Social Science Research 54 (2015) 177–194

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Testing the temporal nature of social disorder through abandoned buildings and interstitial spaces

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 6 February 2014
Revised 19 May 2015
Accepted 18 June 2015
Available online 26 June 2015

Keywords:
Disorder
Abandoned buildings
Systematic social observations

ABSTRACT

With the recent housing crisis, studying abandoned buildings has once again become important. However, it has been some time since abandoned buildings were the subject of direct study, leaving scholars with scant knowledge about the characteristics of abandoned buildings, how they change, and their relationship to neighborhood processes. To fill this gap, we employed longitudinal photographic and SSO evaluations of 36 abandoned buildings and their immediate surroundings in Chicago for one year ($n = 587$). Results demonstrate the presence and severity of social disorder cues vary across time points and the time of day of observation. There is a relationship between abandoned buildings and social disorder, though the relationship is not a trend. Also, social disorder is diminished around extremely decayed buildings. Lastly, we find that our results are driven by the measurement of places ignored by most SSO studies, including alleys and the rear side of buildings.

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1. Introduction

Do abandoned buildings serve as contagion points for disorder? While derelict buildings have long been seen as blight on neighborhoods, the recent housing crisis and the long decline of Rust Belt cities, like Cleveland and Detroit, have reanimated this longstanding question in sociological and criminological research. Abandoned buildings[2] are considered signs of disorder, evidence of a neglected urban landscape, and a harbinger of the slow decline of neighborhoods (Skogan, 1990; Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Hunter, 1985). Furthermore, languishing abandoned buildings damage property values and investment in communities (Immergluck, 2012; Immergluck and Smith, 2006), and property investors regularly use signs of disorder, including abandoned buildings, to judge if buying a property is a good investment (Immergluck, 2012). Moreover, abandoned buildings are seen as hot spots and contagions for crime since they provide privacy and little guardianship (Spelman, 1993; Eck and Spelman, 1987). As such, they can be used for prostitution, drug dealing and using, squatting, and other illegal activities like theft (Eck and Spelman, 1987; Ouellet et al., 1991; Spelman, 1993). It is surprising then, that given the centrality of abandoned buildings in neighborhood processes and crime, we have little recent scholarly information about them.

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[2] While a limited number of studies focus on abandonment, interpreting the research that has been conducted is complicated by variability in the term's operationalization. "Abandoned" is not always defined in research projects, and when it is defined, it is operationalized in ways that produce meaningful differences in statistical models (Morckel, 2014). Furthermore, there may be operational differences between vacancy and abandonment, the latter sometimes simply being a more extreme case of the former. For example, the City of Chicago has a variety of definitions of vacancy that are contingent on the type of property involved: small residential, large residential, non-residential, or construction site (City of Chicago, 2010). For the cases of this study, we use the City of Chicago Fast Track Abatement Program's definition of an included property as a proxy for abandonment, as explained below.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2015.06.013
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Abandoned buildings are unlikely to be static, though most studies of abandoned buildings only monitor the change in crime and disorder around buildings (Spelman, 1993; Eck and Spelman, 1987), not changes to the building. Not only are buildings dynamic, one abandoned building is not like the other: some buildings possess few signs of dereliction, while others possess overwhelming signs of damage. When measured "objectively,"[3] abandoned buildings are typically quantified as a binary variable: being present or not. Measuring abandoned buildings in this manner ignores the several dimensions of variability inherent in buildings, such as how severe the structural damage to the building is or whether or not the building is unsecured. Once again, an in-depth analysis of abandoned buildings, what they are like, and how they change over time, is wanted.

How do abandoned buildings change? Do they play a role in the generation of additional disorder? Our study aims to address these questions by conducting a longitudinal photographic investigation of abandoned buildings where we not only include the front of buildings but venture into alleyways to document their backs. This enables us to examine changes to the buildings and the disorder occurring both on and around them. Our results will shed light on how disorder cues—particularly physical disorder cues—change both over time and in the severity of their condition. While disorder is generally thought of as temporal in nature (Hipp, 2007), little research documents how disorder changes over time, and there are no studies that examine disorder's flux across short timelines as does our study. Here, our work is the first to document the timeline surrounding the trajectory of disorder; as such, we will be able to ascertain whether disorder is generated over the course of a week or if it has a longer time line, closer to a year. Furthermore, our study will examine how variability in the condition or severity of a disorder cue is related to later social disorder. This is not only important for disorder studies, but also urban studies and planning research interested in the relationship between disorder, vacancy, crime, and other neighborhood problems. Without comprehending the trajectory of disorder, understanding the relationship between neighborhood processes and disorder, abandoned buildings, and vacant properties is difficult.

The implications of this work will assist cities in understanding the problems and dynamic nature of abandoned buildings. Many cities, especially those engaging in community or "hot spot" policing, take great efforts to reduce the number and detrimental effects of abandoned buildings (Braga and Bond, 2008; Skogan, 1990; Spelman, 1993), citing crime, budgetary drains, and a low likelihood of being returned to productive use as reasons for abatement and demolition (United States Conference of US Mayors, 2006). Only a few studies have examined the effect of abandoned buildings on neighborhood processes (see Spelman, 1993; Skogan et al., 2004), leaving a large gap between rigorous study of abandonment and the housing crisis of 2007. Our research fills this important information void for cities and their emergency services, like police and fire departments.

2. Defining disorder and the spiral of decay

Characterized by visual cues, disorder is the violations of norms that govern public space and behavior (Hunter, 1985; Skogan, 1990). Typically, disorder comprises threatening public behavior or characteristics of the physical environment that convey a potential for criminal threat (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). Physical disorder shows signs of neglect and dilapidation in the urban environment, such as cracked sidewalks, vacant lots, foreclosed and neglected homes, litter, or broken windows (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Skogan, 1990), while social disorder is primarily based on the behavior of people in public spaces, such as people arguing on the street, loitering, or drug selling and using (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Skogan, 1990). The spiral of decay, or disorder's trajectory, is the pathway through which disorder is thought to cause additional disorder and, eventually, crime. The relationship between disorder and decline in neighborhoods is one that takes time, beginning with unaddressed neighborhood disorder (Skogan, 1990). In order for disorder to affect crime and other neighborhood outcomes, disorder must precipitate additional disorder. Thus, the breakdown in civility generated from increases in disorder is the fulcrum for disorder generating other negative neighborhood social outcomes (Skogan, 1990).

Disorder propagates itself by affecting how individuals interact with neighborhood physical space. When disorder is not addressed, it changes residents' perceptions and attitudes regarding physical and social space. Disorder generates fear in residents (Garofalo and Laub, 1978; Wilson and Kelling, 1982) along with the idea that the city or local government is unable or unwilling to address disorder (Hunter, 1985). Consequently, residents restrict territoriality and withdraw from neighborhood life (Wilson and Kelling, 1982), thereby reducing informal social control in the neighborhood, which then leads to more disorder. Kingsley et al. (2009) provide an excellent illustration of this process in the recent concern about foreclosures and vacant homes brought about by the 2007 housing crisis and recession. When homeowners first receive notice of foreclosure, they may begin to defer regular property maintenance, leaving yards overgrown and the property to decay. The property's condition worsens when the homeowners finally vacate and legal custodians do not sufficiently guard and maintain the property (Kingsley et al., 2009). While there were reports during the housing crisis that neighbors would step into help maintain yards and provide low level maintenance (Holdsworth, 2010), they are unlikely able to conduct repairs to the building's

[3] "Objective" measurement of disorder is observations of disorder that are taken by the researcher, not neighborhood residents, so that the measurement is unbiased by residents' interpretations of the conditions. Systematic social observation (SSO) is a method to document social phenomena occurring in their natural states without the introduction of an intermediate subject's bias. Because SSOs are independent of residents' perceptions, SSOs can "tap aspects of the social and physical environment that survey respondents have difficulty describing accurately" (Raudenbush and Sampson, 1999; p. 11). On the other hand, subjective measures of disorder are the measurement of disorder through the eyes of residents, or other individuals important to the study of disorder, like neighborhood stakeholders. Subjective measures of disorder typically involve surveys that gage respondents' attitudes about disorder.

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