Title: Crime and Safety in Urban Schools and Neighborhoods

Author: Johanna Ruth Lacoe

Advisor: Ingrid Gould Ellen

Date: April 2013

Dissertation Abstract

Outcomes for urban youth are influenced by myriad personal, environmental, and societal factors. Among these, neighborhood crime and disorder, housing, and education are already primary targets for public policy intervention. This dissertation provides new empirical evidence of the spillover effects of foreclosures on neighborhood crime, how school contextual factors affect racial disparities in student safety, and how feeling unsafe in the classroom decreases academic performance. The studies focus on the causes and consequences of crime and disorder in neighborhoods and schools, use micro-level panel data and rigorous quantitative methods, and provide policy-relevant discussion.

Chapter 1, co-authored with Ingrid Gould Ellen, investigates the impact of mortgage foreclosures on criminal behavior within micro-neighborhoods in Chicago. The analysis determines that properties in foreclosure increase total, violent, and public order crime. Foreclosures change the location of criminal behavior within blockfaces, shifting crime inside residences and into vacant and abandoned buildings, with null effects on crime occurring on the street.

Chapter 2 uses student-level panel survey and administrative data from New York City to explore racial and ethnic disparities in feelings of safety at school. Findings indicate that
black and Hispanic middle school students feel less safe at school than white and Asian students who share the same schools and classrooms. Multilevel modeling identifies key school characteristics that contribute to these gaps. Results suggest that black and Hispanic students respond differently to school contexts in ways that are correlated with feeling unsafe.

Chapter 3 provides the first large-scale investigation of how feeling unsafe in the classroom impacts student academic achievement. Feeling unsafe decreases test scores directly and indirectly through increased absences. Estimates are robust to controls for future feelings of safety and safety in other school locations. Students who attend the most violent schools experience greater negative effects of feeling unsafe.

This dissertation explores the generators of neighborhood crime and how government entities such as schools foster disparities in safety among schoolchildren and affect their ability to learn. Understanding these contexts is critical for evaluating current policy and designing future policy to prevent the negative effects of concentrated poverty and crime in urban neighborhoods.