

Sociology Research Briefs

Economic Shocks and Feelings of Safety

Nicholas Recker M.S.

Safety is often described as the defining feature of life in small towns and a primary contributor to their quality of life. We hear a great deal today about the spread of methamphetamine production and use in rural communities and its impact on crime rates. In addition, many small towns have experienced serious economic disruptions that have impacted the social environment. Given these changes, are small towns still places where residents feel safe? What factors of small town life are related to feelings of safety? How important is knowing and trusting one's neighbors and fellow residents? How important is the effectiveness of local police and sheriff's offices? In this report, I examine perceptions of safety in small towns and consider the impact of economic shocks and social capital on those feelings.

Perceptions of Safety in Small Towns

An Iowa State University Sociology Department study of 99 small Iowa towns conducted in 1994 and 2004, found that residents perceived their towns to be less safe in 2004 compared to their perceptions of safety in 1994. The change was not dramatic (from 5.7 in 1994 on a seven point scale to 5.3 in 2004)¹, but it was statistically significant. At the same time, the evaluation of the quality of police services was essentially the same in 1994 (57 percent of residents indicated their police services were good or very good) compared to 2004 (55 percent approval). Factors other than the quality

of police services must be involved in the change in people's feelings of safety.

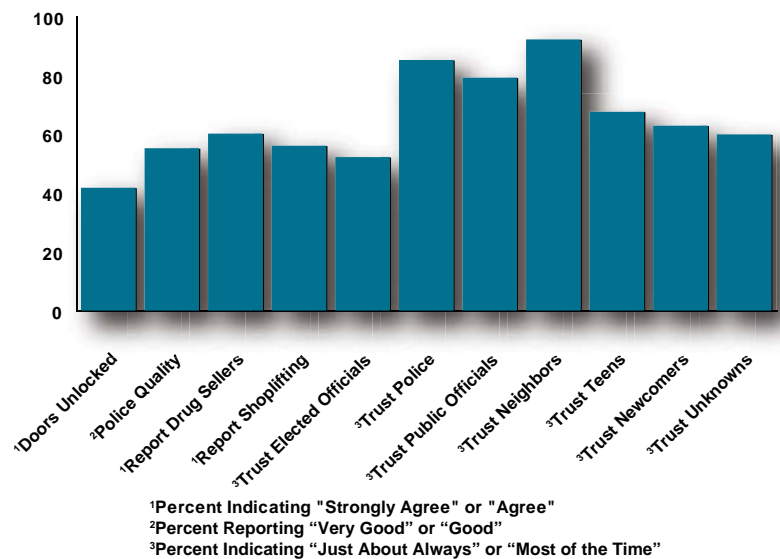
In the 2004 study, we asked more questions related to trust and perceptions of safety to shed light on this topic. A good indication of how safe people feel is whether or not they are comfortable leaving their doors unlocked. As shown in Figure 1, slightly more than 40 percent of residents report that in their town, people are comfortable leaving their doors unlocked. The majority would report a neighbor who was selling drugs, indicate that people in town are expected to report others of shoplifting, and trust local elected officials, public officials, teens, newcomers, and unknown community residents. More than 80 percent trust police and their neighbors just about always or most of the time.

When I analyzed how indicators of trust, approval of the quality of police services, and safety are related to each other, I discovered that small towns where people feel safe are quite different from towns where people feel less safe.

People are more likely to leave their doors unlocked and feel safe in towns where:

- Residents expect other residents will report a neighbor for drug dealing
- There is greater trust of public and elected officials and police
- Residents trust their neighbors
- But the perceived quality of police services doesn't matter
- Nor is the size of the town or the distance to a metropolitan area associated

Figure 1. Perceptions of Safety and Trust



- How well people know each other is negatively related to perceptions of safety

Residents in towns with high approval and trust of police services,

- Indicate that residents will report neighbors for drug dealing
- Indicate that residents will report shoplifting when they witness it
- But only trust, not approval of the quality of police services, is related to perceptions of safety

In smaller towns, residents

- Express less approval of police services
- Report more trust in elected and public officials
- Are more likely to leave their doors unlocked

Economic Shocks and Perceptions of Safety

Prior research of boomtowns suggests that when economic events—both positive and negative—disrupt the social environment of a community, perceptions of safety decrease. “Economic shocks” are sudden events that impact the local economy. These could be the opening or closing of a major employer or the loss of the local school. They are often accompanied by in-migration or out-migration of residents, changes in the housing values and incomes of residents, and usually changes in local government. Thus it is expected that residents will be less likely to know and trust each other in the same way they did prior to the shock, or in the case of a negative shock and out-migration, they may be demoralized and feel helpless. Negative shocks may lead to fewer resources for local services and greater distrust of local officials. As shown above, these factors are associated with lower perceptions of safety. To examine the impact of economic shocks on feelings of safety, I contrasted towns in the Iowa sample with positive economic shocks to towns with negative shocks and those with no shocks since 1990. The findings show that:

- Residents in towns that have experienced a positive shock have greater trust in other residents and higher approval of local law enforcement
- The impact of positive economic shocks on perceptions of safety is indirect through their association with an increase in trust in the community
- Negative shocks have no relationship with feelings of safety, trust, and approval of local law enforcement
- Communities with higher average household income also have a greater sense of safety, more trust and rate the quality of law enforcement more favorably

Policy Implications

The quality of life in small towns is their most important feature and feeling safe is an essential aspect of a high quality of life. However, feeling safe is a complicated emotion related to the community social infrastructure more than the quality of crime fighting and investigation by local law enforcement officials. Feeling safe is tied to trusting local officials and neighbors, and knowing that people in town will report crime, especially serious crimes. The willingness of people to report crimes is directly related to their trust in police and neighbors. Positive economic shocks may lead to greater feelings of safety if they are accompanied by greater trust and an increase in household income.

This suggests that community building strategies—helping people get to know each other so that trust develops, helping them learn about and come to trust local officials – is more effective in promoting feelings of safety than are investments in improving police efficacy.

References

Bursik, R; and H. Grasmick. 1993. *Neighborhoods and Crime, The Dimensions of Effective Community Control*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Inc.

England, J.; and Stan Albrecht. 1984. Boomtowns and Social Disruption. *Rural Sociology*, 49, 2, 230-246.

Hunter, L.; R. Krannich; and M. Smith. 2002. Rural Migration, Rapid Growth, and Fear of Crime. *Rural Sociology*, 67, 1, 71-89.

Messner, S.; E. Baumer; and R. Rosenfeld. 2004. Dimensions of Social Capital and Rates of Criminal Homicide. *American Sociological Review*, 69, 882-903.

Funded by a grant from the National Research Initiative, USDA and Iowa State University Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, Rural Development Initiative.

Methodology

In 1994, 99 small towns not contiguous to a metro area and between 500 and 10,000 in population were randomly selected from within each of Iowa's counties. Questionnaires were mailed to approximately 150 residents of each town. They were selected at random from the town's telephone directory in 1994 and 2004. Approximately 72% of sampled residents returned surveys in 1994 and 67% in 2004.

^aThese statistics and all the statistics reported in this research brief are taken from the Iowa State University Sociology Department's Rural Development Initiative study of 99 rural Iowa towns. Statistics were determined by taking the average of the variable for each of the 99 communities in the study and then using the 99 town figures to calculate a statewide average.

...and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.