

From urban to suburban criminology: Understanding crime in America’s “safe” cities

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Abstract Simon Singer’s [1] *America’s Safest City* represents a new and innovative contribution to the criminological literature. It not only provides a fresh look at understanding crime in America, it sheds the light on a heretofore understudied part of the country, but one that is increasingly populated: Suburbia. Singer offers a new theoretical perspective which he calls “relational modernity.” Because the perspective is so new, it is important to critically appraise and evaluate its merits. Thus, this special issue offers an overview and analysis of the book from four luminaries in criminology.

Keywords Delinquency · Suburbia · Relational modernity · Criminological theory

Introduction

The field of criminology has traditionally and historically had a one track mind. When it comes to areas of study, scholars have generally focused on one part of the population to the exclusion of the others. For example, nearly all of criminology from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century was a criminology of males. Theories were developed and data analyzed for and on male subjects. Similarly, as has been documented, criminology has often been “adolescent limited” [2] in that the concentration of work has examined youth or juvenile delinquency. Cullen was speaking of

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criminological theorizing from the 1960s on, but it is also the case that earlier criminological thought had a telescopic lens pointed at the juvenile years (see [3–5]).

Another area in which criminology has had a single-minded focus is with respect to geographical location [6]. Starting with the influential scholarship of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, who examined the inner city of Chicago (extended to other cities later), criminology has been veritably obsessed with urban crime. In large measure, these areas of focus are understandable; crime is concentrated within males, young people, and inner cities [7]. Chicago, in particular, was experiencing a population explosion in the early part of the twentieth century making it a prime location to study the dynamics of people and places. But as we know, this tendency means that other areas in need of study have gone ignored. Thankfully, in all three areas, work has been conducted to rectify the omissions and much valuable information has amassed. With respect to gender, feminist criminology emerged to address the exclusion of women; for age, life-course and developmental criminology has risen to the challenge of studying crime over the entire life-span. For geographic areas, a new field of rural criminology has recently begun to expand criminological horizons outside the inner city. All three of these fields, or subfields, have brought insights to criminology that would otherwise have gone unnoticed, to the detriment of our understanding of crime and justice writ large. Still remaining unnoticed by criminology, however, has been the areas in between rural and urban locations: the suburbs.

What is likely to become a classic in this new field, Simon I. Singer's *America's Safest City*, was published in 2015. In that book, Singer takes an in-depth look at a place that, in 1996, was named by *Money Magazine* as the safest city in America – Amherst, NY. True to control theory form, one of Singer's goals in the book is to explain why there is less crime in particular areas, such as suburban, generally wealthy areas. One trend in rural criminology has been to determine whether theories developed for urban areas equally apply to suburban/rural ones (see e.g., [8–10]). While informative, this approach fails to appreciate that crime, especially violent crime, is much lower in rural and wealthy areas, and thus the processes we wish to examine may be unique [6]. For example, while research often draws on social disorganization theory to explain rural crime, that approach was developed with urban neighborhoods in mind, which do not exist in the same sense in rural areas [11]. Additionally, new “causes” of deviance are emerging that are seemingly unique to rural, or suburban areas (e.g., “affluenza”). Thus, it may behoove researchers to explore specific concepts and perspectives that help us understand crime in these areas.

Enter “relational modernity.” Singer's perspective is that in suburban and affluent areas, strong, prosocial adult influences are all around. They are found in parents, in schools, neighbors, and other community organizations. These adults help youth in these well-to-do areas become relationally modern and adapt to a complex and changing world. They help the youth cope and make it through challenges rather than responding punitively to missteps, as is the default in the inner city. Of course, that does not mean crime and delinquency does not occur in these suburban places; it is just that the response is different and, in turn, this response makes repeat missteps less likely.

Singer's contribution is an important one in criminology, as evidenced by his work winning the 2015 American Society of Criminology's Hindelang Award for a book that has made an outstanding contribution to research in the field. Yet it is a new and unique perspective and any new approach should be critically analyzed, examined for flaws as

well as strengths. How does the theory of relational modernity advance criminology? Does it represent a truly distinct concept? Can it be applied to non-affluent areas? How well does Singer's analyses in *America's Safest City* stand up to scrutiny? Often, new works and new approaches are uncritically accepted (or rejected) without this sort of critical assessment. The purpose of the present volume is to offer such an appraisal of Singer's work, drawing on an Author Meets Critic session that convened at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology. That session brought together some of the foremost scholars in criminology who each offered an honest evaluation of the book. The articles in this volume are presented to foster a rigorous and thoughtful conversation about Singer's research and theory. In addition, Singer provides a response to each article in the concluding piece.

Why we need a new approach

Few criminologists would disagree with the statement that there are too many theories and perspectives to explain crime and criminality. Thirty years ago, this state of affairs prompted a debate about how to trim the fat; integration or theoretical competition (e.g., [12, 13]). Yet, three decades later, the theoretical landscape has only become more cluttered – theories continue to be introduced and old ones refuse to die. Many theoretical approaches which are popular today actually do a poor job of explaining crime [14]. Thus, rather than simply tweaking old theories or combining perspectives in such a way that theories are added rather than dropped, it may be time to take a closer look at why existing theories are unable to adequately explain crime. The time may be ripe to clear-cut and plant new seeds.

One approach to addressing the shortcomings of criminological theories is to critically examine what those theories do well and where they come up short. It is intriguing that criminologists, in large measure, still allow the dependent variable to determine their approaches—that is, we often focus on high crime populations and places and then seek to explain variation *within* those groups. This is a puzzling approach, particularly for more serious criminal acts, which are quite rare. For example, according to the latest data collected by the FBI, there were only 4.5 homicides and 38.5 rapes per 100,000 people in the US (FBI 2015). Further, since we know crimes are disproportionately committed by a few offenders, these crimes represent even fewer offenders and victims [15]. So why not see what we can learn from low crime places and people?

Following the emergence of feminist criminology to address the lack of attention to female (non)offending, rural criminology has recently sought to rectify criminology's "urban-centricity." Some of this work has sought to determine whether traditional criminological theories apply equally to rural areas ([8]; Osgood & Lee 2000); what has been termed the "generalizability" problem in feminist criminology [16]. Other work has brought criminal activity specific to rural areas to the forefront of criminological research. For example, one form of deviance that had been ignored in urban research is agricultural crime [17, 18]. Agricultural crimes are acts that target the farming industry. Swanson [18] reported that crimes such as theft of irrigation equipment and vandalism of farm property is resulting in massive monetary losses. A more recent application of rural criminology seeks to utilize it to advance a critical criminology approach ([19, 20]; [6]).

Fewer research efforts have aimed at determining whether there are unique processes or factors present in rural areas that contribute to lower crime rates. This may be in part because of rural criminology's preoccupation with demonstrating that crime is in fact an issue in these areas. One exception to this rule is the work of sociologist Matthew Lee, who has, in a series of publications, developed the notion of the moral and civic community that exists in rural areas to protect its citizens [11, 21–23]. Focusing on variation across rural areas, Lee has argued that rural communities that are marked by strong institutions, an involved civic tradition, and citizen investment have lower rates of crime. The notion of civic involvement of a community as an important protective element is somewhat novel but [11] argues his theory “captures roughly equivalent processes” as Sampson et al.’ [24] collective efficacy. Yet in some respects, Lee’s civic community relies and depends upon the existence of resources (middle class businesses, for example), that may be in short supply in urban inner cities. Are there other factors or concepts that differentiate rural areas—particularly rural, well-off areas in which crime is relatively low—which may contribute to a better overall understanding of crime? Additionally, when crime does occur, what sorts of responses help mute the negative consequences that accrue to many delinquents? Simon Singer’s [1] answer to these questions is relational modernity and his case study focuses on the wealthy suburb of Amherst, NY.

In this sense, Singer’s [1] contribution is both a better understanding of crime outside of urban areas, similar to other rural criminology studies, but it is also an expansion of the criminological domain. Singer focuses not on unpopulated rural areas per se, but on suburbs where the population has proliferated in recent decades [25]. While criminology has examined some elements of crime in suburbia (see e.g., [26–28]), there does not appear to be a separate “suburban criminology” subfield, complete with meetings and books dedicated to the topic.

Suburban criminology matters because, like rural criminology, it has the potential to shed light on places where social processes might exist to control crime. Studying these processes can help us understand why crime is low in these areas and conversely why it may be higher in other areas (e.g., densely populated cities) where they do not exist. On the other hand, identifying the processes that help reduce crime in places like Amherst might shed light on how crime may be reduced elsewhere. For example, [29] notes that “Exploring all of this is not just relevant for the suburbs. Many of the conditions of adolescence described by Singer play themselves out in other contexts as well, in cities and in small towns.” So what does Singer find? We now turn to an overview of his important study.

Overview of Singer’s book

In his book, *America’s Safest City*, Singer discusses and tests a theory of deviance (or perhaps conformity) which he calls relational modernity. Relational modernity refers to the bonds that we have with important people and institutions including peers, family members, schools, and adult mentors (the “relational” part) in contemporary society that is marked by demands of multiple settings, the need for autonomy, and other rationalities including the juvenile justice system (the “modernity” part). Singer’s theoretical approach borrows from control theorists such as Sampson and Laub [30],

and Hagan [31] but focuses more on how life in the modern context impacts bonds and how these relationships lead to either conformity or deviance.

Singer proposes these ideas in the early chapters of his book and tests them in the latter chapters. Using a mixed-methods analysis (qualitative interviews and quantitative survey/official records analysis), Singer tests whether or not relational attachments matter in deviant behavior. His analysis reveals that the most important attachments are based on trust and empathy, and that promote personal identity. These types of relationships are even more important than traditional measures of conformity and success such as academic grades and achievement.

The implications of Singer's research are very important and actually fairly easy to implement. For one, society should seek to facilitate adolescents' drive toward developing their own identity. Those who find out about themselves early and find their stake in contemporary society are more likely to lead safe and productive lives. He also suggests the creation of safe places within the family, school, and community settings. What this means is that children should feel safe and supported in their social settings regardless of who they are or what they are experiencing in life (or how they are behaving). Finally, Singer warns against using harsh forms of punishment including arresting youth for minor deviance and over-reliance on the youth justice system which destroy social bonds and lead to deviant identities. These findings echo results from recent developmental and life-course studies.

Importantly, and opposed to most studies in criminology, Singer finds that delinquency has zero relationship with later life outcomes such as education and employment. What is it that distinguishes crime in the suburbs from crime in the city such that there are no long-lasting effects? It seems that the ways in which delinquency is handled here, mostly informally and outside of the criminal justice system, matters. Adults in suburbia rely on the formal system only as a last resort, as opposed to the first option that characterizes "zero-tolerance policies in urban schools and neighborhoods that ensnare poor and minority youth" ([32]; p. 606). Thus the "cumulative continuity" seen in much criminological research [33] may be stemmed by treating delinquency different. This finding has enormous implications for developmental and life-course criminology.

The special issue

Science progresses via rigorous evaluation and thoughtful critique of perspectives. Nothing is gained by uncritical acceptance of theory or research. In that spirit, the American Society of Criminology (along with other organizations), allows a platform for authors of newly published pieces to hear from and respond to reviews of their work in Author Meets Critics (AMC) sessions. Often, these sessions are lost to the scholarly record, not recorded or published in any format. In recent years, however, some special issues of scholarly journals have been used to showcase the critiques and the author responses of important work such as a 2009 issue of *Theoretical Criminology* in which Nicole Rafter organized a series of papers and a response to John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond's work on the genocide of Darfur [34].

In November of 2015, we organized an AMC session at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology to discuss Simon Singer's book, *America's Safest*

City, which was also that year's Hindelang Award winner. The line-up included Frank Cullen, Charis Kubrin, John Hagan, and David Farrington, each criminological luminaries who have pushed the field forward theoretically and empirically. We anticipated thoughtful reviews, not just superlatives, and that's what we got. When we heard the talks, we felt that the information presented was important enough to warrant a symposium where each author wrote his or her critique in article format. Thus the articles that follow are reactions and critiques of *America's Safest City* along with a response by Simon Singer. The hope is that the pieces help stimulate more work on rural and suburban crime and theoretical process related to antisocial behavior outside of the inner city.

First in the issue is the analysis by Frank Cullen. In his article, he points out four lessons for criminology derived from Singer's book. First is that criminology has been blinded by an obsession with lower class crime. Second, crime is handled differently across social classes. Third is that parenting is important for delinquency and, fourth, that white collar crime may stem from suburban delinquency. The last point is derived from Singer's finding that, in fact, while Amherst is safe and that crime and delinquency are low there, that does not mean it is crime-free. It is just that those youth who do deviate are treated differently—much like white-collar offenders are by the justice system.

Next is the analysis by David Farrington. Farrington's article focuses on the comparison Singer draws between Amherst and Newark, NJ (the most dangerous city during Singer's data collection). In seeking to understand why crime differs across the places, Farrington draws on studies that have attempted to remove selection effects. While it is unclear how important the community is, Farrington discusses the elements from Singer's analysis that may be important, such as parenting, the availability of programs, and collective efficacy that is higher in Amherst than elsewhere. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the lower likelihood of official criminal justice processing when face with delinquency in Amherst. Again, the way delinquency is handled is highlighted as an important factor.

Charis Kubrin's article comes next in the issue. Her take is that Singer's book is an answer to the general criminological call for integrated and interactional theory that takes both the person and the context into account. It is a macro/ μ integration, with the structural element represented by modernity and the micro by relational elements. Kubrin notes that the survey data that Singer analyzes in the book were collected in the 1980s and early 1990s and so relational modernity may not have the same form in today's world as it did then. The 1990s and 2000s, she argues, bore witness to incredible technological changes that altered how people live and socialize—in short, how they relate to one another. Does that have implications for the key concept in Singer's theory? It remains to be seen if Singer's theory holds in this new social world.

Finally, John Hagan makes the case that Singer's book is set to become a new "classic" in criminology. Hagan argues that criminological classics add key concepts to the literature—social bonds in Hirschi's (1969) case, collective efficacy in Sampson et al. [24] contribution. Singer [1] gives us "relational modernity." Hagan's analysis illustrates how Singer's book is "an important portrayal and theoretical account of how *one part* of American thrived, while offering an implicit contrast to how "another America" was and continues to be denied the opportunities to find the same "road maps" to success. While Hagan pours effusive praise on Singer's work, he also shares some concern, including what he sees as a sense of perhaps undeserved optimism.

Times are not so bright for suburban youth, as illustrated by employment and living situations of many of these individuals. It is a trend worth watching.

Importantly, this issue is not meant as a one-way form of communication, with critics commenting on Singer's work. To that end, Singer has offered his response to the critiques, which is included as the last article in the issue. Again, to reiterate, we think science progresses by respectful criticism and response—an interplay between theorist and appraiser. In that way, the best, most fruitful path forward, is paved.

Conclusion

The work presented by Singer in his book *America's Safest City* provides the field of criminology with a fresh look at delinquency in all types of contexts and how delinquency is dependent on specific features of modernity. This also leaves open several remaining questions for researchers to take up. For instance, how does modernity and elements of autonomy work for online delinquency? As current incidents of mass killing and terrorism around the globe hit the media outlets, can Singer's theoretical framework explain these acts in contemporary society (societies?) At the very least, an empirically-based framework for exploring these questions has been put forth by Singer and it is the job of all criminologists to start to take this orientation seriously. The responses by seminal criminologists in this special issue represent a good illustration of the way in which new theoretical approaches are introduced and integrated into a field.

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