

Neighborhood disorder, psychological distress, and heavy drinking

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Abstract

Studies show that residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods drink more heavily than residents of more affluent neighborhoods. However, explanations for this association are not well developed. Using data collected from a sample of low-income women with children from Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, we explore the possibility that perceptions of neighborhood disorder encourage heavy drinking. Drawing on Conger's (Q. J. Stud. Alcohol 17 (1956) 296) tension reduction hypothesis, we propose that the stress of living in a neighborhood characterized by problems with drugs, crime, teen pregnancy, unemployment, idle youth, abandoned houses, and unresponsive police can be psychologically distressing and lead some people to consume alcohol as a means of palliative escape, to regulate feelings of anxiety and depression. In support of the tension reduction hypothesis, we find that the positive association between neighborhood disorder and heavy drinking is largely mediated by anxiety and depression.

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Introduction

If neighborhoods shape the drinking practices of residents, how do they? In this paper, we explore the possibility that perceptions of neighborhood disorder encourage heavy drinking. Drawing on Conger's (1956) tension reduction hypothesis, we argue that the stress of living in a neighborhood characterized by problems with drugs, crime, teen pregnancy, unemployment, idle youth, abandoned houses, and unresponsive police can be psychologically distressing and lead some people to consume alcohol as a means of palliative escape, to regulate feelings of anxiety and depression.

Studies show that residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods drink more heavily than residents of more affluent neighborhoods (Crum, Lillie-Blanton, & Anthony, 1996; Andrulis, 1997; Ennett, Flewelling, Lindrooth, & Norton, 1997; Fitzpatrick & LaGory, 2000; LaVeist & Wallace, 2000); however, explanations for this association are not well developed. Some scholars argue that bars, liquor stores, and other retail alcohol outlets are more prevalent in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Crum et al., 1996; Jones-Webb, Hsiao, Hannan, & Caetano, 1997a; Alaniz, 1998; Gorman, Speer, Gruenwald, & Labouvie, 2001; LaVeist & Wallace, 2000). Others contend that alcohol is heavily marketed in poor and minority neighborhoods with billboards, signs, and other forms of advertising (Lee & Callcott, 1994; Andrulis, 1997; Alaniz, 1998; Wallace, 1999; Harwood et al., 2003). Although research shows that alcohol availability and marketing are related to

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patterns of heavy drinking in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Rabow & Watts, 1982; Cassisi, Delehant, Tsoutsouris, & Levin, 1998; Wallace, 1999; George et al., 2001), it is unlikely that these factors alone shape the drinking practices of residents.

There is some evidence to suggest that various aspects of the cultural environment may also promote heavy drinking. That is, disadvantaged neighborhoods may provide a normative context in which heavy drinking is not sanctioned as strongly as within other neighborhoods (Crum et al., 1996; Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Ennett et al., 1997; LaVeist & Wallace, 2000). Police protection is often inadequate in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and, as a result, the consequences associated with deviant behavior (e.g., public intoxication) may be less severe than in other more affluent neighborhoods. For whatever the reason, signs of alcohol consumption are common in disadvantaged neighborhoods. For example, Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) find that public intoxication and empty or broken alcoholic beverage containers are quite common in these neighborhoods. Taken together, neighborhood characteristics such as these may signify to residents that mechanisms of social control are weak or have ceased to function (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Gorman et al., 2001).

Building on prior research, we propose yet another mechanism by which disadvantaged neighborhoods may promote heavy drinking. In this paper, we argue that the stress of living in a disadvantaged neighborhood increases psychological distress, which in turn leads to heavy drinking. Our presentation consists of four sections. First, we develop the conceptual model upon which subsequent analyses are based. Second, we introduce the data source, measures, and statistical procedures. Third, we use data collected from a sample of low-income women with children from Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio to test whether the relationship between perceived neighborhood disorder and heavy drinking is mediated by psychological distress. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings and the possible health implications for women and their children.

Theoretical background

The tension reduction hypothesis

Although people consume alcohol for a variety of reasons, research shows that people often use alcohol to regulate unpleasant emotions (Abbey, Smith, & Scott, 1993; Holahan, Moos, Holahan, Cronkite, & Randall, 2001). Conger's (1956) tension reduction hypothesis proposes that (a) alcohol reduces stress-induced tension or psychological distress, and (b) people consume alcohol for its tension-reducing properties. Whether

alcohol actually reduces tension has yet to be established in the literature (see Sayette, 1999). The key idea behind the tension reduction hypothesis is that people often consume alcohol in response to stressful conditions and to relieve the symptoms of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and other forms of distress.

The tension reduction hypothesis has received modest empirical support. For example, studies show that anxiety (Pearlin & Radabaugh, 1976) and depression (Peirce, Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1994; Russell, Cooper, Frone, & Peirce, 1999) may mediate the relationship between financial stress and alcohol consumption. There is some evidence that the tension reduction hypothesis may hold for illicit substances as well. For example, Boardman, Finch, Ellison, Williams, and Jackson (2001) find that psychological distress partially mediates the association between neighborhood disadvantage and drug use. Drawing on the tension reduction hypothesis, we argue that the stress of living in a dangerous, threatening, or otherwise noxious neighborhood environment can be psychologically distressing and, as a result, promote heavy drinking.

Neighborhood disorder and stress

Neighborhoods with high levels of disorder present residents with observable signs that social control is weak (Ross, 2000; Ross & Mirowsky, 2001; Skogan, 1986, 1990; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Taylor & Hale, 1986). In these neighborhoods, residents often report problems with crime, vandalism, graffiti, people hanging out on the streets, public intoxication, run-down and abandoned buildings, drug use, danger, trouble with neighbors, and other incivilities associated with the breakdown of social control (Geis & Ross, 1998; LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992; Lewis & Maxfield, 1980; Lewis & Salem, 1986; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Skogan, 1986, 1990). These are some of the signs of neighborhood disorder. They convey to residents that social order has broken down and signify a potential for threat and danger. In this paper, we argue that living with this potential can be stressful and, in time, psychologically distressing.

Neighborhood disorder and psychological distress

It is easy to see how neighborhoods characterized by problems with drugs, crime, teen pregnancy, unemployment, idle youth, abandoned houses, and unresponsive police can be stressful. Still to be conceptualized are the mechanisms through which neighborhood disorder may shape the drinking practices of residents. In this paper, we hypothesize that the relationship between

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