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Economic correlates of crime: An empirical test in Houston

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ABSTRACT

Background: As economic inequality grows, there are rising concerns about connections between disadvantage and crime rates in America's cities.
Aims: The purpose of this paper was to perform a correlational analysis of economic factors and crime rates across zip codes in Houston, TX.
Methods: Regression analyses were conducted, followed by examination of effects within a multivariate model. Population-specific methods were applied to calculate the unique predictive validity of unemployment, poverty, income, and academic achievement on violent and property crimes.
Results: Statistically significant predictive effects were observed between unemployment and violent crimes, and between poverty, population density, and counterintuitively, academic achievement, on property crimes.
Conclusions: A criminogenic factors analysis indicated possible real-world effects of targeted interventions - improving economic and educational opportunities in under-resourced neighborhoods may reduce propensity for crime.

1. Introduction

Four years after the onset of the pandemic, the job market has yet to fully recover, resulting in lingering workforce deficits. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, there are nearly 1.7 million fewer Americans participating in the workforce compared to February 2020 (Ferguson, 2023). The ongoing job shortage raises concerns about its potential impact on crime rates, as both economic instability and unemployment remain key issues for policymakers and the public. Furthermore, economic instability often intersects with issues of income inequality and poverty. Economic instability often intersects with income inequality and poverty. Uneven income distribution concentrates wealth in the hands of a few, leaving a large portion of the population struggling with poverty and limited access to basic resource and opportunities. (Piketty, 2014). Poverty, defined as the lack of sufficient financial resources to meet basic living standards, directly impacts millions, limiting access to healthcare, education, and stable housing. These economic conditions not only affect individual well-being but also influence broader societal stability, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of these interconnected challenges (Sampson, 2012). By focusing on Houston neighborhoods, this study aims to examine the relationships between unemployment, income inequality, and crime rates at a local level, contributing to the existing literature and offering targeted solutions for this economically diverse city.

Since Merton's (1938) introduction of Anomie Strain theory, which explains how societal pressures and the lack of legitimate means to achieve success can lead to criminal behavior, the relationship between income inequality and crime rates has been extensively examined in social science research. Throughout the modern history of criminological study, research has consistently revealed a negative correlation between income and crime rates. For instance, Wilson and Hernstein (1985) found that communities with higher poverty rates tend to have higher crime rates. Similarly, communities with lower incomes and higher levels of economic inequality are more likely to experience increased crime rates due to weakened social bonds and a lack of informal social control (Sampson, 2012). This has been a consistent finding at the macro and micro level. Chiricos et al. (2007) found a significant positive association between poverty rates and violent crime rates in the United States. Likewise, a classic study by Sampson and Wilson (1995) demonstrated a strong link between concentrated poverty in urban neighborhoods and elevated crime rates. There is a complex relationship between socio-economic factors and criminal behavior. Some individuals experience a disconnect between societal goals and the means to achieve them; they may resort to criminal behavior, especially

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in conditions where they are facing economic deprivation (Merton, 1938). The current study sought to explicitly examine the relationships between specific economic correlates - unemployment, poverty, income inequality, and academic achievement - and rates of violent and property crimes across Houston neighborhoods.

Poverty refers to individual shortages of essential resources, whereas income inequality reflects broader disparities in wealth distribution across communities, shaping social structures. This perspective frames our review of socioeconomic influences on criminal behavior. Economic stressors lead to interpersonal conflicts and violence among low-income individuals. For example, Peterson and Krivo (1993) explain that there is a negative relationship between neighborhood-level income inequality and violent crime (homicide) in that neighborhood. Other studies have found similar relationships and observed that income is inversely related to violent crimes, where lower income levels may increase the likelihood of engaging in violent criminal behavior (Sampson and Wilson, 1995). Similarly, Sampson and Laub (1993) observed an association between neighborhoods with higher levels of income inequality and increased rates of property crime. While lower income levels are often associated with higher crime rates, the research suggests low income is not the sole determinant. There are other related factors such as unemployment, and race/ethnicity (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). These factors, in addition to the social effects of economic disparities, serve as contributors to income inequality as well as crime rates, effectuating social effects of economic disparities (Messner and Rosenfeld, 1994). In cultures or communities that put an emphasis on materialism, there may be an association between individuals resorting to criminal activities as a means of achieving economic success in an environment that places a high premium on wealth.

2. Unemployment

Like inequality, there has been much discussion regarding the relationship between unemployment and crime. Since the work of Strain and Becker (1968), there has been considerable discussion about crime being a substitute for employment and the resulting correlation between unemployment and crime. There is much research that suggests that there is a correlation between unemployment and crime rates, a phenomenon observed not only in the United States but globally (Bennett and Ouazad, 2020; Cantor and Land, 1985; Nordin and Almén, 2017). There appears to be a common theme throughout the world that an expansive economy reduces crime and reduction in economic opportunity drives up crime (Jawadi et al., 2021). Bell et al. (2020), conducted a study on German prison inmates and found evidence to support the relationship between labor market opportunities and perceived likelihood of recidivism.

Here in the United States the likelihood that lack of a job greatly encourages property crime (Ehrlich, 1973). Research consistently suggests a positive correlation between unemployment and crime, but the degree of influence can vary significantly depending on the type of crime and various contextual and individual factors. Raphael and Winter-Ebmer (2001) have found evidence that demonstrates that the relationship between unemployment and crime may be partially dependent on crime and neighborhood type. The impact of unemployment is often more pronounced in economically disadvantaged communities with fewer resources and opportunities. Additionally, the extent to which unemployment affects crime can vary depending on factors like age, gender, and race. Young males are often found to be more vulnerable to the influence of unemployment on crime, (Freeman, 1983).

Research by Sampson and Laub (1993) found that individuals who experience joblessness are more likely to engage in property crimes as a means of economic survival. Similarly, research by Cantor and Land (1985) found that unemployment is positively correlated with property crimes such as burglary and theft. The preponderance of the pertinent research suggests that unemployment is more strongly linked to non-violent crime than violent crime (Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001). When there is a minimal decrease in unemployment rates, the rate of property crimes falls significantly. Some violent crime rates for types such as robbery and assault, indicate statistically that they are related to unemployment, whereas murder and rape crimes often do not (Rafael & Winter, 2001).

Some research finds a positive correlation between unemployment rates and violent crimes, lending credibility that related psychological factors, such as frustration and desperation, may lead some individuals to resort to violence (Smith, 2021; Smith et al., 2022, Rafael & Winter 2001). Similarly, Spelman (2000) found that individuals who are unemployed and perceive limited economic prospects may resort to violent crime as a way of expressing their frustration. They too suggested a complex web of social and psychological factors stemming in part from unemployment and ultimately lead to more aggressive behavior and crime. Overall, the literature is replete with studies suggesting unemployment causes crime but is less numerous with studies that focus on quantitative comparison of local composition.

Hypotheses abound as to why regarding the reason for this disparity. Some argue that property crimes increase because the crime is a needed source of income (Gould et al., 2002; Raphael and Winter-Ebmer, 2001) whereas others argue that when more people who are likely to be victims of crime are at work, the rate of these crimes decreases; victim employment, like potential perpetrator employment, may reduce crime commission (Cantor & Land, 1985). Others argue that hopelessness or anomie, which may result from unemployment may drive crime (Merton, 1938). The relationship between unemployment, race and income when interpreting their effects on crime rate with violent and property crime may assist us in determining which theory, if any, applied most.

Still the notion that unemployment causes, either indirectly or directly, crime to support their initiatives pervades. While unemployment is undoubtedly a factor associated with crime, it is important to recognize that it is just one of many contributing elements. Smith et al. (2022), in a comparative analysis of different criminogenic factors found that socio-economic status, including employment status, is just one piece of the puzzle (Jacob et al., 2012). Many education and training programs regarding community policing and targeted crime prevention initiatives designed to either re-skill the unemployed or reach past such barriers as Race/Ethnicity use the notion that crime disparities among racial and ethnic groups are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and environmental factors (Smith, 2021). As outlined by Blumstein (2000), a lower socioeconomic status can increase the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities, which may contribute to higher crime rates among these groups. Pager (2003) suggests that racial discrimination in the labor market results in limited opportunities for minority populations, which may push individuals into illegal activities. Unemployment rates epitomize such limited opportunities. As such, the need for greater explanation of the interplay between race, unemployment and income remains.

3. Study location

The city of Houston, Texas was selected as the metropolitan area for analysis in this study. With a population of over 2.3 million residents, Houston is the largest city in Texas and fourth largest city in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). As an ethnically diverse city with significant geographic variance in income levels, crime rates, and demographics across its neighborhoods (Areavibes, 2021), Houston provides an ideal urban location to examine this study's research questions related to inequality, disadvantage and crime.

Houston's economy relies heavily on the energy, manufacturing, aeronautics, and healthcare industries, but the city faces issues with uneven economic development and deep income disparities across communities (Greater Houston Partnership, 2022). Houston is one of the most diverse metropolitan areas in the U.S. with an ethnic composition that is approximately 43.5 % Hispanic/Latino, 31.2 % non-Hispanic

white, 19.2 % Black, and 6.1 % Asian populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). However, racial and income segregation remains deeply embedded across Houston's neighborhoods. Understanding connections between persistent inequality, lack of opportunity, and urban crime represents a pressing concern for Houston policy makers seeking to promote growth, equity and social mobility across the city.

With its combination of sheer scale and population diversity paired with entrenched neighborhood-level inequality, Houston provides the variability needed to systematically analyze links between key economic predictors and rates of violence and property crime through a geographic lens. Examining how these factors relate at the community level may assist in targeting resources toward high-need areas and developing effective policy solutions. Houston captured our interest because of its sheer scale as a major metropolis paired with the deeply embedded neighborhood inequality and variance in opportunity indicated by economic segregation across zip codes. With over 2 million residents, tremendous racial/ethnic diversity, and stark divides in income, employment, educational attainment and crime rates between communities, studying Houston provides an opportunity to illuminate the complex interplay between place-based disadvantage and criminality. Targeting the specific drivers of crime here is crucial for positively impacting life trajectories, reducing incarceration, and promoting justice in one of America's most vibrant but unequal cities.

4. Current study

In the current study we sought to examine how economic factors related to employment and upward mobility relate to crime in a large American city. We wished to examine this also in the context of race. Although Black Americans are overrepresented as perpetrators of crime (Beck, 2021), previous research has found that this relationship is accounted for by socioeconomic circumstances, not something inherent to race (Smith et al., 2022). Thus, the current project will utilize multiple regression to examine which are the strongest predictors of crime perpetration. The current study examines these issues in the city of Houston, a large mixed-ethnicity study with a history of significant crime issues.

5. Methods

This study was preregistered and the preregistration can be found at: https://osf.io/jz82m. We employed a quantitative, correlational research design using archival data to examine relationships between economic factors, academic achievement, and crime rates across neighborhoods in Houston, Texas. Data were gathered from publicly available sources at the zip code level to allow for a comprehensive analysis across the Houston metropolitan area, as it captures the variability and distinct socio-economic conditions that differ from one neighborhood to another within the city. Regression techniques were then utilized to evaluate the predictive validity of key economic correlates on violent and property crime rates, controlling for relevant demographic variables.

5.1. Multicollinearity and effect size issues

Very often, socioeconomic data may be related to each other. In regression equations, this can create multicollinearity issues. In our pre registration, we set Variation Inflation Factors ("VIFs") above 3.0 as a cut-off for concern. In the case that predictor variables are found to be highly collinear, they will be trimmed until VIFs are reduced below 3.0. We have also set a smallest effect size of interest (SESOI) at $r = 0.10$ as a threshold for interpreting results as hypothesis supportive. Doing so reduces the potential that noise effects will be misinterpreted as hypothesis supportive (Ferguson and Heene, 2021). Details on the specific procedures, measures, and analyses are provided in the following sections.

5.2. Materials

To test for variations within Houston, we sought to examine communities at the level of zip code (the narrowest level available). Using zip codes gives us a wider arrange of data and variance allowing us to employ multiple regression with correlates which may help to disentangle relationships among the correlates themselves. Or put simply, this may help us to better understand which correlates are stronger than others. To do this, we took data from two sources. The first of these was the Area Deprivation Index ("ADI")(Kind and Buckingham, 2018) which provides state and national level rankings of communities based on an analysis of education, employment, housing, and income. The second was the Livability Index which is compiled from United States Census Data and FBI crime data (Areavibes, 2021). Each of these data sources provides a single data estimate which we included in our overall database. Together, these provide us with a robust estimate for each community area regarding socioeconomic status issues.

The ADI ratings provided us with a single state and national ranking for each community related to socioeconomic status. From the Livability Index, we were able to get United States government data compiled for violent crime, property crime (crime rates were calculated as number of reported crimes per 100,000 citizens), mean household income (as reported in census data), unemployment (as reported in census data), academic test scores (indicated by standardized test scores), percent Black residents (as indicated by census data) and population density (number of citizens per square mile). We supplanted this data with data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), which included data on income and education level achieved (CDC, 2023). Note that all of these variables were indicated within these datasets and required no calculation on the part of the researchers. All data is publicly available, allowing for easy replication. Prior evidence suggests that use of census and other government based aggregate data is valid for research purposes (e.g., Krieger, 1992) albeit with the acknowledgement that no source of aggregate data is free from error.

As noted above, in each case we simply extracted the variable as offered from each of these data sources. No transformations or other alterations were made to the raw data as provided in these data sources.

5.3. Statistical analyses

Our analyses include two outcomes: Per capita violent crime and per capita property crime. From our datasets we also have several predictor variables of interest. These include: poverty rate, unemployment rate, median household income, academic test scores, percent Spanish speaking, percent Black, population density, ADI federal rank, family income below 10 k (deep poverty), family income below 25 k (poverty). We found that percent Spanish speaking and poverty rate had considerable missing data and were dropped from further analyses.

Aside from descriptive data, main analysis were conducted with OLS (ordinary least square) regression. Both outcome variables had normal levels of skew (less than 1 and greater than −1). Property crimes had slightly high Kurtosis (3.4) though the decision was made not to engage in a transformation of the data. Pairwise deletion was used for missing data. All analyses were conducted using Jamovi software.

6. Results

6.1. Bivariate correlations

Our analysis revealed several key findings regarding the relationship between unemployment, poverty, income inequality, and crime rates in Houston neighborhoods. Correlational data between all predictors and outcomes is presented as Table 1. As can be seen, there are significant intercorrelations between economic factors such as unemployment (0.368 to 0.763) and crime outcomes, suggestive of a likelihood of

Table 1
Bivariate correlations.

		Violent Crime Rate (per 100 k people)	Property Crime Rate (per 100 k people)	Unemployment Rate	Median Household Income	Test score	Percent Black	ADI Natl rank	Deep Poverty (<$10 k)	Poverty (< $25 k)	% with Bachelor's degree
Violent Crime Rate (per 100 k people)	Pearson Correlation	1	0.120	0.654**	−0.782**	−0.430**	0.618**	0.555**	0.539**	0.470**	−0.539**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.106	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Property Crime Rate (per 100 k people)	Pearson Correlation	0.120	1	−0.121	0.081	0.328**	−0.276**	−0.250**	0.018	0.128	0.359**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.106		0.103	0.279	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.810	0.093	0.000
Unemployment Rate	Pearson Correlation	0.654**	−0.121	1	−0.886**	0.054	0.395**	0.643**	0.345**	0.311**	−0.593**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.103		0.000	0.470	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Median Household Income	Pearson Correlation	−0.782**	0.081	−0.886**	1	0.183*	−0.385**	−0.667**	−0.375**	−0.377**	0.655**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.279	0.000		0.014	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Test Score	Pearson Correlation	−0.430**	0.328**	0.054	0.183*	1	−0.611**	−0.348**	−0.323**	−0.234**	0.421**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.470	0.014		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.000
Percent Black	Pearson Correlation	0.618**	−0.276**	0.395**	−0.385**	−0.611**	1	0.453**	0.388**	0.263**	−0.438**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
ADI Natl Rank	Pearson Correlation	0.555**	−0.250**	0.643**	−0.667**	−0.348**	0.453**	1	0.571**	0.620**	−0.868**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	n/a	0.000	0.000	0.000
Deep Poverty (<$10 k)	Pearson CorrelationSig. (2-tailed)	0.539**0.000	0.0180.810	0.345**0.000	−0.375**0.000	−0.323**0.000	0.388**0.000	0.571**0.000	1	0.659**0.000	−0.512**0.000
Poverty (< $25 k)	Pearson Correlation	0.470**	0.128	0.311**	−0.377**	−0.234**	0.263**	0.620**	0.659**	1	−0.497**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.093	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
% with Bachelor's degree	Pearson Correlation	−0.539**	0.359**	−0.593**	0.655**	0.421**	−0.438**	−0.868**	−0.512**	−0.497**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

multicollinearity. This was confirmed in the initial running of the OLS regression equations, with VIFs that were very high. Unemployment and median household income in particular demonstrate some of the highest correlations with violent and property crime rates. As such, variables related to median household income and ADI National Rank were removed, after which all VIFs were below 3.0.

6.2. Violent crime regression

All regression results are presented in Table 2. The full model for violent crime was statistically significant $R = 0.853$, $R^2_{adj} = 0.717$, $F(7, 165) = 63.11$. As can be seen, for Houston, unemployment was a very strong predictor of violent crime ($\beta = 0.712$). This suggests that as unemployment rates increase, so too do the rates of violent crime, particularly in neighborhoods with higher unemployment levels. Other economic factors generally had smaller but significant predictive effects for violent crime as did academic test scores ($\beta = -0.376$) and bachelor's degrees ($\beta = 0.198$). This final result, however, appeared unusual. Academic test scores and bachelor's degrees remained borderline collinear (VIFs approximately 2.7). Thus, when test scores were removed from the analysis the effect of bachelor's degrees became non-significant ($\beta = 0.007$).

6.3. Property crime regression

Given the issues of misleading results identified above with the violent crime regression, and borderline VIF scores, bachelor's degrees were removed from this equation. The full model for violent crime was statistically significant $R = 0.482$, $R^2_{adj} = 0.205$, $F(6, 166) = 8.38$. Interestingly, results here were a bit more mixed. Though relationships with population density ($\beta = 0.190$) and poverty ($\beta = 0.242$) were in the direction one might expect, academic test scores also predicted poverty crimes ($\beta = 0.442$) albeit in a counterintuitive manner.

6.4. Descriptive data

We also provided a table of Houston zip codes ranked by violent and nonviolent crime. That information is provided at: https://osf.io/mrbc5

7. Discussion

Understanding the social roots of crime remains a pressing matter. Policies for reducing crime have often focused on deterrence and police presence. These can be effective but an overreliance on punishment may arguably lead to over incarceration. By contrast, addressing root issues that motivate crime may also reduce the propensity for involvement in crime. The current study sought to address this by examining economic factors related to crime. Our results found that unemployment was highly related to violent crime as were reduced academic performance. Other indicators of economic disadvantage also predicted violent crime, albeit to smaller degrees. By contrast, property crime was related to poverty and population density and, paradoxically, better academic performance.

Focusing on violent crime, it appears that violent crime is fairly directly related to opportunity loss. That is to say, violent crime is more densely located in neighborhoods experiencing higher unemployment and fewer opportunities for social advancement as indicated by academic test scores. Given few opportunities to succeed, individuals may become involved in gangs, or lash out due to stress. Although our data are correlational and community-level, this does offer some suggestion that policy programs that target low-employment, low-academic success neighborhoods to provide better opportunities for social success, whether through job training and programs or academic enrichment may help to reduce the motivation for crime at its source. We note that, consistent with other data (e.g., Beck, 2021) proportion of Black residents predicted violent crime in bivariate analyses, but race was highly collinear with economic circumstances, suggesting race is not inherently predictive of violent crime perpetration. Thus, programs should target neighborhoods with economic and academic needs, regardless of racial composition.

Table 2
Regression results, standardized regression coefficients and *p*-values.

Correlate variable	Violent crimes	Property crimes
Unemployment	0.510, $p < .001$	−0.164, $p = .072$
Test scores	−0.376, $p < .001$	0.442, $p < .001$
Percent Black	0.123, $p = .053$	−0.005, $p = .963$
Population Density	0.148, $p = .002$	0.190, $p = .014$
Deep Poverty (<$10 k)	0.154, $p = .008$	0.082, $p = .398$
Poverty (< $25 k)	0.135, $p = .018$	0.242, $p = .009$
Percentage Bachelor's Degree	0.198, $p = .004$*	N/A

* Note that this score appeared to be inflated by lingering multicollinearity and was non-significant on follow up analysis.

Regarding property crime, our data suggest that neighborhood poverty and population density are related to higher property crime. This suggests that while violent crime may relate to disengagement from legitimate social engagement due to perceived reductions in opportunity to succeed, property crimes may be more related to simple disadvantage and population pressure. Perhaps put more simply…why not break things if the things aren't valuable anyway, and the odds of getting caught are few? This may also help explain that paradoxical relationship with academic test scores. Property crimes are often not reported to police. As neighborhoods advance in academic success, they may be less inclined to shrug off property crimes as par for the course, and more likely to report such crimes to police as residents expect better for themselves and their families.

Taken together our results, though correlational, provide some suggestion that empirically validated programs that target economic and academic opportunities in struggling neighborhoods may have some chance at reducing the propensity for committing both violent and property crimes. Of course, this is not merely a matter of throwing money at neighborhoods and functioning programs should be those that have been rigorously and empirically tested with non-trivial effect sizes.

7.1. Limitations

As with all studies, ours have limitations that must be addressed. First, our data is community-level rather than individual. Related to this, some data such as that on crime, was collected at neighborhood level, creating overlap between some zip codes. This creates some degree of reduction in variance. Nonetheless, this would be expected to reduce effect sizes, so we are confident that those we report are robust. Lastly, our data are correlational, and causal attributions cannot be made from this data.

8. Conclusions

Crime perpetration appears to be related to community level unemployment, academic and poverty factors. Though our data are correlational, it is possible that programs designed to identify and provide opportunities for low-performing neighborhoods may help to reduce crime at the point of entry. We hope that our results provide some constructive avenues for further consideration.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Howard Henderson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Jennifer Wyatt Bourgeois:** Writing – review & editing. **Sven Smith:** Methodology. **Christopher J. Ferguson:** Writing – review & editing.

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