

THE SOCIAL CONTAGION OF VIOLENCE; A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF THE  
NATURE OF VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY

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SOC 461, 462

Senior Project

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Winter, 2012

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Research Proposal	3
Annotated Bibliography	5
Outline	12
Text	15
Violence and Crime in the United States	17
Redefinition of Violence	19
Theory of Contagious Violence	27
Hunter's Point: A Case Study of the Contagion of Violence	31
Contagion and the Individual	33
Implications	36
Conclusion	39
Works Cited	41

## Research Proposal

For my senior project I will be expanding on a paper I wrote previously for my Criminal Justice class. My paper is an exploration of the redefinition of violence as a contagious phenomenon originating in the proliferation of institutional violence as committed by corporations and governments. My paper argues that violence, both at the community and societal level spreads through social contagion. Using the metaphor of contagious disease, I argue that violence spreads infectiously in our communities. I contend that certain communities are more susceptible to violence than others depending on the immunities a community possesses. Immunities - including high socioeconomic status, high levels of education attainment, and high rates of political participation - can shield a community from the effects of violence and limit its contagious spread. Conversely, communities without these protections are subject to chronic community violence. In my argument I redefine violence to include institutional crime, and argue that these crimes are the source of the majority of violence plaguing this nation.

For my paper I will call on multiple sociological research studies to support my claims. I have found a number of studies highlighting the contagious nature of violent crime in American communities. Most notable among these is the 2007 work of Fagan, Wilkinson, and Davies. Their report highlights the nature in which violent crime in communities plagued by chronic community violence spreads. In order to support my theory that the spread of violence is contagious, I will explore on the

work of theorists who originated the theory of social contagion, as well as expand my own thesis of the social contagion of violence. To provide evidence as the prevalence of violent crime in this nation I will call upon the federal governments most recent estimations of crime rates in the United States. For these figures I will use data drawn mostly from FBI and Department of Justice reports. In my exploration of the redefinition of violence, I will draw heavily from the work of Jeffery Reiman. Reiman has written in length about the nature of institutional violence and its impact on American society. I will use other scholarly journals to support my assertion that institutional crime leads to the perpetration of violent crime on community level. I plan on relying heavily on journal articles and other sociological resources found in the library to complete my research.

To develop on my paper from its original version I plan on expanding my exploration of how institutional crime leads to the spread of individual crimes. I plan on using specific case studies to make my case. I will investigate individual communities to see how institutional crime has lead to increased rates of violence in those areas. I also plan on exploring the implications my theory of violence has on public policy and making policy suggestions based of this new understanding of violence.

## Annotated Bibliography

**1) Fagan, Jeffrey, Wilkinson, Deanna L. and Davies, Garth, "Social Contagion of Violence". In THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR, Daniel Flannery, A. Vazsonyi, I. Waldman, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2007; Columbia Public Law Research Paper No. 06-126. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=935104>**

Fagan, Wilkinson and Davies use public health data to identify social factors associates with the epidemic rise and decline of violent crime rates in New York between 1985-96. They found that violent criminal behavior diffuses contagiously across neighborhoods over time. They found that social diffusion of violence was greatest in neighborhoods where social control was minimized by poverty and racial segregation.

The authors also discuss the contagious spread of violence n and individual an interpersonal level. They cite competition for status, reaction to perceived threats, and exposure to previous violence as sources of violent behavior.

This work also provides a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of social contagion theory. They elaborate on the metaphor that social behaviors can spread in a contagious matter similar to the biological spread of disease. They also comment on how individuals or communities can be more susceptible to negative contagion

depending on certain neighborhood characteristics – or what I refer to as “immunities”.

**2) LeBon, Gustav. *The Crowd*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Pub., 1995.**

In this widely read book, Le Bon first develops the idea of social contagion. Le Bon comments on the nature of crowds, and argues that crowd mentality is the result of the social contagion of ideas and behaviors. Written in the early twentieth century and read by many influential world leaders, Le Bon argues that behaviors spread contagiously from person to person within close proximity to one another, accounting for the crowd mentality. The social contagion theory Le Bon uses to describe crowds can also be applied to the spread of other social behavior, such as my commentary on violence.

**3) O'Brien, Tricia. *San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2005.**

O'Brien's book captures the long and difficult history of the hunter's point neighborhood. She chronicles the growth of the neighborhood and the many cycles of industry changes and change in the community. She discusses the impact of heavy industrialization on the community and talks about the history of economic and racial segregation as well. She also chronicles in detail the impact of the establishment of the U.S. Naval shipping yard on the community. This historical account is useful in my analysis of the legacy of institutional violence in the community.

**4) Osofsky, Joy D. "The Impact of Violence on Children." *The Future of Children* 9.3: 33-49. Web. 10 Oct. 2011.**

**<<http://www.icyrnet.net/UserFiles/vol9no3Art3.pdf>>.**

In this article Osofsky discusses the impact of witnessing direct violence on children's behavior. She highlights the actual psychological effects of children exposed to not only domestic violence, but chronic community violence as well. She alludes to the rates of post traumatic stress disorder and other psychological disorder associated with exposure to violence. She argues that exposure to violence at all ages leads to negative behavioral and psychological changes. She spends extra time and attention discussing the relationship between exposure to chronic community violence and aggressive and violent behaviors in school aged youth. She provides empirical data to argue that children who have been exposed to violence are more likely in adulthood to have emotional, sexual and substance abuse problems, as well as are far more likely to commit crimes. This evidence of the effect of exposure to chronic community violence supports my theory of social contagion.

**5) Reiman, Jeffrey H. *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class and Criminal Justice*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon, 2007.**

In this well known work, Reiman argues that the American criminal justice system disadvantages the from start to finish. Beginning with the definition of what it means to be a criminal, from arrest pattern and incarceration rates, the poor are largely victimized by our biased justice system. Reiman argues that activities of the rich are just as violent and criminal as the traditional American definition of crime.

From industrial pollution, to unsafe workplace conditions, to promotion of unnecessary prescription drugs, the agenda of the powerful endangers the rest of society. Reiman argues that this activity is equally as deadly and destructive as street crime and is in fact even more violent. Reiman's work is very influential to my thesis, as I use his arguments to redefine violence and explain that institutional violence is the root of the depravity that causes chronic community violence.

**6) Wilkinson, D and Fagan J. "Theory of Violent Events." *Advances in Criminological Theory Volume 9: The Process and Structure of Crime: Criminal Events and Crime Analysis*. Transaction. 169-96.**

In this work, Wilkinson and Fagan discuss the factor that compel an individual to act our aggressively or to commit violent acts. They cite three major components that compel individuals to act with aggression: to achieve a favorable social identity, to compel or deter others, and to achieve justice. They also argue that when individuals act out violently, it achieves two goals; one developmental and one strategic. The developmental goal is that violence develops in individual's social identity in the context of their community. In area plagued by chronic community violence, individuals seek to present an image of toughness, as strength is a social currency bringing status an respect. This status and respect also offer protection from potential future attacks, which is the second, strategic advantage. In communities where "normal" modes of social control are weak, violent behavior acts as a both a method of self-help and or function of justice.

**7) Lochner, Lance. "Education and Crime." Masters Thesis. University of Western Ontario, 2007. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.**

In this thesis, Lance Lochner discusses the relationship between educational attainment and crime. He explores factors that drive the correlation between educational attainment and crime and the social savings from crime reduction by investment in education. Lochner argues that education develops employment skills and increases the opportunity cost of crime commission. He also alludes to the possibility that education is a socialization mechanism that causes people to not want to participate in criminal activity. He also recognizes that education can change an individual's social networks, therefor effecting their exposure to criminal activity and their chances of committing crime. Lochner supports these assertions with imperical data showing rates education rates of incarcerated individuals.

Interestingly, Lochner also discusses education attainment possible positive effect on white collar crime rates. He argues that education does iin fact increase the likelihood of individuals committing certain white collar crimes.

**8) Hamilton, James T. "Environmental Equity and the Siting of Hazardous Waste Facilities in OECD Countries: Evidence and Policies." Workshop on The Distribution of Benefits and Costs of Environmental Policies: Analysis, Evidence and Policy Issues. 5 Mar. 2003. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.<<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/53/22/38436943.pdf>**

This is a paper presented by James T. Hamilton of Duke University the Workshop on The Distribution of Benefits and Costs of Environmental Policies: Analysis,

Evidence and Policy Issues held the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development in 2003. The paper explores the distribution of hazardous waste facilities in the United States. Hamilton recognizes the disparities in hazardous waste facility placement across socioeconomic groups and attempt to explain this inconsistency. He points to the fact that studies have shown statistically significant increases in hazardous waste sites in Hispanic and Black communities, as well and neighborhood with a disproportionate amount of residents living below the poverty line. Hamilton also presents research on how firms determine where to locate waste facilities. He cites low levels of political participation as a factor leading to the presence of waste facilities and offers empirical data to support this relationship.

Hamilton also discusses how the EPA responds to hazardous waste spill incidents depending on the nature of the surrounding community. Taking preventative measures to avoid spills is calculated by determining the external cost of potential cancer cases and the opposite cost of preventative repairs. It was found that in communities with higher incomes and higher levels of political activity, preventive measures where taken at greater rates.

**9) U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Crime in the United States,” September 2011, < <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2010/crime-in-the-u.s.-2010>>**

The Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reports is the US Government’s official crime data set released each year. The report provides information on crimes committee all across the nation, as reported by local precincts

and federal agencies. It provides a clear picture of what types of crimes are committed, at what frequency, and in what regions of the country. I use the UCR to discuss the prevalence of violent crime in America.

**10) Ramirez, Mary K. "PRIORITIZING JUSTICE: COMBATING CORPORATE CRIME FROM TASK FORCE TO TOP PRIORITY." *MARQUETTE LAW REVIEW* 93 (2009): 971-1018. Web. 2012.**

This work argues for increased prosecution of corporate criminals and heavier monitoring of white-collar criminal activity by the Department of Justice. Ramirez describes in detail the rise of corporate power and the ensuing crime wave that follow. She gives some historical perspective into the nature of corporate crime, noting the Supreme Court ruling which gave corporations the freedom to act as "similar to persons". This ruling has allowed for a great deal of corporate power throughout American history and has allowed for corporate manipulation of our political system. She also describes how conglomeration has made the corporate structure so complicated, it becomes impossible to prosecute corporate crime, as blame is difficult to blame. Ramirez's work helps to give a historical background against which an understanding of the nature of corporate crime can be developed.

## Outline

- I) Introduction
  - a. Importance of understanding the nature of violence
  - b. Thesis: violence is a contagious phenomenon originating in the proliferation of institutional violence as committed by corporations and governments that spreads through society and communities and compels individuals to commit crimes.
  - c. Brief introduction the metaphor of violence as a phenomenon similar to contagious disease.
- II) Violence and Crime in the US
  - a. Prevalence of violent crime
    - i. Unified Crime Reports, NCVS
    - ii. Effect of violence on communities
- III) Redefinition of Crime
  - a. The federal government's definition of violent crime is limited to traditional street crime, but other types of violent are extremely prevalent and impactful in American society.
  - b. Expanding the definition of "crime" and "violence" to include institutional violence
  - c. Reiman's theory of construction of crime
    - i. The amount of energy a society invests in combating certain types of crime should reflect the threat posed by those crime
    - ii. Not practice in America, as certain types of crime that are extremely damaging go largely unregulated
  - d. Examples of institutional crime
    - i. Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill
      - 1. 11 death, 17 injuries, 4.9 million barrels of crude oil spills and untold ecological damage.
      - 2. Spill was directly cause by corporate negligence and disregard for worker and environmental safety
    - ii. The tobacco industry
      - 1. Almost 500 thousand death annually and 8.6 million people living with tobacco related illness in the US
      - 2. Disturbing legacy of disregard for health of the American consumer
        - a. Blatant denial of carcinogenic or addictive nature of cigarettes.
  - e. Structural Reason for Prevalence of Institutional Crime
    - i. Nature of Capitalism – Structure and Function
      - 1. Capitalism and the definition of crime in America
        - a. Certain types of activities labeled more "criminal" or "violent" than others.
        - b. Lack of enforcement for institutional crime because of importance of profit in America

- 2. Profit motive
      - 3. Cost analysis of externalities (including environmental damages, law suit, fines, etc)
    - ii. Culture of Competition
  - f. Violence redefined
    - i. Violence includes those acts perpetrated by governments and corporations that leads to injury, death, illness, deprivation, or exploitation of others.
- IV) Theory of social contagion
- a. Social contagion views the spread of any phenomenon, in this case violence, through the metaphor of contagious disease.
  - b. Violence is a virus that spreads through society and communities, contingent on the existence of certain immunities.
  - c. Immunities
    - i. High rates of political participation
      - 1. Low rates of voter turnout diminishes the likelihood of community action against environmental violations by corporations
    - ii. High quality education attainment
      - 1. High rates of educational attainment decreases amount of street crime in a community
    - iii. Socio economic status, access to resources, economic and political power are all immunities
    - iv. All immunities are inter-related, so that no one variable can be understood independently from another
    - v. Communities with their collective immunities weakened are subject to the effects of contagious violence originating at the institutional level. They are also less equipped to combat the effects of the cycle of chronic community violence.
  - d. Those communities with strong immunities are also the sector of society that are the sources of institutional violence.
  - e. The communities which are the perpetrators of violence are the ones most equipped to combat its effect – this leads to the cyclical nature of contagious violence.
- V) Community Example – Hunters Point
- a. Today is plagued by high rates of poverty, disease, unemployment, and crime.
  - b. History of institutional violence
    - i. Naval Shipping Yard
      - 1. Vast negative health and environmental impacts due to radioactive materials testing and coal plants
    - ii. Racial Segregation
      - 1. Redlining and isolation from the main city
    - iii. Declining industry in recent decades
      - 1. High rates of unemployment
  - c. Marginalized community plagued by historic deprivation

- i. Increased levels of depravity leads to increases amount of criminal activity
- VI) Individual Motivations for Criminal Activity in Marginalized Communities
  - a. Theory
    - i. Subculture of Violence
      - 1. Subculture is a group with a social value system that is both apart from and a part of the value system of society as a whole.
      - 2. Attitudes towards crime and criminal behavior are developed by interaction within the subculture
    - ii. When an individual is in socialized within a community plagued by chronic community violence, their perception of the role of crime in their lives is altered so that their value of violence is different than that of the society as a whole.
      - 1. This leads individuals to commit acts of violence and crime for different reasons and at different rates than of society at large.
  - b. Institutional violence creates an environment of depravity in which eliminate tradition routes of conflict resolution
  - c. Evidence
    - i. Studies show in communities of chronic violence, violence is a method of self-preservation and retaliation
- VII) Implications of this new understanding of violence
  - a. Possible policy and criminal justice implications
- VIII) Concluision

The Social Contagion of Violence; A Theoretical Exploration of the Nature of Violence  
in Society

Violence is a serious social problem plaguing this nation, one that greatly affects the communities in which it is perpetrated. Whether it is chronic community violence in the form of gang conflict, or institutional violence committed by governments against its citizens, the presence of violence can severely cripple a community's ability to thrive. Not only does the existence of violence in a community thwart prosperity, but it enables the contagious spread of similar types of violence. In discussing violence, I am not only speaking of our nation's traditional definition of violent crime, but also of the vast injustices committed by this country's most powerful institutions. Corporate pollution, unsafe work environments, the lack of public investment in minority communities, and government corruption are all types of violence whose contagious effect I will demonstrate. This paper will explore the redefinition of violence as a contagious phenomenon originating in the proliferation

of institutional violence as committed by corporations and governments. The existence of this kind of violence in our society, through social contagion, leads to the spread of chronic community violence.

In the following pages I will provide evidence to show the prevalence of corporate and institutional crimes in America, develop my theory of social contagion, discuss how institutional violence creates community crime and highlight the implications of this new understanding of violence.

Theory of social contagion, originally developed by Gustav LeBon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, argues that the behaviors and actions of those with whom we are in close and repeated contact with effect our own behaviors and actions (LeBon). Social contagion theory uses scientific germ theory as a basis for which to explain the spread of social phenomena in communities. In the context of violence, social contagion theory suggests that the prevalence of crime in a community can be in part attributed to the spread of that crime stemming from exposure to similar types of violence (Fagan et al). For example, if a youth is exposed to a violent street crime, say the shooting of his cousin, social contagion theory suggests this youth is now more likely to commit a similar crime. In conjunction with this theory, we must understand that the spread of violence is not limited to direct contact, but also spreads through the contagious effects of institutional violence. Crime is inseparable from the issues of discrimination and inequality. In the context of social contagion of violence, a community burdened by depravity is weakened in its immunities and is less able to battle the effects of violence, and therefore less able to stop its spread. I will elaborate on the theory of social contagion later in this discussion, but an

introduction to the core of the theory is necessary to give the following material context.

## VIOLENCE AND CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES

Crime rates in the United States have been declining consistently for years, especially within the last decade. In fact, homicide rates in America are at their lowest since before 1965 (US Census Bureau). But while violent crime within the United States as a whole has dropped, violence has been concentrated into low-income communities where the prevalence of violent crime is a major social problem. Both violent crime and institutional violence have a serious impact on these communities.

The US Department of Justice's definition of violent crime includes aggravated assault, forcible rape, robbery, and murder (US Department of Justice). In the year ending March 31, 2010 approximately 1.3 million violent crimes were reported to the police in the United States. Of these 1,257,000 occurred in metropolitan areas (US Department of Justice). The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) concluded however, that 3.8 million people were the victim of violent crimes in the US in 2010 (Truman). Violent crime accounts for 12% of the total reported crime in the US, with a violent crime being committed every 25.3 seconds in 2010 (FBI). Community violence specialists estimate that the majority of aggravated assaults are committed by members of low-income communities within these metropolitan areas, and that violent crime overall is heavily concentrated within these communities (Fagan et al). So although crime overall has been declining nationwide, violent crime

in low income and minority communities is still extremely prevalent, and the concentration of this type of crime in these communities has a profound effect on the individuals who live there.

In order to gain some insight as to how violent crime can effects communities, we can look at the effects of violent crime on youths, which has receive extensive attention from criminologists. It is widely assumed that exposure to violence leads to an increase risk of perpetrating similar acts, and this is especially true for children and young adults, who are arguably more vulnerable than adults to the power of subcultural social influences. According to the Surgeon General, it is estimated that youth who experience violence in their home or neighborhood are 74% more likely to commit violent crimes (Department of Justice). Extensive studies on adolescence that have been exposed to chronic community violence show that these teens are significantly more likely to commit violent crimes as well as display increased levels of aggressive behavior (Osofsky). Studies on the spread of violent crime within low-income communities have shown that incidents of violent crime in a given neighborhood lead to an increase of similar crimes perpetrated by youth in that neighborhood over the next year, and in surrounding neighborhoods as well. This phenomenon is most pronounced in low-income communities, where depravity leads to a lack of resources with which to combat the effects of crime contagion (Fagan et al).

One must also understand that these statistics are subject to question, as they are snapshots of a bias justice system that systematically discriminates against the lower classes. We know that in the United States, while middle class whites commit

the majority of crime, the majority of those arrested and imprisoned for committing crime are men of color (Federal Bureau of Investigation). Our justice system defines and enforces crime in such a way as to let those with power maintain the status quo; by only emphasizing and enforcing street crime, those with power are allowed to perpetrate vast injustice without consequence. Government and corporate crime is equally as destructive as street crime, as they also contribute to the contagion of violence in our society. This kind of institutional violence is more prevalent in society than most may realize and has a profound effect on the communities against which it is committed.

#### REDEFINITION OF VIOLENCE

In order to understand the impact institutional violence has on our society, we need to redefine crime. Previously, my definition of violence has been similar to the US Department of Justice and FBI's definition. In these institution's crime reports, violent crime is defined as robbery, rape, assault, or murder (Department of Justice). This narrow definition can provide insight into the contagious effects of these specific types of violence, but my definition of violence needs to be widened, in order to explore the effects of other kinds of undoubtedly violent and criminal behavior on American society. Institutional and corporate crimes are rampant in our society, and it is this type of violence which potentially more destructive than the types of street crime discussed previously.

The American criminal justice system has limited the definition of crime to mainly concentrate on street crime. As many criminologists have argued, crime is

defined, and consequently enforced, in such a way as to control the poor and to benefit those with power. Our definition of crime largely overlooks those offenses committed by those in positions of power. As Jeffery Reiman elaborates in his work The Rich Get Richer and The Poor Get Prison, crime is defined in such a way as to keep the masses thinking that certain types of crime are of a greater threat to us, so that other types of violence, like corporate pollution, predatory lending, or the production of hazardous products, can continue without scrutiny.

Reiman's theory on the construction of crime is helpful in understanding why the traditional definition of criminal activity is so narrow. He argues that in theory, the criminal justice system should be a reflection of the threats that are present in society. This is to say that the amount of resources invested by our criminal justice system to reducing certain threats should be a reflection of which threats pose the greatest danger to our society. This theory is not executed in practice however, as our justice system spends more energy reacting to street crime than to corporate or government crime. The United States invests an immense amount of resources into combating street crime, but the system spends few resources protecting society from the most dangerous threat; the threat posed by economic and institutional crimes. Today in American, a person is murdered every thirty minutes, while a person dies from unsafe or unhealthy work conditions every ten minutes (Reiman). While this kind of institutional crime is clearly more prevalent, its threat is not adequately reflected by the American criminal justice system. This keeps the masses believing that street crime is a danger to us, while ignoring the crimes that are the greatest threat to every American today.

The problem in proving that institutional and economic crimes are in fact criminal is that we must overcome our traditional definition of crime in order to accept that the economic and institutional wrongs perpetrated on society are in fact violent. Our conventional understanding of crime limits our definition of violence to acts like robbery and murder, making it difficult for us to accept the possibility that an executive who makes a decision that ultimately leads to the illness or death of his employees is in fact a criminal.

### *Modern Examples of Corporate Violence*

In order to illustrate this more clearly, we can look into the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. The spill, located off the coast of Louisiana, lasted for three months in the spring of 2010, eventually releasing 4.9 million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico (Hoch). The spill was started by a massive explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig platform, an event that killed 11 workers and injured 17 more. After extensive investigations by the US Government and multiple private parties, investigators discovered that the explosion and subsequent oil spill could have been prevented if not for decisions made by BP executives concerning safety regulations. A June 2010 hearing by the US House Energy and Commerce Committee noted a number of cases leading up to the explosion in which BP chose to execute risky procedures to save time and money, despite the warning of contractors and staff (CBS). Employees had previously expressed safety concerns about an impending oil spill, however BP failed to make the necessary repairs and instead opted for the use of inferior risky procedures. BP's executives exhibited a pattern of decision-making

where profit was a more important factor than the safety of the workers. As a result, the working conditions on the rig were jeopardized and dozens of individuals were seriously injured or killed.

Although it is clear that it was the decisions of executives at BP that resulted in the death of eleven men, nobody was ever charged with murder or any other crime. Although the crime committed in this instance clearly does not line up with our traditional definition of murder, is it not the same? When a person commits murder, as described by law, they have intentionally acted to end the life of another human. While an executive making irresponsible decisions may not intend to harm anybody, their choices can directly lead to the endangerment of others. These given executives at BP have made an intentional, rational, and conscious decision leading to the loss of life. While the American criminal justice system may not see this crime as murder, men were killed because of these executive's actions.

It is no less violent to end the life of another by making an executive decision than it is to commit a "traditional" murder. Nor is it less violent to expose workers to hazardous chemicals that are known to cause cancer, or to addict millions of people a year to toxic drugs for the sake of profit, yet these kinds of criminal transgressions occur every day.

The injustice perpetrated by the tobacco industry is another example that shows the impact of corporate crime on the United States. The smoking and consumption of tobacco products is one of this nation's most pressing health concerns. Tobacco is the single most preventable cause of death and disease in this nation; an estimated 443,000 people dying annually from tobacco related illnesses,

while another 8.6 million live with tobacco related illnesses (CDC). Smoking tobacco is known to cause serious health complications; including lung, larynx, esophageal, and oral cancers. Despite these dangers, an estimated 46.6 million people in America are regular smokers (CDC). The prevalence of smoking in the nation despite its toxic effects is due in large part to the mass deception campaign executed by the tobacco industry. In his work The Cigarette Papers, Stanton Gantz reveals the extent to which the tobacco industry has attempted to conceal the deadly effects of cigarettes in order to continue making record profits. Gantz found that for nearly a half century, the tobacco industry has acknowledged the addictive nature and deadly effects of cigarette smoking. Despite this admission, the industry has engaged in countless campaigns to refute their own research and spread doubt about the harmful effects of tobacco (Gantz). This misinformation campaign has all been in the name of maintaining record profits and avoiding government regulation.

In the mid 1990's the tobacco industry suffered a small blow when it lost a series of suits from several US states, claiming the tobacco industry knowingly contributed to the death of American citizens. Despite these successful suits, there has been very little improvement made regarding industry regulation, and the tobacco industry continues to make enormous gains while millions of Americans die annually at the hands of an industry that knowingly distributes carcinogenic products. This activity is undoubtedly criminal. An entire industry devoted to making vast profits off of the death of citizens is allowed to thrive with little to no accountability for the destruction it has caused. Millions have been murdered as a direct result of this industry, yet there are no repercussions. *This* is the redefinition

of violence; violence is not only limited to the traditional justice definition, but to all those acts perpetrated by corporations and government institutions which lead to the injury, illness, or death of others.

### *The Structural Foundations of Institutional Violence*

This institutional violence is widespread in twenty-first century society. Its prevalence is largely due to the structure of the American political economy. American capitalism values economic freedom, competition, and profit. An emphasis on these values leads to a motivation for profit-seeking institutions to break the law without any regard for the potentially violent criminal effects of their actions. Industrialized capitalism is the structural source for corporate violence; it incentivizes crime through profit motive, helps shape the judicial system to protect profit at all costs, and creates a competitive corporate subculture that leads to violence.

Modern American capitalism values freedom of markets, competition, and above all profit. A corporation's legal responsibility is to its shareholders. American corporations, by law, are required to operate within the best interest of their shareholders and with no legal responsibility to the public interest (Elhauge). When an institution is bound to value profit above all else, it will limit its consideration of other factors in its operation. In the pursuit of profit, a corporation may act with extreme disregard for the consequences of its actions. What economists call externalities - secondary consequences of economic activity - are created when a corporation acts without consideration for the consequences of profit seeking activity. Though externalities can also be positive, they are most often negative. It is

these negative externalities that are the source of institutional violence. These consequences are not considered by corporations in their pursuit of profit that is mandated by the capitalist political economy of American society. As corporations seek profit they commit vast grievances against the public interest and proliferate institutional violence.

The effects of the capitalist political economy are not limited to the actions of corporations only. The capitalist structure of American society has created a legal system that protects the interests of corporations over the public. The government's definition of violent crime is limited to individual action, and usually does not consider the negative externalities of corporations to be a legitimate and punishable form of violence. The laws in American society are molded by the capitalist structure of its economy. This is a phenomenon Karl Marx recognized early on when he claimed the judicial system of a state is one of the many factors determined by that state's economic structure (Bonger). Because the industrialized capitalism of America values profit, the legal system of America protects profit seekers and does not recognize the actions of corporations as violent.

Ultimately, the capitalist profit motive leads to an extreme disregard for the violence caused by the intense focus on profits. The capitalist political economy that fosters this mentality also serves to encourage this behavior by not recognizing the actions of corporations to be violent. This structure only serves to increase the prevalence of institutional violence by providing all the structural supports needed for its proliferation. Even further, the capitalist political economy also creates a culture in which profit is the highest value. This corporate subculture promotes

crime and violence by discouraging consideration of the public interest and by encouraging lawlessness in the endless seeking of profit.

The capitalist profit motive creates a corporate subculture of competition that supports institutional violence. The definition of success in industrialized capitalist societies is the accumulation of wealth. The individual and collective struggle for profit is the marker of American society. In the corporate world, this pursuit is intensified, and profit becomes the only goal. The seeking of profit and disregard for externalities leads to a subculture in which the definition of lawlessness is dependent upon to potential of profit. In other words, breaking the law is redefined as being favorable as long as such lawlessness results in profit. If breaking the law leads to profit, then the law is disregarded, as profit is the ultimate goal. This focus on profit creates a redefinition of crime within the corporate subculture. As we will see later, the redefinition of crime within the subcultures of marginalized communities also leads to increased rates of crime there. The corporate subculture leads to institutionalized violence, as once again the public interest is disregarded and violence is perpetrated in the pursuit of profit.

In this way, violence is intimately related to profit motive. The pursuit of profit in modern capitalist societies leads to disregard for externalities and fosters the existence of institutional violence. The structure of the American economy and the nature of capitalism leads to institutional violence. This violence, as defined earlier, leads to the mass illness, injury, and marginalization of large segments of American society.

With this new understanding of violence, it is clear that violent crime is not only a problem concentrated in low income communities, but throughout our society and across the globe. This new violence, though different in many ways, still has a profound effect on the individuals and communities unto which it is perpetrated. Similarly, it is still subject to social contagion, and can multiply more violence throughout our society. All of these forms of crime and violence are interconnected, and their existence in our world is a result of the proliferation of the virus of violence.

#### THEORY OF CONTAGIOUS VIOLENCE

Now that the definition of violence has been broadened to include not only street crime, but institutional and corporate crime as well, the theory of social contagion must be expanded. Social contagion views the spread of any given phenomenon, in this case violence, as similar to the spread of contagious disease. Through this lens, violence crime can be viewed as a virus that spreads uncontrollably unless a society is armed with the necessary immunities to combat such a threat. In the following discussion I will expand on this metaphor, elaborating on what sort of advantages are considered immunities, the implications of not having such defenses, and the ways in which both street crime and institutional violence weaken the immunities of our society.

Just as viruses do in germ theory, violence can spread from direct or community contact through social contagion unless an individual or community is armed with the defenses to fend off this threat. In protecting ourselves from the

impact of violence, immunities come in many forms. Access to quality education, high socioeconomic status, high political participation, access to resources, and economic and political power are all immunities that can protect communities from the threat of contagious violence. When an act of violence is committed in a community armed with any number of these defenses, they are able to employ their resources to assure the residual effects of said violence are reduced.

### *Immunities Further Explained*

In order to expand on this idea, we can look at how any of the above immunities can protect a community from the contagious spread of violence. For example, how might high political participation protect a community from corporate violence in the form of dumping of toxic waste? Through the political process, communities can demand the removal of toxic facilities or the payment of reparations for damages caused to their community by dumping. Low voter turnout and political participation seriously diminishes the likelihood of community action against corporate environmental violence (Hamilton). Since the problems of low voter turnout and political participation are inextricably tied to minority and low income communities, these are the communities in which there are the highest rates of exposure to toxic waste (Hamilton). In this example, where community action in the form of political participation is an immunity to the virus of corporate dumping, a lack of immunities allows for corporate violence to infiltrate the community. The existence of this violence is the catalyst for the proliferation of more violence in the community. I will expand on this idea of the cyclical nature of contagious violence a

shortly, but another example of the importance of immunities in combating crime is needed to strengthen my metaphor.

The relationship between education and crime can show just how important these immunities are in protecting a community from crime. Access to quality education is one of the many defenses a community can arm itself with in order to thwart the spread of violence. Increases in educational attainment significantly reduce the amount of street and violent crime in a community (Lochner). By gaining access to a quality education, students also gain access to legitimate career choices and a stable financial future. Much like political participation however, access to quality education is a resource that is unevenly distributed throughout our society. Low income communities often have less access to resources and tools that can provide their students with a quality education (Aikens et al). This lack of educational excellence leads to lower attainment levels, which are directly correlated with heightened levels of street crime (Lochner). In this example of education as an immunity to crime, we see that in communities where quality education attainment is low, communities immunities against street crime are diminished.

It must be understood that when we talk about these societal immunities against contagious violence, no one variable can be understood in isolation from another. All of these factors are related to one another. Communities with low quality education attainment rates are often the same communities with low political participation. These same populations are also largely afflicted by lower socioeconomic status, lower access to resources, and low political power. It is by this

nature that we find communities that have had their collective immunities severely weakened, and violence of every kind is allowed to thrive within their confines.

### *“Immune” Communities*

Just as there are communities who are left particularly vulnerable to the contagious spread of violence, there are also communities who have equipped themselves with all the advantages necessary to combat this virus. These are the populations with high levels of educational attainment, wealth, political participation, and access to resources. When an act of violence is committed in these communities, the community is able to fully engage their immunities and often stop the spread of violence. It is also in these populations, however, where the perpetrators of institutional and corporate crime exist. So although they are often the source of some of the most violent types of crimes, they are the communities most equipped to reduce its effects as they relate to them. This is where the reinforcing nature of contagious violence comes into play.

When those communities with the most power are able to commit violence without experiencing the repercussions of that violence’s contagious spread, violence of all kinds is able to run rampant in our society. In this cycle, violence of all kinds, whether it is street crime or institutional and corporate violence, is aloud to spread aggressively throughout society. This contagious spread of violence then easily affects those communities with lessened immunities. Once a population’s defenses are weakened the spread of violence within that community occurs even more easily. This is the reinforcing nature of contagious violence; that once a community has been

infected, the spread of violence becomes ever more impossible to combat. Similarly, a community with strong defenses is able to perpetrate violence against other while using its immunities to remain removed from its action and become ever more powerful.

#### HUNTER'S POINT: A CASE STUDY OF THE CONTAGION OF VIOLENCE

In examining this feedback relationship we can examine a community that has been long plagued by the social contagion of violence. The Hunter's Point neighborhood of San Francisco is a community that has long been label as a "bad neighborhood". Located in the southeast corner of San Francisco, the neighborhood today is afflicted with high rate of crime, poverty, disease, and unemployment. The history of Hunter's Point is one riddled with institutional violence against the community, resulting in the contagious spread of crime and urban decay. An examination of this history can show the contagious nature of the cycle of violence and the impact this phenomenon can have on a single community.

The Hunter's Point community began to grow as a result of the expansion of the military industrial complex with the establishment of the San Francisco Naval Shipyard in 1940 (O'Brien). The growth in the shipping industry brought an influx of blue-collar African American workers to the community. Along with this, formal racial segregation within the city in the form of evictions after the end of WWII contributed to the concentration of Blacks in Hunter's Point (Joe, et al). Through the seventies, the shipyard was also the site of the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory, which performed extensive testing on the effects of radiation on living

organisms and military technology (United States Navy). During this same period, Hunter's point also served at the site for the coal burning power plants that provided electricity to San Francisco throughout the twentieth century. By products from these plants have been cited for negative environmental and health problems in the area (O'Brien).

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a legacy of institutional violence perpetrated against the Hunter's Point community. Through the violent act of using racial segregation to concentrate minorities in the neighborhood, then subjecting these residents to massive amounts of pollution and radiation through dangerous industry, those in power have perpetrated major social crimes against this community. These acts of violence have left the community damaged, with fewer defenses to combat the effects of institutional violence. In recent years, industry has been declining in the community, resulting in seriously high rates of unemployment and poverty (O'Brien). The neighborhood also has disproportionately high rates of street crime, especially gang related murders. Both local and federal government have recognized the need for an increase in employment and resources in the community, but nearly all plans to revitalize the neighborhood have been abandoned in recent years. This leaves the Hunter's Point community marginalized from the rest of San Francisco, vulnerable and easily effected by the contagion of institutional violence.

The case study of Hunter's Point shows how the contagion of violence was catalyzed by institutional injustice, then was allowed to proliferate in a community with already weakened defenses. This is the cycle that allows for crime and violence to be committed throughout our society with little repercussions for those in power.

Violence thrives in our society, as there is widespread misunderstanding about the source of violence in our communities.

## CONTAGION AND THE INDIVIDUAL

In discussing the impact of institutional violence on communities, we must explore the relationship between these institutions and the individuals within the victimized communities. Although the presence of corporate and government crime leads to the spread of community violence, we cannot forget that it is ultimately individuals who commit the violent crimes that law enforcement focuses so heavily on. How does the presence of institutional violence lead individuals to commit violent crimes such as robbery and assault?

### *Subculture Theory*

A subculture, as defined by Marvin Wolfgang, a pioneer of subculture theory, is "a normative system of some group or groups smaller than the whole society" (Wolfgang). A subculture within society then, has a "social value system which is apart from and a part of a larger or central value system" (Wolfgang). This means that subcultures exist within society and have a normative value system that is similar to that of society as a whole, but has several distinct values that separate it from the dominant culture. These value norms determine the way an individual perceive or reacts to a certain set of circumstances in society.

Subcultures can exist in any segment of society. As discussed earlier, the competitive, profit-driven corporate world is a subculture in American society. The

corporate world is a subculture of violence because it holds a different set of values and definitions involving violence and crime. Within the business world, the emphasis on profit as the most important factor in decision-making results in a value system that is different from that of society as a whole. This subcultural value system leads corporations to often disregard the better public interest in their decision-making and produces institutional violence. In other words, the corporate world is in fact a subculture of violence whose value system emphasizes profit, encourages criminality, and results in institutional violence. The corporate community is only one example of a subculture within our society, but is of course intimately related to the subculture of violence that also exists within marginalized communities.

In the context of chronic community crime specifically, a subculture of violence is one that has a different set of values and definitions that promote violence within that community. Positive attitudes towards violent or criminal behavior are developed by individuals within this subculture and can result in a person having an altered violence value set (Wolfgang). When an individual is socialized into a community plagued by chronic community violence, the perception of the role of violence in their lives will be different from that of society as a whole. This subculture of violence leads to a different perception of the value of crime. Individuals may see violence as normal, as a path to legitimate conflict resolution, or even as necessary within the context of their community. This different normative value system surrounds violence in marginalized communities results in individuals in those communities committing crime for different reasons, and at different rates, than society as a whole (Wolfgang).

The contagious proliferation of institutional crime, as previously shown, leads to the marginalization and depravity of communities without the resources to combat its effects. The depravity within these communities leads to the development of a subculture. The members of a given marginalized community have been victim to the violence of institutional crime, and therefore develop altered value systems in regards to violence. The virus of violence spreads from the corporate subculture to marginalized communities by creating a situation in which violence is viewed and utilized in different ways than in the segments of society less affected by institutional violence. The creation of a new violent subculture through such deprivation results in increase rates of violent crime and the growth of chronic community violence. Within these communities, individuals with altered violence value systems commit acts of violence for reasons unique to the subculture created by depravity.

#### *Evidence of the Subculture of Violence in Marginalized Communities*

If the depravity created by institutional violence results in a violence subcultures, what is the evidence to show that individuals in these communities use violence in a different way than the rest of society? The most obvious way in which institutional crime can cause individuals to commit acts of violence is by eliminating legitimate routes to conflict resolution. In their 2010 study on the violent behaviors of active street criminals, Jacobs and Wright highlighted the reasons why members of communities plagued by chronic community violence choose to use violent behavior as a method of self-preservation and retaliation. In communities with high rates of violent crime, perpetual violence combined with community distrust of law

enforcement, leads to lack of conventional conflict resolution methods (Jacobs, et al). Self-help and self-preservation in these communities most often comes in the form of violence, specifically violent retaliation (Jacobs, et al).

Participants in the study confirmed that violent behavior serves multiple functions in their communities, many of which would be considered inappropriate to the rest of society. Many reported that violent retaliation served to both right past wrongs and to prevent future affronts (Jacobs et al). Several participants also expressed that direct retaliation was not always necessary. Often individuals redirected their anger through acts of violence towards other members of the community. Subjects admitted that anger stemming from community violence was often redirected away from the original source (Jacobs et al). This redirection of anger contributes to the contagion of community violence.

Violence, originating from institutional injustice or chronic community violence, serves to create a subculture of violence within the community. With an altered violence value set, individuals spread violence outward through the redirection of violence as a method of self-preservation. In these communities, both institutional crime and resulting individual actions of self-preservation within the subculture of crime contribute to the contagious spread of violence.

## IMPLICATIONS

Outdated understandings of violence do not address the impact of institutional injustice and the contagious spread of violent behavior on communities. It is this same obsolete misunderstanding of the nature of violence that has allowed

for the existence of a long perverted law enforcement system. The methods by which our law enforcement and justice institutions enforce crime only add to the problem of social contagion of violence. Racial profiling, gang task forces, increased police presence, and negative law enforcement-community relationships contribute to increased rates of violent crime in marginalized communities and are proof-positive that our current approach to crime reduction is not working (Mauer). These law enforcement tactics actually serve to aid the contagious spread of violence, as they themselves are a form of institutional violence in marginalized communities. In truth, every aspect of our society contributes to the contagion of violence, as violence committed by those in power is rarely recognized as the injustice it is.

With this new understanding of violence - as a virus that spreads contagiously and disparately impacts those communities with fewer social immunities - society can begin to combat the real source of violent crime. While those in power have been allowed to commit violence without accountability for their actions, those without power have long been victims of institutional crime. The legacy of this institutional violence remains in communities with low social immunity, as these neighborhoods are less able to stop the spread of violence within their boundaries. In understanding violence as a contagious and holistic problem, with an institutional source the problem of crime in this nation can finally be addressed in an effective way.

The capitalist profit motive is a major structural enabler to institutional violence. A corporation's main responsibility and function is to seek profit regardless of the consequences. This results in violence in the form of externalities created during corporate profit-seeking activities. If American society can recognize this as a

source of true violence, we can implement strategies to combat corporate crime, which is often the source of the virus of violence.

In order to stop the contagious spread of violence in society, we also need to address the inequality that leads to community immunity weakening and marginalization. A lack of social immunity to combat violence is a by-product of inequity. Low quality education, low political participation, and low socio-economic status in a community are intimately tied to the larger problem of inequality in American society. By recognizing inequality as a source of marginalization, we can better help communities to arm themselves with the resources need to fight institutional violence. Within these marginalized communities, violence spreads as it is redirected through individual actions shaped by the subculture of violence. By understanding the subculture of violence in these communities, we can work to stop the viral spread of violence.

Of course, simple education and understanding are futile without action. A political effort based on this new understanding of violence in a tangible way to affect real change. Through advocacy, action, and legislation efforts, the viral spread of violence can be contained. Prosecuting and reducing the vast amounts of institutional crime is an integral part of the solution. Corporate and government crime is the root of violence in American society. A containment of this violence would be the most powerful step in thwarting the social contagion of crime. Community advocacy programs to equip communities with the resources they need to be “immune” from the spread of violence are another important step. If marginalized communities can arm themselves with the immunities needed to

combat institutional violence, then the spread of crime can be stopped. Any genuine political effort to stop the contagion of violence would also have to include demanding the restructuring of the American political economy. As discussed previously, the problems of institutional crime and inequity between different communities are intimately tied to the capitalist profit motive. In order to truly combat the sources of contagious violence, activists must call for large-scale reform of the political economy.

Overall, an understanding of violence as a virus that originates in institutions and spreads contagiously to communities with reduced social immunities that in turn results in chronic community violence can, result in major policy changes. An awareness of the true nature of violence in American society can ultimately lead to meaningful reform and a containment of the virus that is violence. A corresponding political response in the form of activism and policy reform can realize this new understanding and contain the contagious spread of violence.

## CONCLUSION

Violence, and the crime resulting from it, has long been a problem in American society. Violence impacts millions of Americans each year and has a profound affect on the health of our communities and the prosperity of our nation. Unfortunately, Americans do not understand the true nature of violence in this society. Crime and violence have long been seen as problems to be understood on a individual level, explained through character defects or bad behavior. The true causes of violence are

much more complex than this. All forms of violence, from corporate crime to community crime, are interrelated through the contagious spread of violence.

Violence spreads through society as a virus, originating in institutional crime and infecting marginalized communities and fostering the subcultures of violence that lead to chronic community violence. The metaphor of contagious disease is the perfect model through which to understand the spread of violence in American society. Institutional violence, in the form of corporate and government crime, is the source of the virus. The capitalist profit motive leads to an institutional disregard for the public interests results in crime and violence. This violence proliferates, and infects communities that are marginalized and have weakened social immunities. Immunities, including education, political participation, and wealth, can combat the affects of institutional violence. Marginalized communities, damaged by the affects of previous violence or inequity, have weakened immunities and are therefore more often the victim of institutional crime. Because of the prevalence of violence, these victimized communities develop subcultures of violence. Here, violence value norms are different from the rest of society, and violence is often utilized more frequently as a path to conflict resolution or protection. This subculture leads to increased levels of chronic community violence and crime.

The virus of violence spreads throughout society to impact institutions, communities, and individuals. By understanding the nature of violence - as a contagious social phenomenon - we can begin to make meaningful efforts to eliminate its cause and reduce its spread. If we combine our collective immunities to combat the true source of violence then justice may finally be served.

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