

## *Partners and Crime: Perceptions of neighborhood danger in older couples*

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Neighborhood environments are crucially important to older adults' health and quality of life (Ellen, Mijanovich, and Dillman 2001). If an older adult believes that he or she lives in a dangerous neighborhood, this may be deleterious to his or her well-being, through increased stress, anxiety, and withdrawal from social networks (Lorenc et al. 2012). However, the way that older adults form a perception of their neighborhood as 'dangerous' is not well-understood. While perceived danger can of course arise from local crime rates, the perceptions that residents form about their environments are often not only a result of actually dangerous characteristics or events; perceptions can be colored by neighborhood context, such as ethnic composition, or neighborhood collective efficacy (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004). Feeling endangered could also arise from individual psychological differences, since personality traits are associated with differences in perceptions of the social world (Lahey 2009). This paper therefore examines the many reasons why some older adults believe that they reside in a dangerous neighborhood, both social-environmental and social-psychological.

I use data from a nationally representative survey of older adults, which asks respondents to describe how dangerous they think their neighborhood is, and includes numerous geocoded variables and other self-reports. Furthermore, one useful feature of these data is that they include full interviews of romantic/sexual partners, meaning two people living in the same neighborhood rated the same area for its level of danger. Using geocoded census data, indicators of crime rates, husbands' and wives' ratings of the same neighborhood's cohesion and reciprocated exchange, as well as other self-reported characteristics, I examine the correlates of perceived neighborhood danger in 912 couples living in the same area. I use seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) to estimate the impact of husbands' characteristics on their wives' perceptions, and vice-versa. I estimate these regressions using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) in order to assuage problems with missing data.

Looking at Table 1, I find that even when controlling for crime levels, neighborhood ethnic composition and neighborhood social cohesion substantially impacted perceptions of danger. Therefore, regardless of respondents' ethnicity, neighborhood proportion black was still associated with perceptions of disorder. If the respondent felt that the area had greater

neighborhood cohesion, then they were less likely to perceive their neighborhood as dangerous, and their spouse's feelings about neighborhood cohesion were not associated with their own perceptions of danger. Husbands were more likely to feel their neighborhood was dangerous if they were more Neurotic, but wives felt more unsafe if they were more Open, and wives were also more likely to feel safer if their husbands were more Conscientious. Additionally, wives but not husbands were more likely to feel unsafe in their neighborhood if they had lived there for a very long period of time (i.e. more than 25 years). I also carried out analyses predicting discrepancies between husbands and wives in terms of their perceptions of neighborhood danger, and found no significant associations between discrepancies in perceived danger and discrepancies in any of the variables shown in Table 1.

These findings suggest that the mechanisms which produce perceptions of danger in older adults are complex, and only partially dependent on high local crime rates. Rather, a confluence of social-psychological and ecological factors come together to shape perceptions of danger. In line with previous work (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004), fear of crime may be exacerbated if the neighborhood has a higher percentage African American, since this group carries the stigma of being violent. Additionally, perceptions of local collective efficacy may also help to assuage worry, regardless of other local characteristics. Finally, personality traits might lead to different perceptions of local conditions. The personality traits of key alters, such as one's spouse, could also impact perceptions, where social roles cast alters in positions of responsibility for others' safety (for example, husbands may feel responsible for their wives' safety).

## **Bibliography**

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*Table 1. Predicting perceptions of neighborhood danger in older couples, according to husbands and wives living in the same neighborhood (SUR fit with FIML; n = 912)*

	Husbands	Wives
Neighborhood characteristics		
Crime rate	0.08*	0.09*
Neighborhood disorder	0.13**	0.07
Poverty rate	0.12**	0.13**
% Non-Latino black	0.18***	0.14**
% Latino	-0.03	0.08
Density	0.01	-0.02
Self reports		
Neighborhood cohesion	-0.18***	-0.27***
Tenure in neigh (ref.= less than 10 years)		
11-25 years	-0.02	0.07
More than 25 years	-0.08	0.23**
Personality		
Openness	-0.04	0.11**
Conscientiousness	-0.01	-0.07
Extraversion	0.04	0.02
Agreeableness	-0.01	0.02
Neuroticism	0.09**	0.08
Marital happiness	-0.05	-0.03
Functional health problems	0.01	0.06
Non-Hispanic black	-0.04	-0.13
Hispanic	0.26	0.31
College, BA or more	-0.35***	-0.24**
Age	0.12***	0.08*
Married (vs. cohabiting)	0.01	-0.24
Spouse reports		
Neighborhood cohesion	-0.06	-0.04
Personality		
Openness	0.00	-0.01
Conscientiousness	-0.04	-0.10**
Extraversion	0.04	0.05
Agreeableness	0.01	0.05
Neuroticism	0.01	0.05
Marital happiness	-0.06	-0.04
Functional health problems	0.10	0.01
Constant	0.19	0.24
Rho: 0.24***		

*Note:* \* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001