

Resident Perceptions as a Function of Neighborhood Socioeconomic Status

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Resident Perceptions as a Function of Neighborhood Income Levels

Neighborhood perceptions are likely to vary as a function of a variety of different individual- and community-level variables. For example, the experience of personal and property crime victimization has been found to influence residents' perceptions of neighborhood safety (e.g., Baba & Austin, 1989; Baba, Holyer, & Austin, 1991; Kalinich & Karr, 1981), and satisfaction with the physical appearance of a neighborhood has also been found to be related to crime fears, and well as neighborhood life quality perceptions (Edwards, Weakly, Van Hoosen, Wolfe, & McDonald, 2003; Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992; Perkins & Taylor, 1996). Even the amount of green spaces in a neighborhood has been found to be related to judgments of neighborhood safety, environmental satisfaction, and sense of community (Kuo, Bacaicoa, & Sullivan, 1998; Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, & Brunson, 1998).

Unfortunately, many studies of the variables that may predict residents' perceptions of their neighborhoods do not directly evaluate the effect that the socioeconomic status (SES) of the neighborhood may have on these perceptions. This is potentially problematic in that some researchers have found that neighborhood SES can predict residents' and neighborhood health (e.g., Elliot, 2000; Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002; Pickett & Pearl, 2001; Robert, 1998), and even residents' social and physical activity levels (e.g., Estabrooks, Lee, & Gyurcsik, 2003). In short, SES seems to be an important variable to study in research on neighborhood perceptions and experiences.

The purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which neighborhood residents' perceptions and experiences differed across SES (income) levels in a mid-sized American city. It

was predicted that indicators of neighborhood health and life quality would be higher in high-income neighborhoods than in middle- and low-income neighborhoods.

Method

A 39-item survey with items assessing various neighborhood perceptions and experiences, including perceptions and fear of crime, history of crime victimization, satisfaction with the appearance of the neighborhood, sense of community, and neighborhood quality of life perceptions, was distributed to 1800 households in the Boise, Idaho area. The surveys were distributed via a systematic random sampling technique to every 10th household in nine randomly selected census tracts (three of these census tracts were in the highest third of income levels, three in the middle third, and three in the lowest third). Each survey was accompanied by a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope. Surveys were returned from 440 respondents, for a response rate of just under 25%. Survey response rates did not differ as a function of neighborhood income level (the response rates were 35.9%, 31.4%, and 32.7%, for the high-, middle-, and low-income neighborhoods, respectively). Sixty-five percent of the respondents reported themselves to be women, and nearly 80% reported being White. Nearly 80% of the respondents reported being homeowners. The median age of the respondents was 47 years, and the median length of residence at the respondents' current address was 10 years.

Results

The results of the neighborhood perception items with interval-scale response options were aggregated by income levels and subjected to a one-way multivariate analyses of variance. A statistically significant difference in neighborhood perceptions was found among the three

income groups. Separate univariate analyses of variance probed for statistically significant differences in perceptions as a function of neighborhood income level on each item.

As seen in Table 1, several statistically significant differences ($p \leq .05$) in perceptions were found as a function of income levels. These results were accounted for by: 1) residents in high- and middle-income neighborhoods having significantly lower perceptions and fears of neighborhood crime than residents of low-income neighborhoods; 2) residents of high-income neighborhoods reporting significantly more satisfaction with the appearance of their neighborhoods than residents of middle- and low-income neighborhoods; 3) residents of high-income neighborhoods reporting significantly less concerns about neighborhood traffic than residents of middle-income neighborhoods; 4) residents of high-income neighborhoods reporting a greater neighborhood sense of community than residents of low-income neighborhoods; and 5) residents in high-income neighborhoods reporting a higher neighborhood quality of life than residents of middle- and low-income neighborhoods.

Separate chi-square analyses were conducted for three items that featured dichotomous “yes/no” response formats. As seen in Table 2, no significant differences were found as a function of neighborhood income levels for history of personal or property crime victimization, or for satisfaction with levels of police presence in the neighborhood.

Discussion

The hypothesis that the survey respondents’ perceptions and experiences would differ as a function of their neighborhood’s income level was largely confirmed. As hypothesized, residents in high-income neighborhoods generally reported their neighborhoods to be more healthy (i.e., more visually attractive, with less perceived crime and traffic, more sense of community, and a

higher quality of life) than residents of middle- and low-income neighborhoods. These results have obvious policy implications for city and neighborhood planners, members of neighborhood associations, and others who might wish to identify which neighborhoods are likely to be healthy and which are not. These results also have implications for those who are interested in making all neighborhoods healthy places to live for their residents. It seems clear that interventions designed to increase neighborhood life quality are well suited for middle- and low-income neighborhoods, as these neighborhoods—according to the results of this study—appear to be most likely to face the types of challenges (e.g., higher traffic levels, higher fear of crime, and lower sense of community) that may make neighborhoods less desirable and vulnerable to deterioration.

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Table 1

Mean resident perceptions as a function of neighborhood income level

Variable	Income Level		
	Low	Middle	High
Perception of neighborhood crime	3.37 ^a	2.80 ^b	2.69 ^b
	(2.19)	(1.19)	(1.23)
Fear of neighborhood crime	2.75 ^a	2.29 ^b	2.27 ^b
	(1.51)	(1.25)	(1.41)
Satisfaction with neighborhood composition	4.77	4.89	5.20
	(1.59)	(1.63)	(1.58)
Satisfaction with neighborhood appearance	4.49 ^a	4.56 ^a	5.08 ^b
	(1.49)	(1.53)	(1.44)
Satisfaction with trees and green spaces	4.98	4.82	5.23
	(1.63)	(1.74)	(1.50)
Perceived neighborhood traffic problems	3.58 ^{a,b}	3.96 ^a	3.44 ^b
	(1.82)	(1.99)	(1.89)
Perceived neighborhood noise problems	3.26	3.16	2.84
	(1.68)	(1.64)	(1.59)
Perceived importance of knowing neighbors	4.56	4.75	4.73
	(1.75)	(1.75)	(1.65)
Perceived neighborhood sense of community	3.47 ^a	3.75 ^{a,b}	3.92 ^b
	(1.62)	(1.58)	(1.65)
Perceived neighborhood quality of life	4.99 ^a	5.31 ^a	5.77 ^b
	(1.27)	(1.17)	(1.05)

Note. All ratings are on a 7-point scale, with higher numbers indicating higher values; numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. Superscripts indicate significant differences across rows.

Table 2

Percentages of residents' crime experiences and perceptions as a function of neighborhood income level

Variable	Income Level					
	Low		Middle		High	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
History of personal crime victimization	9.7	90.3	4.4	95.6	8.2	91.8
History of property crime victimization	35.0	65.0	34.1	65.9	27.4	72.6
Satisfaction with police presence	74.1	25.9	68.7	31.3	69.3	30.7