of the block. The three strongest predictors of the violent-crime rate were the percentage of owner-occupied housing, the percentage of African-American residents, and median income. As exhibit 3 indicates, the inclusion of the interaction term of mobile home community with percentage home ownership did have a significant effect on the natural log of property-crime and violent-crime rates. The interaction term had a statistically significant and negative effect on both crime measures, which indicates that increasing levels of home ownership in mobile home communities distinctly decreased both crime rates. The other results were virtually identical to what was found in exhibit 2.

Exhibit 3

Coefficients From the Regression of the Natural Log of Property Crime Rates and the Natural Log of Violent Crime Rates for Street Blocks in Omaha, Nebraska, With the Interaction Term of Mobile Home and Home Ownership

Variable	Property Crime (natural log)		Violent Crime (natural log)	
	b ^a	t-statistic	b ^a	t-statistic
Presence of mobile homes	2.82	1.21	2.51	1.17
Adjacent to mobile homes	2.98	1.36	- 3.48	- 1.67
Presence of public housing	7.00	2.24*	6.33	2.12*
Adjacent to public housing	3.05	1.57	6.17	3.32*
Mobile home* % own-occupy	- 0.43	- 2.89*	- 0.29	- 1.97*
Racial heterogeneity	0.06	3.81*	0.06	3.98*
Median income ^{b, c}	- 0.01	- 14.68*	- 0.01	- 8.50*
Mobility ^b	0.01	0.38	0.02	1.11
Vacancy rate	0.13	3.83*	0.09	2.77*
% Owner-occupied housing	- 0.18	- 18.08*	- 0.14	- 14.32*
% Single mothers	- 0.01	- 0.49	0.02	0.70
% African American	0.08	7.45*	0.13	12.51*
% Hispanic	0.03	1.42	0.01	0.32
Area of block	0.12	9.47*	0.10	8.41*
% 65 years and older	- 0.03	- 1.50	- 0.04	- 2.16*
% Males 15 to 21 years of age	- 0.01	- 1.14	0.08	1.76
Overcrowding ^b	0.29	4.51*	0.43	6.91*
Intercept	4.70*		2.10*	
Adj. R-squared	0.30		0.28	
N = 6,144				

* $p < .05$.

^a Unstandardized b-coefficients have been multiplied by 10 to avoid miniscule numbers.

^b Measured at the block-group level.

^c In thousands of dollars.

Discussion

Official police data from 2000 through 2002 in Omaha indicate no statistically significant difference in the rates of crime between blocks with mobile home communities, blocks adjacent to mobile home communities, and all other residential blocks. In regressions controlling for a variety of other variables, the association of mobile home communities remained statistically insignificant. Blocks adjacent to mobile homes also manifested no significant association with either property-crime or violent-crime rates.

The study found that blocks and block groups with mobile home communities had lower percentages of female-headed households, young males, and African Americans and a higher percentage of home ownership than did the other types of blocks studied. Typically, these factors indicate lower levels of disadvantage (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997; Sampson and Wilson, 1995). This point is further reinforced by comparing blocks with mobile homes with blocks with public housing complexes. In 2000, the 34 blocks with public housing structures had, on average, an African-American population of 64.57 percent, a percentage of owner-occupied housing of 9.39, and a median income of \$16,280.

Perhaps the most glaring difference between blocks with mobile home communities and those with public housing structures was the percentage of owner-occupied housing. The average percentage of owner-occupied housing on blocks with mobile homes was 78.65. Many individuals in these communities own their units (or mobile homes) and rent the land. This same arrangement does not exist for public housing residents.

The difference in the percentage of home ownership may be one reason why the crime rates in blocks with mobile home communities does not approach the level found in blocks with public housing structures. Home ownership has been an important factor in predicting lower levels of crime and disorder in a neighborhood in several previous works (see Roncek, 1981; Ross, 1977; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). It is argued that individuals who own a housing unit have a greater stake, economically and socially, in maintaining the viability of the overall neighborhood. This study found that an interaction term for the presence of a mobile home community and the percent of households that are owner occupied had a statistically significant and negative association with both violent-crime and property-crime rates over and above the negative association of home ownership and crime in general.

Wilson (1987) and Sampson and Wilson (1995) have argued that higher rates of crime and disorder in low-income African-American communities exist because Whites and African Americans live in distinct communities with different levels of structural disadvantage. In these truly disadvantaged areas, residents are socialized to participate in criminal and deviant behavior because most of the other residents are already involved with criminal or deviant activities (Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Skogan, 1990). In addition, residents might deem criminal behavior the only option because of persistent unemployment (Krivo and Peterson, 1996). Residents in mobile home communities, in contrast, may at least have an owned asset, in the form of a manufactured home (Coleman, 1988; Yinger, 1995). They may also not face the level of discrimination that could be faced by African-American residents who attempt to obtain housing (Krivo and Kaufman, 2004; Massey and Denton, 1993; Turner, 1992).

Despite the apparent better standing of mobile home communities relative to public housing communities, mobile home communities in Omaha are not without problems. The descriptive data in exhibit 1 indicate the average block or block group within a mobile home community is characterized by a low-income population living in a large area with a higher vacancy and mobility rate when compared with adjacent blocks and all other residential blocks (see MacTavish et al., 2006 for similar conclusions). Mobile home communities also have higher frequencies of crime than the average Omaha block has. The average raw frequency (before being converted to population rates) of violent crime from 2000 through 2002 was 1.62 offenses in blocks with mobile home communities, .96 offenses in blocks adjacent to mobile home communities, and 1.24 offenses in all other residential blocks. For property crime, the average frequency was 5.84 offenses in blocks with mobile home communities, 4.54 offenses in blocks adjacent to mobile home communities, and 3.43 offenses in all other residential blocks. In their subjective experience, the residents of mobile home communities may not fully adjust for population in their encounters with crime, and they might well perceive their neighborhoods as more dangerous than average. They have some protective factors against crime, however, that the residents of “truly disadvantaged” communities lack.

Policy Implications

The results of the study suggest that cities and other municipalities should not be so reticent to allow the creation or expansion of mobile home communities. Mobile home developments are not dens of crime and disorder (Dawkins et al., 2008). The presence of such communities, at least in Omaha, does not significantly increase crime rates, after controlling for a variety of other demographic factors. Communities have a vested interest in providing housing options for those residents who are less affluent or cannot afford to own a traditional home. Dawkins et al. (2008) found that the price of manufactured housing is less than one-half the price of site-built housing, after adjusting for land costs. Finding affordable housing was a matter of deep concern for many communities even before the current economic crisis. Apprehension about mobile home communities, especially in terms of their possible effect on crime, may be overstated. The evidence of this article is supportive of Dawkins et al. (2008), who urge that local regulators should seek to make sure that the permitting system is disposed toward allowing greater placement of mobile home or manufactured-housing communities.

A more positive treatment of manufactured housing by planning commissions is undoubtedly difficult to achieve given the prevailing negative sentiment regarding mobile home communities. One factor driving this negative sentiment is the unsightly appearance of some mobile home communities, especially those with units built before the HUD standards were implemented in 1976. MacTavish, Eley, and Salamon (2006) point out that finding effective ways of replacing old units with new units is one of the most pervasive structural problems in mobile home communities. Some communities have had success using Community Development Block Grant funds and other local funds to help finance the replacement of older and dilapidated units (MacTavish, Eley, and Salamon, 2006). The replacement of older units can not only improve the appearance and functionality of mobile home communities but can also address the issue of overcrowding, which is significantly and positively associated with both violent-crime and property-crime rates.

The limitations of this study need to be acknowledged and, in future work, transcended. The use of block-group data in lieu of block-level data for three census indicators may affect the precision of these indicators. It is difficult to generalize the findings of the current study to mobile home communities in all areas of the United States; for example, in some places, especially in warm climates, mobile home communities cater to affluent and mostly retired individuals (Hart, Rhodes, and Morgan, 2002). Undoubtedly, the findings would be different for that type of mobile home community. The 15 communities studied in Omaha, however, were quite diverse, ranging from what Hart, Rhodes, and Morgan (2002) call utilitarian mobile home communities to upscale mobile home communities.

Future research about mobile home communities could take several directions. As Dawkins et al. (2008) suggested, the study of manufactured housing communities is stymied by the limited amount of data that exist about these developments. A more thorough collection of data about manufactured housing communities would help catalyze future research and understanding of these unique developments. Future studies of crime and residents' life in mobile home communities might also consider the extent of drug-related crimes, residents' relations with police, and relations among residents. Further, the physical designs of these communities and their possible effect on opportunities for crime should also be explored. Future scientific research may help erode existing stereotypes that are imbedded in decades of friction between mobile home communities and larger municipalities. Extending beyond this rhetoric allows municipalities, police, managers of mobile home communities, and residents to accurately identify and address the problems these unique neighborhoods face.

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