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Neighborhoods and Intimate Partner Violence: A Decade in Review

Emily M. Wright¹, Gillian M. Pinchevsky², and Min Xie³

Abstract

We consider the broad developments that have occurred over the past decade regarding our knowledge of how neighborhood context impacts intimate partner violence (IPV). Research has broadened the concept of “context” beyond structural features such as economic disadvantage, and extended into relationships among residents, collective “action” behaviors among residents, cultural and gender norms. Additionally, scholars have considered how the built environment might foster (or regulate) IPV. We now know more about the direct, indirect, and moderating ways that communities impact IPV. We encourage additional focus on the policy implications of the research findings.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, domestic violence, theory, neighborhood context, communities and victimization

Introduction

For most of U.S. history, the common scholarly belief held that intimate partner violence (IPV) was a private form of violence (Siegel, 1996) that largely occurred “behind closed doors” and was therefore not susceptible to “outside” factors such as the surrounding neighborhood or community. Since 2000, however, there has been much theoretical and empirical attention given to neighborhoods and IPV.¹ In fact, there have been at least four reviews on the topic (or analogous behaviors, e.g., dating violence) since 2012 (Beyer et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012; VanderEnde et al., 2012).

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In this paper, we consider the broad developments that have occurred over the past decade regarding our knowledge of how neighborhood context impacts IPV. We also discuss questions that remain unaddressed and deserve further study. In our view, the major theoretical and empirical developments have refined our understanding of neighborhood influences on IPV. The literature base has broadened its focus to include more theoretical umbrellas with new and additional mechanisms linking neighborhood or contextual factors to IPV (e.g., gender stratification, norms) and positing direct, mediating, and moderating effects (Wright, 2015; Wright & Benson, 2010). Additionally, the concept of “neighborhoods” has been broadened beyond structural factors (e.g., disadvantage) to include more social, cultural features (e.g., support, beliefs), actual and perceptual neighborhood qualities, physical or “built environment” features (e.g., alcohol outlets), and service provisions. The expanded picture of how neighborhoods impact IPV provides a much clearer picture of how and why contextual factors impact “violence behind closed doors.” There is still room for improvement, though, and we use this paper to consider the avenues for continued theoretical and empirical development.

Developments Over the Past Decade

Theoretical Foundations in Social Disorganization

Most early research on the impact of community context and partner violence stemmed from social disorganization theory (Beyer et al., 2015; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Voith, 2019). The theory maintains that neighborhood deprivation and the concentration of ethno-racial diversity in low economic neighborhoods hinder communication between residents and the formation of social ties (Kornhauser, 1978), thus reducing the mechanisms of informal social control within neighborhoods (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Residential instability and turnover reduce the capacity of organizations and institutions to provide social control over residents’ behavior because invested residents move out of the area while the number of strangers in the area increases (Bursik & Webb, 1982).

The majority of research on the impact of neighborhood conditions and IPV has focused on the effect of structural disadvantage, such as poverty (Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012).

Theoretical developments, therefore, have centered on this feature as well. As reviewed by Pinchevsky and Wright (2012), it has been stipulated that higher levels of disadvantage may hinder the formation and breadth of social ties between residents, leaving victims more vulnerable to violence from their partners. It may also lead to increasing views of cynicism toward the justice system, decreasing the likelihood that women in violent relationships will seek help from police or service shelters, or that residents in the area (e.g., bystanders) will initiate formal or informal control mechanisms, such as calling the police. Similarly, economic disadvantage may facilitate stress and strain, frustration, and alienation and foster social isolation among residents, thus inhibiting the transmission of social values that disapprove of violence within relationships. The research indicates that, to a large extent, economic deprivation of individuals and/or concentrated disadvantage within neighborhoods are associated with higher levels of IPV (e.g., Bonomi et al., 2014; Diem & Pizarro, 2010; Wright & Benson, 2011). This relationship extends to various geographies such as urban and rural settings (Edwards et al., 2014) and different countries (Gracia et al., 2015).

In comparison, other elements of social disorganization theory have received less empirical attention. For example, the theory suggests that neighborhood ethno-racial composition and residential turnover should impact IPV. However, the roles of both are rarely examined beyond control variables, and the results are mixed (Emery et al., 2010; Foshee et al., 2015). Moreover, there has been relatively little work in the past 10 years regarding immigration (even though it has been a major force of social change in the U.S. for ethno-racial compositions and residential mobility) and there are few data available to quantify the impact of immigration status and/or neighborhood immigrant rates on IPV (Emery et al., 2010; Erez & Harper, 2018; Gracia et al., 2014, 2015; Wright & Benson, 2010). The work available has shown mixed results, with some studies suggesting no effect of neighborhood immigration on IPV rates (e.g., Emery et al., 2010; Gracia et al., 2014, 2015), others suggesting that it might actually prevent or reduce the levels of IPV (Wright & Benson, 2010; Xie et al., 2018), and still others suggesting that the relationship may depend on the gender of the victims (Soller & Kuhlemeier, 2019). The mechanisms

underlying the relationship, such as organizational structures, cultural differences in the treatment of IPV, social ties between neighbors, and/or a hesitancy to report this violence, are receiving more attention, but are still poorly understood at this point (Xie & Baumer, 2019).

Social disorganization theory also stresses that neighborhood structural factors and crime are linked by social processes among neighborhood residents, including collective efficacy, social ties, and cultural norms. Pinchevsky and Wright (2012) offer a detailed overview of how these social processes might impact IPV. They note that collective efficacy may increase the likelihood that residents will intervene on violent couples in an attempt to stop the violence. It may also increase help-seeking behaviors among IPV victims or increase other forms of social control that might deter violence. Neighborhood social ties and interactions may provide support to victims, offer avenues by which to seek help, and increase the surveillance and monitoring of residents' violent behavior (Wright & Tillyer, 2020). Cultural norms may influence the acceptability of IPV and the likelihood that the violence goes unreported or ignored by residents (Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012). Despite these theoretical mechanisms, however, the evidence on the impact of collective efficacy on IPV is mixed (Edwards et al., 2014; Wright & Benson, 2011; Wright & Tillyer, 2020), although it might act as a moderator of neighborhood effects (Jackson, 2016), or be associated with analogous forms of IPV (e.g., dating violence, see Johnson et al., 2015). Elements of collective efficacy, such as social cohesion and social control, have been separately studied, and the findings reveal some association between levels of social control and decreased rates of IPV (Rothman et al., 2011; Showalter et al., 2017). However, previous studies have also suggested that social cohesion and informal social control are not always highly correlated (Hipp & Wo, 2015); more research appears to examine indicators of informal social control, and might include perceptions from neighbors (Kirst et al., 2015). This research notes that informal social control is sometimes associated with higher—rather than lower—levels of IPV (Rothman et al., 2011), while other measures of collective efficacy (e.g., those assessing community action and interrelatedness) have produced mixed results as well. Research on social ties between neighbors and IPV generally

posits that social support among neighbors are associated with reduced levels of partner violence, but research is mixed in terms of the mechanisms involved (Wright & Tillyer, 2020).

Finally, little research over the past decade has examined the role of community culture and IPV: Emery et al. (2010) found that areas with higher levels of legal cynicism (a measure of culture) did, in fact, experience higher levels of IPV relationship dissolution, and Wright and Benson (2010) reported that IPV rates were lower in communities where cultural norms support outside interventions for IPV (i.e., where residents do not believe that IPV is a private matter). This line of research suggests that the type of violence and specificity of norms matter a great deal to the results that are uncovered, but more research is needed on this topic.

The mixed findings reviewed here likely stem from two sources. First, the outcome measures of IPV may be different across studies; some research (e.g., Wright & Tillyer, 2020) suggests that neighborhood influences are stronger for more serious forms of partner violence, and those studies which examine less serious behaviors may fail to find significant effects. Second, there have been many advancements in data collection regarding neighborhood conditions over the past decade, with some neighborhood-based research expanding to locations previously unexamined. For instance, most early studies on the topic utilized multilevel data from Chicago, but additional cities (e.g., Toledo) and new countries (e.g., Spain) have been recently examined. As such, some measures of concepts such as collective efficacy or culture have varied slightly across studies. It is possible that these methodological issues—different locales and measures—contribute to the mixed findings in the literature.

Theoretical Expansion: Ecological Systems Theory

Importantly, the theoretical frameworks from which neighborhoods and IPV have been studied have expanded in the past decade. In particular, increasing research has focused on various levels of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Voith, 2019) to explain the multiple contributors of IPV. Compared to social disorganization theory, ecological theory is considered to be broader and may offer more flexibility in terms

of how it can explain neighborhood effects on IPV.

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems theory posits that multiple levels of ecological systems—macro, exo, meso, and micro—interact with each other to influence individual behavior.² This theory has been recently used in the examination of contextual effects on IPV (Voith, 2019).³ The macrosystem is defined by cultural contexts, beliefs, and political and economic systems (see also Jewkes, 2002). In some ways, this is likely the most theoretically developed (and studied) aspect with regard to IPV. As noted above, economic deprivation and indicators of contextual disadvantage have continued to be examined in the IPV literature (e.g., Bonomi et al., 2014; Diem & Pizarro, 2010; Gracia et al., 2014, 2015), but cultural contexts might also involve beliefs about violence, violence in relationships, and/or the appropriateness of intervening on family matters such as IPV (e.g., Cools & Kotsadam, 2017; Emery et al., 2010; Voith, 2019). Peitzmeier et al. (2016) found that norms promoting gender equality in roles and relationships were protective against IPV perpetration; in combination with others' work on gender stratification and/or gender resources and status (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017; Jackson, 2015, 2016; Xie, Lauritsen, et al., 2012), these lines of inquiry offer significant avenues for further development. Similarly, the role that patriarchal social systems—that which “evokes images of gender hierarchies, dominance, and power arrangements” (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 554) —can also guide further development in this area, as the majority of research on patriarchy has been at micro- rather than macro-levels (Crittenden & Wright, 2012).

The exosystem refers to the linkages between two or more settings (including settings in which a person may not actively participate, but in which factors arise that indirectly influence the person), and may include both social and physical environments. With regard to IPV, Voith (2019) posits that the exosystem might include overcrowded living environments and other stressful situations that can impact IPV. Indeed, within the past decade, perceptions of disorder and community violence have been linked to increased risk of IPV (Beeble et al., 2011; Copp et al., 2015; Jain et al., 2010). The exosystem might also include physical environmental characteristics such as alcohol outlet density, a topic that has received increased attention in recent years (Cunradi, 2010; Cunradi et al., 2011; Iritani et al.,

2013; Snowden, 2016; Waller et al., 2013). Research on the relationship between alcohol outlet density and IPV generally suggests that the more alcohol outlets in an area, the higher IPV rates are in that area (Waller et al., 2012)(but see Waller et al., 2012 for non-significant findings). Cunradi (2010) suggests that this relationship may exist because such areas may have different normative constraints against violence, alcohol outlets may promote substance use among couples by simply providing more opportunity, or that they provide environments where people at risk for IPV may interact and reinforce attitudes and opportunities for IPV. This work is an excellent example of considering how the built environment might influence opportunities for (or against) IPV.

The mesosystem involves relationships between various microsystems (the environments in which people live). This level includes social networks between individuals and community residents. Voith (2019) suggests this level may also include community action such as social support, collective efficacy, and economic capital. As noted above, social support and collective efficacy have been examined as components of the neighborhood—IPV research. Voith (2019) suggests that for future research, Bronfenbrenner's theory can be used to expand upon the influence of neighborhood economic capital on IPV to address issues such as what variables to use to define the concept of economic capital, or whether the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and IPV is linear (Benson et al., 2003). Jackson's (2015, 2016) work on women's relative economic resources, and Xie, Heimer, et al.'s (2012) work on women's labor force participation might fit well within this theoretical perspective, and offer strong starting points for continued research.

The microsystem is the smallest and most immediate of environments. It includes the environment in which people live, and the institutions and groups with which individuals interact regularly. With regard to IPV, the microsystem encompasses the family environment and the relationships between family members as well as individual-level predictors and moderators of IPV, including mental health problems and attitudes (Voith, 2019). Such factors undoubtedly have been examined the most in IPV research, but it goes beyond the scope of this review. What is notable about the microsystem is that the contexts

described above may act as *moderators* to individual-level relationships found in the microsystem, and/or that the features of the microsystem may act as *mediators* to the effects of neighborhoods or higher-level contexts.

Certainly, understanding how moderating and/or mediating variables function may contribute to our understanding of IPV, as they highlight how and why—or for whom—context matters with regard to IPV. Wright’s (2015) analysis of Chicago residents, for example, showed that social support from family significantly reduces IPV, but the effect is only found in neighborhoods of higher socioeconomic status. Other neighborhood characteristics, such as collective efficacy, have also been shown to interact with individual-level variables (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age), resulting in unique patterns of IPV across different demographic and socioeconomic groups. Both Jain et al. (2010) and Edwards et al. (2014) found, for instance, that collective efficacy is predictive of victimization for males but not females. Similarly, mediators to the neighborhood—IPV relationship have been explored and the research shows that some individual-level factors may mediate the impact of context on partner violence. For instance, Beeble et al. (2011) found that neighborhood disorder reduced IPV victims’ quality of life, but this relationship was indirect through survivors’ levels of fear, possibly because fear precludes residents from engaging in activities in the neighborhood. Taken together, the findings reviewed here suggest that neighborhood influences might be stronger or weaker for certain individuals, or might influence individual-level predictors of IPV in unique ways, and Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) theory can provide a strong foundation for these relationships.

Broader Concept of Neighborhood “Context”

Our review of the research on context and IPV suggests a clear pattern of development: early research focused almost entirely on a single contextual level (e.g., one’s immediate neighborhood), primarily that of structural economic disadvantage (Miles-Doan, 1998). Slowly, the research began to incorporate more social context measures, such as social support, ties, informal social control, and culture (Caetano et al., 2010; Emery et al., 2010). The recent focuses on cultural values

and norms, as well as social “action” (e.g., informal social control, collective efficacy) are more recent extensions of this research (Peitzmeier et al., 2016; Showalter et al., 2017; Wright & Tillyer, 2020).

Another recent development appears to be examining features of the “built environment,” such as physical disorder, greenspace, businesses, or other establishments in the area (Cunradi et al., 2011; Xie, Lauritsen, et al., 2012). Physical disorder has long been associated with increased crime, with scholars suggesting that disorder sends messages that the environment is unsafe, unkept, that residents do not look out for each other, or that crime is not taken seriously (e.g., Ross & Mirowski, 2009; Ross et al., 2001). Additionally, the environment might also include businesses that have the potential to foster violence between intimates (e.g., alcohol outlets; Cunradi, 2010), or the lack of businesses or environmental characteristics (e.g., greenspace), which would prevent or alleviate IPV. For instance, parks and recreation space are important features that alleviate stress and depression and other negative affective states, and environments that do not offer access to these areas may inadvertently contribute to IPV (Wright et al., 2015). Similarly, contexts that have fewer social service providers and police officers have been found to have higher rates of IPV (Xie, Lauritsen, et al., 2012). Given that both reporting victimization to police and the use of victim services are linked to lower subsequent IPV victimization (Xie & Lynch, 2017), a logical extension is that contexts offering these agencies—particularly victim services—will see benefits in terms of reduced IPV rates.

Looking Forward: Next Steps for Research Regarding Contextual Effects on IPV

Based on our review of the developments in the research over the past decade, we see at least three avenues for continued exploration and refinement: (a) increased theoretical development, (b) expansion to other forms of victimization, and (c) a closer consideration of policy implications.

Theoretical Attention to Culture, Lifestyles, and the Built Environment

Theoretical development and expansion are still needed to

continue to uncover the ways in which context matters to violence between partners. Much more attention should be paid to cultural aspects of communities, especially how they foster non-intervention, or influence IPV and similar forms of victimization through other means. We think several specific avenues for research are warranted. First, questions remain whether neighborhoods actually foster family victimization through beliefs or cultures that support IPV, and to address this we need research examining cultural norms around family violence more specifically (e.g., Emery et al., 2015), including research on whether cultural contexts simply lead to the failure of residents to intervene in violence, or whether they openly endorse IPV or abuse. Second, we are particularly interested in how neighborhood cultural values might influence residents' willingness to inform formal sanctioning agents (e.g., police) about IPV. The majority of research on cultural values and social control has centered on *informal* social control enacted by residents, but we suspect that neighborhood cultural factors also impact formal control (Wolf et al., 2003).

We also believe that there is room to integrate theories related to lifestyles/routines. Here, we suggest that the focus should be to consider how neighborhood environments might impact routines and lifestyles of people/families in ways that foster IPV, as well as offer opportunities for (or against) the occurrence of this violence. Following this line of inquiry, continued theoretical development should *consider the ways in which neighborhood conditions foster risk or protective factors for IPV from a lifestyles/routine activities perspective*. For instance, future scholars should attempt to answer how contextual features elevate or reduce the opportunities for IPV occurrence (e.g., are there parks and greenspaces for potential victims to escape to, at least temporarily?).

Similarly, we believe that the "built environment" offers much more room for theoretical and empirical expansion as well, especially with regard to the availability of agencies and organizations which might foster or inhibit family violence. For instance, social service agencies (e.g., advocacy centers, family shelters, police, see Xie, Lauritsen, et al., 2012) have been found to be associated with lower levels of partner violence in an area; similar to the work on alcohol outlets and IPV, we

suspect that areas with more organizations that (a) increase reporting of IPV, (b) increase help-seeking behaviors among victims, (c) increase intervention (formal or informal in nature), and/or (d) increase support services in the aftermath of victimization would likely be associated with reduced levels of IPV.

Expansion to Sexual Abuse, Human Trafficking, and Repeat Victimization

Many of the features of the environment discussed throughout this paper that impact IPV victimization can be applied—even if tailoring is needed—to other forms of interpersonal victimization, as the theoretical mechanisms likely operate similarly. Some work has already been done, including to examine neighborhood effects on child abuse (e.g., Morris et al., 2019) and dating violence (Rothman et al., 2011). However, more expansion could be done, for instance, regarding neighborhood conditions that reduce the likelihood of reporting or detecting IPV, intervening on it, and/or supporting victims in the aftermath of victimization are likely also applicable to sexual abuse, human trafficking, and repeat interpersonal victimization. If a community largely “looks the other way” or does not recognize harm in IPV cases, it might also do so for sexual victimization, repetitive victimization, and/or trafficking. Similarly, if neighbors do not know each other and interact with each other, they may be unable to identify when human trafficking or repeat victimization is taking place because they would not interact to see the signs of victimization. Again, we suggest that scholars consider how environmental conditions might offer opportunities for forms of victimization that are likely to go undetected and/or unreported.

Closer Consideration of Policy Implications

Finally, we believe it is time for scholars to use the knowledge about communities and IPV to devise and promote more policy implications. We see three ways that the

research to date can inform policy. First, the findings thus far should guide the strategic placement of services that help victims and survivors of IPV. We now have a strong understanding of the types of areas most vulnerable to IPV and similar forms of victimization—such as those that are lower in socioeconomic status or have high rates of poverty, disorder, and crime (e.g., Gracia et al., 2015). Research also demonstrates that areas with more service providers, such as victim service agencies and/or police (Morton et al., 2014; Xie, Lauritsen, et al., 2012), or fewer businesses that promote violence (e.g., alcohol outlets, Cunradi, 2010), are more protected from high IPV rates. The policy implications that arise from these findings suggest that service providers should be placed in vulnerable areas, whereas facilities that foster IPV should be limited from these areas. For instance, more victim service providers, shelters, and advocacy centers should be purposefully located in disadvantaged areas so that they can be easily accessed to provide direct services to victims of crime and/or abuse. Similarly, formal responders, such as the police and emergency responders, who are deployed in vulnerable areas might expect to respond to IPV-related service calls more often than those serving less disadvantaged neighborhoods. They should, therefore, receive enhanced training on the issues they are more likely to deal with (such as IPV).

Second, research findings thus far point to ways to modify the *social* environment—beyond the physical and built environment—to reduce IPV. Scholarship shows that enhancing social control mechanisms, such as ties and relationships between neighbors, might reduce IPV (e.g., Browning, 2002; Wright & Tillyer, 2020). Thus, functions that increase the likelihood that neighbors interact with each other, recognize one another, and intervene (e.g., formally or informally) when crime occurs will likely reduce IPV and analogous behaviors. Likewise, programs, educational efforts, and policies that work to change the cultural norms regarding the acceptability of partner violence, and those that attempt to enhance bystanders' and/or neighbors' willingness to report and intervene on this violence will be expected to reduce IPV rates in the area.

Finally, the findings from studies examining neighborhood

mediation and moderation indicate that context might help us to better understand how and why (or under what circumstances) prevention and intervention responses work best, or for whom they work (such as residents of certain types of neighborhoods or contexts). For instance, policy implications might consider how various predictors of IPV (e.g., fear, lifestyles) have been impacted by neighborhood context, and devise responses accordingly. That is, if context impacts fear levels or anger levels among couples, which then leads to IPV, how can programs and interventions be tailored to better reach at-risk couples who are geographically located in vulnerable areas? Relatedly, neighborhoods might impact or moderate the existing risk factors and protective factors for IPV; this also holds implications for policy. For instance, Wright (2015) found that the impact of social support on IPV was less effective in some types of neighborhoods than others, and Morton et al. (2014) found that the impact of neighborhood alcohol outlets on child neglect was moderated by the presence of substance use service facilities. These findings suggest that some services, responses, protective factors, and risk factors for IPV and similar forms of victimization may be more or less effective in some areas than in other areas.

Conclusion

Over the past decade we have been encouraged by the amount of scholarship that has begun to look beyond the micro-level to better understand IPV and other forms of victimization. Taken together, the recent research on neighborhood context and IPV has begun to broaden the concept of “context” beyond structural features such as economic disadvantage. The literature has extended into relationships among residents, collective “action” behaviors among residents, cultural and gender norms, and, more recently, the built environment, which can encompass physical features of disorder, as well as businesses or other establishments that might foster (or regulate) partner violence. We now know more about the direct, indirect, and moderating ways that communities impact IPV and analogous forms of victimization. With continued research, we can develop a better understanding of how neighborhoods impact the predictors of IPV and analogous victimizations, as well as influence the

effectiveness of prevention efforts and response strategies to these forms of victimization. We encourage additional focus on the policy implications of this research, and look forward to the next 10 years of scholarship.

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Notes

1. Geographic areas or entities such as neighborhoods, communities, census tracts, neighborhood blocks, and so forth, will be referred to interchangeably with “neighborhoods” throughout this manuscript.
2. Bronfenbrenner (1986) later introduced the chronosystem, which adds a dimension of time to this theory by studying the influence of change and stability in one’s environments on behavior.
3. Voith’s (2019) model is based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) framework, but the two are not exactly the same, as Voith’s (2019) work is tailored to the analysis of IPV. Our review focuses on Voith’s (2019) interpretation of the multi-layered ecological effects on IPV.

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