Retaliatory Homicide: Concentrated Disadvantage and Neighborhood Culture

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Much of the research on violent crime is situated within an exclusively structural or subcultural framework. Some recent work, however, argues that these unidimensional approaches are inherently limited and that more attention needs to be given to the intersection of structural and cultural determinants of violence. The present study takes up this challenge by examining both structural and cultural influences on one underexamined type of homicide: retaliatory killings. Using quantitative data to examine the socioeconomic correlates and ecological distribution of homicide in St. Louis, Missouri, and narrative accounts of homicide incidents, we find that a certain type of homicide (what we call “cultural retaliatory homicide”) is more common in some neighborhoods than in others due to the combined effects of economic disadvantage, neighborhood cultural responses to disadvantage, and problematic policing. Problems confronting residents of these communities are often resolved informally—without calling the police—and neighborhood cultural codes support this type of problem-solving, even when the “solution” involves a retaliatory killing. The findings thus lend support to a more integrated structural-cultural perspective on violent crime in urban neighborhoods.

One of the greatest challenges facing researchers interested in the causes of violent crime is explaining high levels of black-on-black violence. Although an extensive body of research addresses racial patterns in violence, some argue that current conceptualizations of the race-violence linkage are unsatisfactory (Bruce, Roscigno, and McCall 1998; Heimer 1997; Sampson and Wilson 1995). One problem is that most of the literature takes either an exclusively structural or cultural approach, and neglects the intersection between the two. Some researchers, however, are beginning to address both structural and cultural dimensions of race and crime. The present study contributes to this effort by examining structural and cultural factors related to retaliatory homicides in neighborhoods in St. Louis.

Integrating Structural and Cultural Approaches to Violence

Much of the literature on homicide focuses on either structural or cultural explanations. In the classic subcultural perspective, lower-class communities generate a distinctive moral universe that glorifies and legitimates aggressive behavior, particularly among male juveniles. This “subculture of violence” becomes self-perpetuating in disadvantaged communities and, according to Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti (1967), explains why these neighborhoods generate high homicide rates. Why such violent subcultures resonate in some groups...
but not others, and why they are more robust in some geographic areas than others, are questions not adequately addressed by this subcultural approach. Moreover, the structural forces shaping cultural phenomena are for the most part invisible in this perspective.

The obverse problem can be seen in structural approaches, which typically neglect normative and cultural influences on behavior. Conflict theory, for instance, focuses almost exclusively on the material conditions that contribute to higher rates of street crime among the poor and minority groups. Social disorganization theory is another case in point. Although the original formulation of the theory by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942) did examine cultural influences on behavior, subsequent versions of the theory focus almost entirely on socioeconomic and ecological factors and explicitly dismiss subcultural explanations of crime (Kornhauser 1978).

A growing number of scholars are beginning to recognize that these unidimensional approaches are unsatisfactory in that they fail to capture the intersection of structural and cultural factors. Robert Sampson and William Julius Wilson (1995) incorporate both factors in their discussion of crime and inequality in American cities. Their basic thesis is that macro-social patterns of residential inequality give rise to the social isolation and ecological concentration of the disadvantaged, which leads to cultural adaptations that undermine social organization, and hence the control of crime. Poverty, heterogeneity, institutional instability, and other structural features of disadvantaged urban communities are hypothesized to impede communication and obstruct the quest for common values, weakening these neighborhoods’ capacity for social control and thus increasing crime. Similarly, drawing on Anthony Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration, which emphasizes the dual and reciprocal role of structural and cultural forces, Marino Bruce and associates (1998) argue that social structure (i.e., economic deprivation, dangerous living conditions) influences levels of violence within a community by interacting with normative pressures and social psychological processes.

A number of ethnographic studies support the idea that structurally disorganized communities are conducive to the emergence of subcultural value systems and attitudes that seem to legitimate, or at least provide a basis of tolerance for, crime. Ruth Horowitz’s (1983) study of a poor Hispanic community in Chicago found a prevailing “code of honor” shaping young residents’ values and behavior. The code mandates deferential treatment of others and aggressive sanctions against those who show disrespect. Similarly, Elijah Anderson’s (1999) study of a disadvantaged Philadelphia neighborhood and Jeffrey Fagan and Deanna Wilkinson’s (1998) study of two inner-city New York communities identified a “code of the streets,” whose norms govern interpersonal encounters in public and “supply a rationale allowing those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way” (Anderson 1999:33). Residents of such communities develop an acute sensitivity to disrespect from others, and a “disputatiousness” or inclination to respond violently to even trivial slights (Luckenbill and Doyle 1989). When these violent reactions occur in public places, the perpetrator often wins admiration from bystanders who witness the incident (Cooney 1998). Like Shaw and McKay (1942:164–83), these scholars document intra-neighborhood variation in residents’ attachment to local cultural codes: a segment of the community does not embrace the code of honor on the streets and instead holds conventional values supportive of legal norms. Still, the street culture is potent enough that anyone who ignores it does so at his or her peril. The street culture becomes the dominant normative order in these communities.

Although neighborhood cultural codes are likely to shape certain types of violent encounters such as retaliatory killings, studies of retaliatory homicide have largely ignored the neighborhood context. This literature shows that, in the typical encounter, one party issues a challenge to another because of some perceived affront, leading to a “character contest” in which one or both parties attempt to “save face” at the other’s expense (cf. Felson and Steadman 1983; Katz 1988; Luckenbill 1977). The parties exchange increasingly belligerent accusations and threats, the encounter escalates, and ultimately, one person responds to the other’s insults with a lethal assault. This literature examines homicide incidents solely at
the situational level, yet others argue that retaliatory homicide is more pervasive among some classes or in some communities than in others (Anderson 1999; Black 1983; Markowitz and Felson 1998). Such homicides are more common in disadvantaged communities. These neighborhoods offer residents few avenues for gaining status and prestige, creating conditions conducive to the development of alternative normative codes, including ones that legitimate violence as a means of enhancing one’s reputation (Anderson 1999; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Horowitz 1983). Respect and honor are especially prized among males who have few “personal accomplishments or cannot draw on valued social roles to protect their self-esteem when they are confronted by an insulting action” (Horowitz 1983:81). In Fagan and Wilkinson’s (1998) study of young men (aged 16–24) in two inner-city New York neighborhoods, all of the 125 respondents cited the need to use violence to gain prestige and personal security. Concentrated socioeconomic deprivation in these communities reduces conventional opportunities for status attainment and generates alternative routes to winning prestige.

Disputes are often resolved informally and violently because residents of disadvantaged communities are dissatisfied with police protection. Over time, police practices may help to shape neighborhood residents’ values and behavior (Jacob 1971), including the development of a street code that supports informal violent resolution of problems. The literature indicates that policing in poor neighborhoods may have this effect in two ways—through inadequate crime control and through abusive treatment of residents, both of which foster community alienation from the police.

Residents of disadvantaged minority neighborhoods frequently complain that they receive inadequate police protection, and that officers are often unresponsive to residents’ calls and take a fairly tolerant approach to street deviance (Huang and Vaughn 1996; Kennedy 1997). Three-quarters of African Americans in Los Angeles, for instance, said there were not enough police in their neighborhoods, while only 1 percent said there were too many police in their neighborhoods (Los Angeles Times 1988). A study of 343 neighborhoods in Chicago found that residents of disadvantaged areas were significantly more likely than residents of middle-class communities to report that the officers working in their neighborhoods were not responsive to “local issues,” performed poorly in preventing crime and in maintaining order on the streets, and responded poorly to crime victims ( Sampson and Bartusch 1998), even after controlling for neighborhood violent crime rates and racial composition. Similarly, studies of Indianapolis, Rochester, Tampa–St. Petersburg, and St. Louis (Reissig and Parks 2000; Smith, Graham, and Adams 1991; Velez 2001) found that residents of extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely than residents of less disadvantaged neighborhoods to report dissatisfaction with the kind and quality of police services to their neighborhood.

Research on police practices lends supporting evidence to residents’ complaints. One study found that police see residents of high-crime communities as “deserving victims,” whose lifestyles invite victimization. In such neighborhoods, officers tend to normalize residents’ victimization, which leads them to respond less vigorously to crime than in more affluent areas (Klinger 1997; see also Velez 2001). And a study of three cities (including St. Louis) found that police officers were much less likely to make arrests of blacks than of whites who were involved in interpersonal violence (Smith 1987). This study supports Donald Black’s (1976) argument that the police are less likely to invoke the law when blacks are victimized, perhaps because officers normalize black-on-black violence. For their part, police complain that they often find it difficult in poor neighborhoods to get witnesses to crimes to provide information or testify in court because of their fear of retribution and/or lack of confidence in the police. Highly disadvantaged, high-crime neighborhoods thus suffer from something of a policing vacuum, which may, in turn, lead residents to take matters into their own hands to protect themselves and their honor: “Where enforcement of the law is inadequate, it becomes important to
defend one’s reputation . . . to establish that one is not to be trifled with” (Cohen and Nisbett 1994:551).

At the same time, the policing that does take place in these communities is often considered abusive. Unwarranted police stops, verbal and physical abuse, and racial bias toward residents of poor minority communities have a long history in the United States and continue to strain residents’ relations with the police (Fagan and Davies 2000; Smith 1986; Weitzer 1999, 2000). Police misconduct in these neighborhoods thus drives a wedge between officers and residents, which only reinforces the salience of the street code’s prescriptions for dealing with interpersonal problems. Police abuse of residents, coupled with underenforcement of the law and unresponsiveness to residents, constitute multiple sources of alienation from the authorities that, we argue, increase the likelihood of residents resolving disputes on their own and responding to victimization with retaliatory violence. The thinness of formal social control in socially distressed neighborhoods contributes to the development of cultural codes that legitimate informal tactics for resolving problems. In this context, at least some types of homicide may be related to residents’ cynicism regarding the police as an appropriate or effective mechanism of social control. Horowitz (1983:82) notes that “disputes over honor must be settled personally, not through the legal system,” and Anderson (1999:34) argues that the street code is “a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system. . . . The code of the street thus emerges where the influence of the police ends.” This does not mean that the policing vacuum is directly related to all types of retaliatory killings in these neighborhoods, since offended parties have no legal recourse when the affront is a simple matter of disrespect. But when the offense is a criminal act (an assault, shooting, theft), offended parties do have legal recourse but instead may decide to settle the score on their own, rather than calling the police. It is in these types of disputes that the policing vacuum is most evident.

Bruce and associates (1998:41) write that the “real challenge . . . is to identify mechanisms linking structural disadvantage to the perpetration of violence within the African American community.” The present study takes up this challenge by providing a more systematic examination of the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and retaliatory killings, utilizing both quantitative data and narrative accounts of homicides in St. Louis, Missouri. We argue that retaliatory homicide is more common in disadvantaged neighborhoods than in other types of neighborhoods because of a combination of structural disadvantage and neighborhood-cultural responses to deprivation and problematic policing. The article thus provides empirical support for the argument that structural and cultural factors jointly shape homicide at the neighborhood level.

The City and the Neighborhoods

Residential segregation of blacks and whites is pervasive in cities throughout the United States. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, the city of St. Louis is no exception: blacks (48 percent of the population) live primarily in the northern parts of the city, whites (50 percent) primarily in the southern parts, and there are few racially mixed neighborhoods. Similarly, urban poverty in American cities is concentrated among blacks. In St. Louis, the mean percentage of persons living below the poverty level in predominantly black tracts (tracts that are greater than 75 percent black) is nearly 38 percent, while the mean percentage in poverty in predominantly white tracts (tracts that are greater than 75 percent white) is only 11 percent. The average unemployment level in black tracts exceeds 9 percent, whereas it is less than 4 percent in white tracts; median family income in black neighborhoods is $16,927, far below that in white neighborhoods: $31,198. Moreover, black neighborhoods, on average, have a much higher percentage of households on public assistance (26 percent) than do white neighborhoods (6 percent).
In addition to economic disadvantage, black neighborhoods in St. Louis have higher levels of family disruption than white neighborhoods; the mean percentage of children 18 years and under living in a single parent household in black neighborhoods is nearly 53 percent, compared to only 23 percent in white neighborhoods. Finally, on average, white neighborhoods have more than twice the percentage of college graduates than black neighborhoods (nearly 10 percent versus 4 percent). In sum, it is clear that in St. Louis, the most disadvantaged neighborhoods are black neighborhoods.

Regarding homicide in St. Louis, descriptive statistics from the St. Louis Homicide Data Set on retaliatory and non-retaliatory killings from 1985–1995 show that retaliatory homicides differ from non-retaliatory homicides along a number of dimensions (Table 1). First, a greater percentage of retaliatory homicides are drug-related (43 percent versus 34 percent) and gang-related (18 percent versus 11 percent). Second, victims of retaliatory homicides are more likely to be killed by gunshot (nearly 87 percent) than are victims of non-retaliatory homicides (71 percent). Third, while the average age of suspects in retaliatory and non-retaliatory homicides is similar (around 25 years old), the average victim age differs: retaliatory victims, on average, are younger (27 versus 32). Fourth, nearly all retaliatory offenders are male (96 percent versus 90 percent for non-retaliatory offenders) and African-American (96 percent versus 90 percent). Finally, whereas nearly 20 percent of non-retaliatory homicides occur between family members, only 5 percent of retaliatory homicides do. Most retaliatory homicides occur between friends or acquaintances (78 percent).

To begin to examine the relationship between disadvantage and retaliatory homicide, we compared neighborhoods of differing poverty levels in terms of the percentage of total homicides that were retaliatory in nature. We first employed the categorization of poverty used by Lauren Krivo and Ruth Peterson (1996; cf. Wilson 1987). Here, low poverty tracts are those

1. A case was coded 1 (presence) for drug- or alcohol-related homicide if there was any mention of drugs or alcohol being present. This could include bottles or drug paraphernalia found at the scene; evidence that the suspect, the victim, or both were intoxicated; or substantiated witness testimony that the victim, offender, or both had been drinking/using drugs immediately prior to the homicide. Likewise, a homicide was classified as gang-related if the homicide involved a suspect or victim identified in the police report as a gang member, but did not arise from gang activity per se (Rosenfeld, Bray, and Egley 1999).
that have mean poverty levels of less than 20 percent, high poverty tracts are those that have mean poverty levels between 20 and 39 percent, and extreme poverty tracts are those that have mean poverty levels greater than 39 percent. As expected, the percentage of total homicides that are retaliatory increases linearly with successive levels of disadvantage. In low poverty tracts \( (n = 46) \), 12.6 percent of all homicides were retaliatory; in high poverty tracts \( (n = 46) \) 14.2 percent of all homicides were retaliatory; and in extreme poverty tracts \( (n = 19) \), 19 percent of all homicides were retaliatory.

Our use of a more inclusive measure of disadvantage provides further support for these findings. We divided St. Louis census tracts into quartiles based upon the distribution of disadvantage levels (an index comprised of poverty, percent of children not living with both parents, median family income, percent unemployed, and percent black). Based on the distribution, we classified neighborhoods as having low, medium, high, and extreme levels of disadvantage. We found that, once again, as disadvantage levels rise, so does the percentage of homicides that are retaliatory. Going from low to medium to high to extreme levels of disadvantage produces corresponding increases in the percent of homicides that are retaliatory: 11.5 percent, 12.5 percent, 13.7 percent, and 17.9 percent, respectively. The greatest jump occurs when moving from high to extreme disadvantage.
These differences are illustrated in a map that plots the distributions of disadvantage and retaliatory homicide in St. Louis neighborhoods. As Figure 1 shows, retaliatory homicides are not randomly distributed across the city, but are clustered primarily in the north. While clustering also occurs for non-retaliatory killings, and the mapping of all homicides would look relatively similar to this Figure, the clustering is somewhat greater for retaliatory homicides. Seventy-five percent of all retaliatory homicides ($n = 252$) are located in just 34 census tracts (out of 114), whereas 75 percent of all non-retaliatory homicides ($n = 1045$) are located in 42 tracts. More importantly, Figure 1 suggests a strong relationship between retaliatory homicide levels and disadvantage. The darkest areas of the map—which indicate those neighborhoods with the highest disadvantage levels—have by far the greatest number of retaliatory homicides, while the least disadvantaged areas located in the southwestern section of the city have very few (only 10 percent of all retaliatory homicides from 1985–1995 occurred in low disadvantaged tracts). Thus, retaliatory homicides occur most often in areas that are economically and socially disadvantaged. These differences in disadvantage levels and homicide rates are consistent with findings from recent research (McNulty 2001; Parker and Pruitt 2000; Shiha-deh and Steffensmeier 1994).

**Methods**

The study uses both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the disadvantage-retaliatory homicide relationship. The quantitative data address questions related to the socio-economic correlates and ecological distribution of retaliatory homicide, and the qualitative data illustrate how neighborhood cultural codes manifest themselves in encounters leading to retaliatory killings, including culturally-specific interpretations of respect, disputatiousness, and legitimate violence.

**The St. Louis Homicide Data Set**

The sample of killings, taken from the St. Louis Homicide Data Set, contains information on 2,161 homicides that occurred in St. Louis between 1985–1995. These killings represent criminal homicides that were compiled from case files maintained by the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department and supplemental files submitted by investigating officers. For each case, information about the suspect(s), victim(s), and event were recorded; the coding instrument includes over 80 items related to the homicide.

All information from police files was hand-coded by trained coders. In addition to coding relevant variables, the coders created a narrative of each homicide that provides an account of the event, describing what occurred, who was present, and other important information. The source of these narratives is police reports, which include a detailed description of the crime scene and physical evidence, information from suspects and witnesses, and other pertinent information. The narratives were not constructed with the code of the street or police practices in mind, but they nevertheless contain data that address these issues.²

Of the 2,161 homicides that occurred from 1985–1995, 1,731 (80 percent) have identified motives. As the motive is a central factor in this study, we exclude those cases without a motive.³ Of those with an identified motive, 19.5 percent ($n = 337$) are retaliatory, while the

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2. It should be noted that the narratives vary in length, with some providing much more detail than others on the events leading up to the retaliatory killing. Thus, some encounters likely contained elements of the code of the street or police practices that were not mentioned in the respective narratives.

3. To determine if motive-unknown and motive-known homicides are significantly different, we compared frequency distributions on a subset of homicide characteristics across the samples. With a few exceptions (drug- and alcohol-related homicides are underrepresented in motive-unknown cases), the means and distributions for all variables are
remaining 1,394 (80.5 percent) are non-retaliatory homicides. The classification of motive refers to the police-recorded motive. All retaliatory killings involve at least two time points: (1) an initial disputative interaction, in which an affront to one party remained unanswered or unresolved, which prompted (2) a subsequent encounter during which the offended party exacted deadly retribution for the earlier offense. In all cases examined here, the St. Louis police were able to establish that the homicide was a response to an earlier altercation between the parties.

A potential limitation of police-recorded data concerns the accuracy, completeness, and consistency of the information. The St. Louis police department clears a high percentage of cases and thus has more complete records than cities with lower clearance rates (Decker 1996:431). In addition, a test of inter-coder reliability was carried out. An independent researcher read through the narratives and coded a random subset of the cases (roughly 10 percent). Agreement coefficient alphas were computed for the variables and the alphas indicate that the high agreement levels between the coders did not result from chance; all of the alphas are above .75.

**Measures and Analytic Procedures**

To examine whether neighborhood disadvantage is significantly associated with retaliatory homicide, we performed a regression analysis using 1990 Census data for the city of St. Louis. For comparison purposes, we also examine the relationship between these factors and non-retaliatory killings. The regression models adjust for spatial autocorrelation. The units examined are census tracts. Of St. Louis’ 114 tracts, three were excluded from the analyses because they have populations of less than 200, compared to a tract average of 3,572. A sizable population allows one to construct reliable rates (Rosenfeld et al. 1999).

Nine variables were constructed from the 1990 Census to reflect neighborhood differences in poverty, race, employment, age composition, family structure, and residential stability. The list of independent variables encompasses the key correlates of neighborhood homicide rates found in the literature (Kubrin 2003; McNulty 2001; Miles-Doan 1998). They include: (1) percent black; (2) median family income; (3) percent poverty, defined as the percentage of persons living below the poverty level; (4) percent young males, defined as the percentage of males aged 14–24; (5) percent residential mobility, defined as the percentage of persons aged 5 and over who have changed residences in the last five years; (6) percent children not living with both parents, defined as the percentage of children 18 years of age and under not living with both parents; (7) percent unemployed, defined as the percentage of unemployed persons 16 years of age and over; (8) percent divorced, defined as the percentage of divorced persons 15 years of age and over; and (9) population size, defined as the total resident population.

Given the strong correlation between the independent variables, and consistent with a number of recent studies (Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990; Sampson and Bartusch 1998), we conducted factor analysis (a principal components analysis using the varimax rotation method). The analysis of these neighborhood items yielded two factors with eigenvalues above the conventional threshold of 1.00 that explain 80 percent of the cumulative variance. Consistent with existing research, the poverty-related variables are highly associated and load on the same factor. Thus, the first factor, labeled *Neighborhood Disadvantage*, exhibits high loadings for poverty (.94), percent children not living with both parents (.93), median family income, percent poverty, percent unemployed, and percent children not living with both parents. The second factor, labeled *Income and Age Structure*, exhibits high loadings for percent black (.75), median family income (.73), percent young males (.72), and percent children not living with both parents (.67). The remaining three factors, labeled *Residential Stability*, *Demographic Characteristics*, and *Social Characteristics*, each account for less than 10 percent of the cumulative variance.

Similar. For example, in motive-unknown homicides, 91 percent of the offenders are black, 97 percent are male, and 8 percent are juveniles; likewise, in motive-known homicides, 91 percent of the suspects are black, 91 percent are male, and 13 percent are juveniles. Moreover, the distribution of victim/offender relationship is similar across the subsamples. Nearly 17 percent of both motive-unknown and motive-known homicides are between family members, 68 percent (motive-unknown) and 60 percent (motive-known) are between friends or acquaintances, and 15 percent (motive-unknown) and 23 percent (motive-known) are between strangers. These similarities suggest that excluding motive-unknown homicides from the analyses does not pose a serious problem.
income (.91), unemployment (.87), and percent black (.84). Recent research points to the need to examine multiple disadvantages facing the black population instead of single factors, such as poverty (Parker and Pruitt 2000:566; Ricketts and Sawhill 1988; Sampson and Wilson 1995), and our measure captures these multiple disadvantages.

Percent residential mobility (.89) and percent divorced (.83) are the measures with appreciable loadings on the second factor, labeled Neighborhood Instability. The clear emergence of a residential instability factor is consistent with past research (Miles-Doan 1998; Sampson and Bartusch 1998). The two factor scores, neighborhood disadvantage and neighborhood instability, are used along with percent young male and population size to capture the various dimensions of community context.

An examination of the univariate distributions revealed skewness in the homicide rates (but not in the independent variables), a finding not too surprising given that urban spatial data such as these are frequently non-normal in their distribution. Homicide is a rare event and most neighborhoods in St. Louis have few homicides and even fewer retaliatory homicides, despite our pooling the data over a 10-year period. Moreover, when populations are small relative to offense rates, the discrete nature of the homicide counts cannot be ignored and traditional Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) analyses cannot be employed.

An alternative approach that resolves these problems is the Poisson-based regression model. Poisson regression has the advantage of being precisely tailored to the discrete, highly skewed distribution of the dependent variable. However, the basic Poisson regression model is appropriate only if the data are not overdispersed; applying the basic Poisson regression model to overdispersed data can produce underestimation of standard errors of the $\beta$s, which in turn leads to misleading significance tests. A solution is found in the negative binomial regression model, the best known and most widely available Poisson-based model that allows for overdispersion (for a complete description, see Osgood 2000). In light of these issues, this study employs counts for retaliatory and non-retaliatory homicides as the dependent variables, and uses a negative binomial estimation procedure to determine the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and retaliatory homicide.

Homicide is typically concentrated in certain areas of a city. Formally, this pattern is indicated by the concept of spatial autocorrelation, or the co-occurrence of similarity in value with similarity in location (Anselin et al. 2000:14). When high (or low) values in a location are associated with high (or low) values at nearby locations, positive spatial autocorrelation or spatial clustering is indicated. In analyses using spatial data, estimates and inferences from regression analyses must adjust for spatial autocorrelation; ignoring spatial dependence in the model may lead to false indications of significance, biased parameter estimates, and misleading suggestions of fit (Messner et al. 2001:427).

Spatial dependence can be controlled for using either a spatial error or spatial lag model (Baller et al. 2001:566). The spatial error model evaluates the extent to which the clustering of homicide rates not explained by measured independent variables can be accounted for by the clustering of error terms; it captures the spatial influence of unmeasured independent variables. The spatial lag model incorporates the spatial influence of unmeasured independent variables but also stipulates an additional effect of neighbors’ homicide rates (i.e., the lagged dependent variable). This model is more compatible with notions of diffusion processes because it implies an influence

4. Race is distinct from disadvantage; treating them as attributes of the same dimension confounds attempts to identify their distinct influences on homicide levels. Nevertheless, the finding that percent black loads heavily with the poverty-related variables makes sense ecologically (in St. Louis), since this reflects neighborhood segregation mechanisms that concentrate poor, African-Americans, and single-parent families with children (Wilson 1987). In such a segregated context, it is problematic to try to separate empirically the influence of percent black from the other components of the disadvantage scale, for there are in fact no predominantly white (>75 percent white) neighborhoods that map onto the distribution of extreme disadvantage that black neighborhoods experience. For example, when we divided St. Louis into thirds on poverty level, no predominantly white neighborhoods fell into the high-poverty category. This finding is consistent with the literature (Krivo and Peterson 2000; Sampson and Wilson 1995).
of neighbors’ homicide rates that is not simply an artifact of measured or unmeasured independent variables. Rather, homicides in one place may actually increase the likelihood of homicide in nearby locales (Baller et al. 2001). We expect this to be the case with retaliatory homicides.

In the regression models, we estimate the effects of neighborhood characteristics on retaliatory and non-retaliatory homicide levels with adjustments for spatial dependence by incorporating a spatial lag model. The first step in this procedure consists of the analysis of patterns of spatial autocorrelation in the homicide levels. A large number of spatial autocorrelation tests have been developed, the most common of which is Moran’s I (Anselin et al. 2000). Moran’s I is a cross-product coefficient similar to a Pearson correlation coefficient and is bounded by 1 and −1. Significant positive values for Moran’s I indicate positive spatial autocorrelation or clustering, while negative values suggest clustering of dissimilar values. In the analysis presented here, we use the Spacestat software to carry out the Moran’s I test for spatial autocorrelation.

Assuming that spatial dependence is observed, we include a spatial lag model in the regression analyses. Kenneth Land and Glenn Deane (1992:228) assert that in spatial-effects models, the spatial diffusion or interaction processes are determined simultaneously with the dependent variable. This produces a nonzero correlation between the potential (spatial lag) variable and the error term, which violates the assumptions under which OLS produces unbiased (and therefore consistent) estimates of the regression coefficients. As a corrective method, they propose a two-stage least squares (2SLS) technique to derive consistent estimators in spatial-effects models with potential variables. Thus, following recent research (Moreno and Sampson 1997:43), we apply Land and Deane’s 2SLS technique, and in particular, the Anselin-Alternative method, to create measures of homicide potentials. These variables capture the spatial dependence of retaliatory and non-retaliatory homicide levels in a given census tract on homicide levels in the surrounding area, and the significance of their coefficients provides a test for spatial autocorrelation.

Results

**Neighborhood Correlates of Retaliatory Homicide**

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all variables are presented in Table 2. As shown, the mean number of retaliatory and non-retaliatory homicides from 1985–1995 are 3 and 12.56, respectively. Looking at neighborhood characteristics, in 1990, the average poverty level across neighborhoods was 25 percent, the average percentage of children not living with both parents was 40 percent, and the average percentage of persons unemployed was nearly 7 percent. Other characteristics of interest include the average percentage of persons

5. Although Robert Baller and associates (2001) distinguish between spatial error and spatial lag models, the procedures discussed in their study to determine the most appropriate model in a given study are available only for OLS-based regressions, and not for Poisson-based regressions (personal correspondence with Baller). At present, the methods are not sufficiently developed to run the different diagnostic tests in Spacestat that would determine which model is appropriate to deal with autocorrelation. In particular, the series of Lagrange Multiplier tests that perform this procedure are currently available only for OLS-based regressions. Thus, we chose to run the spatial lag model, which is sufficient as the error model is nested within the lag model (see Baller et al. 2001:566).

6. Moran’s I was computed using a first power inverse distance weights matrix (row standardized) based on the distance between census tract centroids for all tracts excluding the one under consideration. Thus, greater weight is given to tracts that are closer than to those that are farther away. We then multiplied the spatial weights matrix by predicted values of each of the dependent variables. This potential indicates the influence of homicide in neighboring tracts, with the influence decaying as the distance between tracts increases (Land and Deane 1992:228).

7. In the first stage, we save the predicted values of the dependent variables from a regular regression. The predicted values are then multiplied by the spatial weights matrix. That product, as a variable, is used in the final regressions to control for spatial lag dependence.
Table 2 • Basic Statistics and Correlations

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<td>.19*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Percent poverty</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.85**</td>
<td>.80**</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Percent young males</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Percent residential mobility</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Percent children not living with both parents</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Percent unemployed</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>10. Percent divorces</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>11. Population size</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>12.56</td>
<td>48.96</td>
<td>24,298</td>
<td>24.92</td>
<td>7.48</td>
<td>43.96</td>
<td>39.62</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>9.06</td>
<td>3571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>11.31</td>
<td>40.87</td>
<td>9,238</td>
<td>15.42</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>12.04</td>
<td>17.09</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1526</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01
divorced (9 percent), the average percentage of persons who have changed residences in the last five years (44 percent), and the average median family income ($24,298).

Turning to the relationship between these characteristics and homicide counts, we see that the correlations in Table 2 illustrate a significant positive association between disadvantage and retaliatory homicide. Each of the dimensions of economic disadvantage—percent poverty, percent unemployed, and median family income—is correlated with retaliatory homicide. Moreover, percent black, percent young males, and percent children not living with both parents are all significantly positively associated with retaliatory homicide. Retaliatory killings are negatively associated with percent divorced, suggesting that neighborhoods with higher levels of divorce have lower levels of retaliatory violence. Finally, neither residential mobility nor population size is associated with retaliatory homicide in St. Louis. To see if the strong association between disadvantage and retaliatory homicide holds when controlling for other factors, we turn to the regression results.

Table 3 • Regression Results for Neighborhood Characteristics on Retaliatory and Non-Retaliatory Homicides

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Retaliatory Homicide</th>
<th>Non-Retaliatory Homicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood disadvantage</td>
<td>.766 (.106)***</td>
<td>.575 (.065)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood instability</td>
<td>−.034 (.092)</td>
<td>.074 (.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent young males</td>
<td>.018 (.021)</td>
<td>.014 (.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population size</td>
<td>.0002 (.000)***</td>
<td>.0003 (.000)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial effects</td>
<td>.561 (.150)***</td>
<td>.184 (.025)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−2.046 (.589)**</td>
<td>−1.338 (.378)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−2LL</td>
<td>−189.160</td>
<td>−304.648</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Entries are unstandardized coefficients followed by standard errors in parentheses. N = 111 census tracts.
*p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001

8. A related issue has to do with the implications of the homicide data spanning a 10-year period with 5 years preceding the 1990 census data from which the structural covariates are derived. This situation could be problematic if it is the case that homicide levels from 1985–1990 influence changes in neighborhood characteristics (that are measured in 1990). A 1992 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (Community Affairs Office) on St. Louis demographics suggests that during this time period, St. Louis communities were relatively stable. The report states that “overall, the region (city of St. Louis) has been in a period of population stability” (p. 4). This suggests that including homicide data from 1985–1990 is not likely to be problematic. In addition, given the rarity of homicide, it is a common practice in studies to aggregate the data over a number of years (Messner and Golden 1992; Parker and Pruitt 2000). This is especially true when examining one type of homicide across census tracts, as is the case here.
First, as Table 3 shows, neighborhood disadvantage is significantly related to all kinds of homicide. For non-retaliatory killings, neighborhood disadvantage emerges as the strongest factor ($\beta = .58; p < .001$); a unit change in neighborhood disadvantage would increase the expected number of non-retaliatory homicides by 78 percent (percent change $= 100\times[\exp(.575) - 1]$), holding all else constant. Likewise, neighborhood disadvantage is significantly positively associated with retaliatory killings ($\beta = .77; p < .001$). The coefficient of .766 indicates that a unit change in neighborhood disadvantage would increase the expected number of retaliatory homicides by 115%. While neighborhood disadvantage is correlated with both types of killings, a closer look reveals that disadvantage has a stronger influence on retaliatory than non-retaliatory homicide (.77 versus .58; $t = 1.54$; $p = .063$). This suggests that neighborhoods with higher levels of concentrated disadvantage are especially likely to experience greater numbers of retaliatory than non-retaliatory killings.

The results also indicate that spatial autocorrelation exists in the models. First, the Global Moran’s I coefficients for both homicide types are greater than zero and significant at the $p < .05$ level. These results provide strong evidence of a significant spatial pattern. Second, the regression results indicate that spatial autocorrelation in the homicide distributions remains after accounting for neighborhood context: the coefficient for the autocorrelation term is significant in both equations. These results are consistent with a diffusion hypothesis. Finally, Pseudo R$^2$ statistics displayed at the bottom of Table 3 indicate that the regression model accounts for 24 percent and 23 percent of the variance in retaliatory and non-retaliatory homicides at the neighborhood level.

While these findings indicate that disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to experience retaliatory than non-retaliatory killings, the results tell us little about the nature or type of retaliatory violence that these communities experience. Anderson (1999), Horowitz (1983), and others claim that many killings in disadvantaged communities result from a prevailing code of honor and respect that shapes residents’ values and behavior, and encourages the use of violence in response to others’ challenges and disrespectful treatment. If these arguments are correct, we would expect to find that disadvantaged neighborhoods not only experience a greater number of retaliatory killings than non-disadvantaged neighborhoods, but that retaliatory killings in poor communities are more likely to reflect elements of the street culture.

To test this idea, we performed a content analysis of all retaliatory homicide narratives, classifying each case into one of three categories: (1) street code ($n = 90$), (2) likely street code ($n = 213$), and (3) not street code ($n = 31$) (in 3 cases narratives were missing). Cases were classified as “street code” and scored a 1 if they had strong evidence of (a) disrespect (e.g., insults and provocative gestures, refusal to show proper deference, character assassinations, challenges to masculinity, embarrassment in front of others, affronts against female significant others); (b) community or family support for retaliatory violence; and/or (c) actors’ decisions to resolve problems through direct action and not involve the police. Retaliatory cases that were clearly unrelated to these factors were categorized as “not street code” and scored a 3 (e.g., a customer of a car repair shop killed the owner for cheating him; two mentally ill tenants killed their landlord because they were unhappy about their living quarters; a man killed his boss for firing him; a woman smothered her child to retaliate against the child’s father, who had left the woman). In the majority of the remaining cases, the “likely street code” category (scored a 2), the narratives suggested elements of the code of the street but lacked sufficient detail to be definitively classified as street code killings.

For the analysis, we combined “street code” and “likely street code” cases into one category labeled, “cultural retaliatory homicides.” The remaining cases have been labeled “situa-

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9. The formula for the standard test for coefficient differences across equations is: $t = \frac{b_1 - b_2}{\sqrt{SEb_1^2 + SEb_2^2}}$ (Paternoster et al., 1998). All coefficient comparisons are based on a one-tailed test. See also McNulty (2001:479).
tional retaliatory homicides,” which means that the killing appeared to be shaped by interpersonal circumstances unrelated to neighborhood values and norms (cf. Felson and Steadman 1983; Luckenbill 1977). To determine whether disadvantage is more strongly associated with cultural than situational retaliation, we performed regression analyses and compared the coefficients for neighborhood disadvantage across the two equations (see Table 4).

As expected, neighborhood disadvantage is strongly related to cultural retaliatory killings ($\beta = .86; p < .001$); a unit change in neighborhood disadvantage would increase the expected number of these homicides by 136 percent. On the other hand, neighborhood disadvantage is not significantly associated with situational retaliatory killings. More importantly, results from a standard test for coefficient differences across equations reveal that neighborhood disadvantage is more strongly associated with cultural than situational homicides (.86 versus .07; $t = 2.57; p < .01$). This finding was further confirmed when we compared street code killings (category 1 cases only, excluding “likely street code” cases) to situational retaliatory killings ($t = 2.44; p < .01$). These findings provide strong evidence that poor neighborhoods have greater numbers of cultural retaliatory killings, where honor and disrespect play a prominent role in the production of retaliatory violence.

In sum, both the descriptive statistics and the regression results indicate that disadvantaged neighborhoods experience a greater number of homicides that are retaliatory in nature, and that these retaliatory killings are more likely to reflect elements of the street culture. Retaliatory homicides differ markedly from non-retaliatory homicides on a number of dimensions (Table 1), and there is a strong bivariate correlation between disadvantage and retaliatory homicide (Figure 1 and Table 2). Neighborhood disadvantage is the factor most strongly associated with this type of murder (Table 3), and poor neighborhoods are more likely to experience cultural than situational retaliatory killings (Table 4).

### Cultural Retaliatory Homicide: Accounts Illustrating the Street Culture

These findings establish a statistical relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and a particular type of retaliatory homicide that we call “cultural.” To elaborate the connection between community structure and culture, we turn to a second data source: the homicide narratives. We use these data as a descriptive supplement to the regression analyses; they provide additional insights into the nature of retaliatory homicide and illustrate important
patterns in accounts of retaliatory violence. The narrative descriptions demonstrate various components of culturally motivated homicides—features that distinguish these killings from situational retaliatory homicide.

All narratives quoted below involve instances of cultural retaliatory homicide. They are drawn from highly (61 percent) or extremely (39 percent) disadvantaged areas (based on Krivo and Peterson’s [1996] categorization), and these neighborhoods are socio-economically similar to other disadvantaged neighborhoods in St. Louis (e.g., the mean percentage of persons in poverty in tracts comprising our sample narratives is 39 percent, compared to 35 percent for all highly/extremely disadvantaged tracts in St. Louis, and the mean percent unemployed is 10 percent and 9 percent, respectively).

As we suggested earlier in the article, there is an inclination among some residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods to resolve problems through lethal violence. Many of the actions that precipitate violent retribution may appear extremely minor to outsiders (e.g., being stared at, called a name, losing at a game, the theft of $10 or a car stereo, etc.), but these “trivial” catalysts must be understood in the context of neighborhood conditions that increase the chances of residents’ disputatiousness. Based on what we know of the “code of the streets” in disadvantaged communities, it is expected that encounters that result in retaliatory homicide will be shaped by: challenges interpreted as disrespectful or damaging to oneself or to one’s significant other or friends; some level of community tolerance for this informal social control; and reluctance to involve the police. Each of these motives or conditions is evidenced in the narrative accounts drawn from disadvantaged areas, but are less apparent in the accounts drawn from affluent neighborhoods. Of the 34 retaliatory cases in affluent neighborhoods, in only one case did the motive clearly resemble elements of the street code of respect. In affluent neighborhoods, retaliatory killings were motivated by prior physical attacks (6 cases) or by miscellaneous conflicts (e.g., a feud over a car battery, nonpayment for services rendered, theft of money or property [4 cases], disputes over drugs [6 cases], child abuse victims killing their abusers [3 cases], tenants killing their landlords because they had been evicted [2 cases]). These homicides did not appear to be driven by considerations of personal honor, status, and respect. The following discussion of retaliatory killings in disadvantaged areas is organized around four conditions associated with the street code: retribution for disrespect, insults toward female significant others, a policing vacuum, and community and family support for retaliation.

**Retribution for Disrespect**

Disrespect comes in many flavors. In one case, a man who tried to buy powder cocaine on the street was rebuffed by the seller, who only had crack cocaine for sale. The victim went around the corner, bought crack, and returned to the seller and told him he was “not the only game in town.” The seller had been trying to establish himself in the drug trade—“flexing muscle as a distributor” according to the narrative account—and the charge that he was “not the only game in town” was evidently interpreted as a challenge to his business acumen. The seller, along with two accomplices, killed the victim, and the accomplices were later shot in retaliation for the killing (Case 058). In the following case, the suspect was attacked by someone he had formerly thought was afraid of him and who also questioned his manhood, adding insult to injury and calling for retribution:

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10. We did not quantify the narrative data in terms of its frequency by category because some cases fall into two or more categories, and because these data are intended solely as illustrative of the ways in which subculture can contribute to violence.
The suspect liked to bully the neighborhood youths and order them around. On the day in question, the victim had apparently had enough. When the suspect told the victim to go to the store for him, the victim refused. The suspect then called the victim a “punk.” The victim punched the suspect once in the mouth and the suspect hit the ground. The victim told the suspect to get his nine [gun], calling the suspect a punk because the suspect needed a weapon to be tough. Friends of the suspect later told police that the suspect was “in shock” that the victim would hit him; the suspect said that he thought the victim was afraid of him. The suspect said he would “take care of business” and his friends knew he would shoot the victim, because the suspect was no fighter and would only settle things with a gun. As the victim was sitting in a car with friends, the suspect shot into the car, then fled the area. (Case 059)

When the victim physically resisted the suspect’s bullying and challenged the suspect’s manhood (claiming he could not dominate others without a weapon), the suspect felt compelled to “take care of business” and eliminate the challenger.

In one case, a police officer’s routine act of writing a parking ticket was construed as disrespectful and deserving of the ultimate retribution:

The suspect drove at a high speed, hitting an officer who was writing a parking ticket. The victim was thrown into the air and landed on the hood of the suspect’s car. The car carried the officer approximately fifty feet down the street and he rolled off the car. Suspect then walked to the victim, searched him, and kicked him repeatedly in the face. The suspect said, “He’ll think twice before he gives me another ticket,” and “That’ll teach him to embarrass me in front of my grandchildren,” and “You don’t know how much hate I got in me.” The suspect had gotten a parking ticket that day, but there was no evidence that this officer had written it. It appears that the suspect was so angry over the ticket, he simply went looking for a police officer. He told police he wasn’t sorry and would do it again. (Case 534)

Particularly galling to the offender was the fact that he had been embarrassed in front of his grandchildren, even though the officer killed was not the culprit.

In several cases, a victim dares another to kill, a striking type of victim precipitation that is construed as both disrespectful and invitational (Katz 1988; Luckenbill 1977). In one case,

The suspect accused the victim of blocking his entrance to a doorway, called the victim a name, and ordered the victim out of his way. The victim and suspect then got into a fistfight. Victim and suspect exchanged threats before leaving. Later, the suspect drove up in a car and said something to the victim, who responded, “Go ahead and shoot me,” which the suspect did. (Case 165)

Disrespect can be elevated from the personal level to the community level—i.e., acting in a way that shows disrespect toward the entire neighborhood. Community members sometimes take offense at this more diffuse kind of disrespect, and attempt to assert informal social control over those whose deviant behavior is deemed unacceptable. “Bullying” people in the neighborhood was a problem in the following case:

One of the suspects said he and his friends were tired of the victim’s son bullying the neighborhood. He said it had “gotten out of hand.” Victim’s son tried to bully people into joining the Bloods [gang]. A source said the victim’s son was responsible for a shooting several months prior in which an infant and five others were shot. On the night in question, according to one suspect, they decided to “take care of the problem.” The suspects distributed guns and walked to the home of the victim’s son. The victim was sitting on the front porch with her son and two others. The suspects took up positions in two gangways and opened fire. The victim and one witness returned fire with 9mm pistols. The victim [the son’s mother] was shot, and the suspects fled the scene. The victim’s son said that “someone would pay” for his mother’s death. (Case 042)

In another instance, the perpetrator presents himself as performing a community service by killing someone who had been victimizing the neighborhood:

He said to police, “That wasn’t a college boy I shot! He was nothing but a junkie. He’s been all over town trickin’ and beatin’ folks.” Not only did the victim sell “burn bags” [in the neighborhood], but
he also led people to believe that the drugs “came from the neighborhood” [apparently damaging the reputation of other drug dealers]. (Case 452)

Not only is disrespect a common motive for retaliatory killings, but the killing can earn the perpetrator respect from peers. This is a central feature of the street code in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Anderson 1999). An example follows:

The suspect was very tight with two brothers, whose sister had been killed in 1990, for which the victim had been arrested. Reportedly, the two brothers had put out a contract of $10,000 for the death of the victim. At the time of the shooting, the victim was walking across a parking lot when the suspect approached and began shooting. The victim fell, and the suspect then stood over him and continued firing at his face. The suspect then calmly walked to his grandmother’s house near the scene. As police investigated, he went back outside and watched the police. He and his friends congratulated one another and laughed. No one in the crowd pointed him out to the police as the shooter. Reportedly, the victim was killed on this day because it was the birthday of one of the brothers [who was] seeking revenge for his sister. (Case 344, our emphasis)

Further evidence of the code of respect in disadvantaged neighborhoods can be found in accounts that make direct reference to local expectations and norms. Actors sometimes tell others that they fully expect their disrespectful behavior to be punished by persons whom they offend. For instance, after stealing a man’s car stereo and selling it to a friend, the thief told the friend to keep quiet about it, because if the owner found out who had stolen it, he would kill the thief—which he subsequently did (Case 591). In many other accounts, actors appear to believe they have no choice but to retaliate for some affront, no matter how minor. Consider the “suspect [who] didn’t like the way the other man looked at him and said, as a result, he would have to kill the man” (Case 313). Opting not to retaliate against someone who shows disrespect may suggest that the offended party is weak and available for future abuse by others in the neighborhood (Anderson 1999).

**Insults Toward Female Significant Others**

In “cultures of honor” generally, “Insults or attacks against female members of the family are considered especially heinous” (Cohen and Nisbett 1994:552). We found a similar pattern regarding disrespect toward female significant others. In several cases, one or both of the antagonists had some kind of involvement or problem with a female third party—a sister, girlfriend, mother, etc. In these cases, one party’s treatment of a woman is interpreted by the other party as a sign of direct disrespect toward the woman and/or vicarious disrespect toward a man associated with the woman. The readiness with which such relatively minor affronts are defined as worthy of lethal violence is striking in the following accounts, illustrating how status conditions in disadvantaged neighborhoods seem to predispose males to respond violently to other males’ offenses (Anderson 1999). In the course of a card game, the victim drank and increasingly used foul language:

He was asked to stop, and would apologize, but he would then curse again. The victim kept apologizing, but said he “couldn’t help” cursing because he was drinking. Finally, the suspect’s aunt said that the game was over and it was time for everyone to leave. The victim left and the suspect ran outside and shot him. Suspect apparently felt victim had insulted or failed to respect his aunt. (Case 406)

Some of the conflicts revolve around perceived challenges to a person’s manhood, an asset highly valued in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Anderson 1999; Horowitz 1983). A case in point follows:

The victim had been at the lounge with friends and family celebrating his birthday. He had started a conversation with a woman at the bar, and her boyfriend (one of the suspects) became extremely angry, accusing the victim of “hitting on” the woman. After the argument, the boyfriend/suspect was heard saying that he would kill the victim, repeating this over and over. When the bar closed,
there was a crowd out front, a car drove up and its passengers fired into the crowd. The victim ran and two men jumped out of the car and ran after him, shooting. They were the two men who had stood behind the boyfriend/suspect in the bar. (Case 450)

Two other instances of disrespect involving a woman follow:

Suspect 1 was talking to a woman acquaintance. She told police they were only friends. The victim, her ex-boyfriend, saw them talking and ordered the woman into the house. He told them that “the talking was over.” Suspect 1 drove away, and later returned with suspect 2. When they saw the victim, suspect 1 asked him why he had “dissed” him. Suspect 2 then pointed a rifle out the window of the car and opened fire. (Case 089)

Witness 3 had been in a fast-food restaurant in the neighborhood and had seen the victim harass a woman whom witness 3 knew. The woman had been upset and couldn’t get the victim to stop. Witness 3 went home and told witness 1 and the suspect what had happened. Witness 1 picked up a stick and the suspect picked up a shotgun. They found the victim on the street and confronted him, demanding to know why he had harassed the woman, who was seven months pregnant. Witness 1 swung the stick and the suspect shot the victim. (Case 800)

Retaliation can occur even when the woman in question tries to prevent it:

The victim and his ex-girlfriend had a three year-old daughter, and the woman was six months pregnant by suspect 2, who lived with her. The day before, the victim and the woman had argued about their child, and the victim told her he would “slap her silly,” though he did not do so. The woman told suspect 2 about the incident. On the day in question, the suspects were in the parking lot when the victim approached, preparing to enter the building. The woman was watching from a window, and hollered at suspect 2, reminding him of what the victim had said to her the day before. Suspect 2 engaged the victim in conversation, and punched and kicked him. Suspect 1 then ran into the building and returned with a shotgun, which he handed to suspect 2. The woman claimed that she hollered out the window, telling suspect 2 not to shoot the victim, and that other people in the area did the same. But suspect 2 placed the gun to victim’s head and fired. (Case 572)

Simply threatening a woman, to “slap her silly,” provided grounds for murder, showing how little “provocation” is needed to justify the ultimate punishment.

The following example shows how a minor slight, a teasing remark about a female, can have deadly consequences where the street code reigns:

The victim was visiting friends when the suspect stopped by to pick up an ID card from a 19-year-old female who was an acquaintance of the victim. As the suspect was leaving, the victim told the girl that she was “picking ‘em young these days.” The suspect asked the victim who he was talking to and said “you better check yourself before you wreck yourself.” Shortly after, when the victim left the apartment, the suspect shot him. (Case 335)

To suggest that the suspect was too young for the girl was evidently a sign of disrespect that could not go unpunished.

One subcultural feature of these communities is the acceptability of teenage girls having babies (Anderson 1999), but not everyone endorses this practice. In the following case, a critical comment about such a girl provided the backdrop for a violent attack, which may be seen as an attempt to defend the legitimacy of the prevailing code regarding youth pregnancy:

A friend of the victim’s had made some remarks about the suspect’s pregnant girlfriend, that “she is only 16 and already has two kids.” This angered the suspect, who pulled a gun on the victim’s friend. Later, the victim and his friend were standing near the housing project when the suspect and girlfriend walked by. The victim’s friend then said to the suspect, “maybe you should have shot me when you had the chance,” and he and the victim put their hands behind their backs, acting like they had weapons. The suspect said, “Man, what’s your problem? I thought this thing was over with you.” Suspect then chased the victim and friend, firing shots. (Case 447)
A Policing Vacuum

The street culture calls for the use of informal control or summary justice in response to others’ “offensive” behavior, instead of calling the police. Earlier in the article we cited evidence of a policing vacuum in extremely disadvantaged St. Louis communities, whose residents tend to believe that police services to their neighborhoods are inadequate (Velez 2001). The narrative data suggest that residents often do not call for police intervention when they have been victimized by others. Instead, they take direct action and may even publicly broadcast their intention to take revenge, by putting “word on the street” that another person is about to be attacked or killed. In several cases, suspects let it be known that they were “out to get” the victim, demonstrating little concern about repercussions from the police.

As indicated earlier in the article, the policing vacuum does not apply to the initial stages of every conflict. When it comes to certain types of transgressions (such as theft of drugs, a stare that seems challenging, and other signs of disrespect), the offended party simply has no legal recourse. But when the precipitating acts are serious, criminal offenses (an aggravated assault, shooting, rape, etc.), the offended party might be expected to call the police. Despite the gravity of these crimes, however, it is noteworthy that suspects typically decide to settle the score on their own, without invoking the police. It is in these types of conflicts that the policing vacuum is most evident.

One theme running throughout the narratives is the unwillingness of witnesses to give information to the police. It was frequently the case that people known to have information about a crime refused to contact the police—for two reasons. First, some of the persons killed were seen by others as legitimate victims. In one case, not only did the suspect justify the murder to the police, but witnesses also condoned the killing:

The suspect told police that no one “gave a shit” or “gave a fuck” about the victim, and told police that they were wasting their time. Witnesses said they weren’t going to become involved. No one would “witness” against the suspect because the victim was no good. (Case 667)

Similarly, with regard to a victim who had been stealing cars for a year, “residents told police that neighbors would not mourn the victim and would not cooperate” with police because the killing was deserved (Case 716). Another man, who was killed because he had a habit of robbing drug dealers, “was not well-liked in the neighborhood, so no one wanted to cooperate with the investigation” (Case 898).

Fear of retribution is another reason why people avoid talking to the police. Residents of these neighborhoods have little or no confidence that the police are capable of protecting them if they provide information. During the investigation of one shooting, young men emphasized to police that “life in the projects was rough.” One person didn’t want to talk because “I have to live down there”; another told police, “you have no idea what it’s like down there” (Case 570). Neighborhood conditions are such that talking to the police might compromise one’s personal safety. One witness to a killing was “so afraid of the suspect that he would rather go to jail than cooperate in the prosecution” (Case 088). After one killing, residents believed that the suspect was watching the police station to see who was being questioned, which “terrified” witnesses (Case 344). As many as 50 bystanders witnessed this killing, but no one was willing to talk to the police. About 20 youths were nearby at the time of another killing, but all denied being present and refused to give their names to police (Case 688). That this may be a rational decision under the circumstances is demonstrated by instances when informants are subsequently attacked. Some of our narratives describe police “snitches” who were later killed for talking to the police. One victim, who had acted as a lookout during one of the suspect’s previous killings, was now believed ready to testify against the suspect at another murder trial, and was killed before he could do so (Case 283). In another case, the police stopped a man whose car had been used in a crime, and took him to the police station for questioning. Three suspects, who ran a “dope house,” thought that the victim had
“snitched to police” about the dope house—though he had not, according to the narrative. After the police returned the man to the location where he had been picked up by officers, the suspects shot and killed him (Case 100).

Those who did contact the police sometimes insisted on doing so secretly. Several cases involve “confidential informants” and “secret witnesses.” One person said he would talk to police, but only if he could enter the police station through a tunnel (not the front door where he might be observed by the suspect) or if the police staged a “mock arrest” as cover (Case 344).

**Community and Family Support for Retaliation**

Neighbors who have no relation to those involved in a dispute may not only tolerate but also actively support the use of retaliatory violence. Such support may come from third parties who observe the initial or subsequent (fatal) altercation (Cooney 1998; Luckenbill 1977) or more generally from a wider section of the community. The latter form of support seems implicit in the case where the victim had been acting in a way that aggravated the entire community, such as “bullying” the neighborhood (Case 042 above), or in the case of “a common thief and troublemaker, who wouldn’t survive the summer because he ‘fucks’ with too many people,” in the words of this victim’s former friend (Case 461). In another case, a suspect who was visiting someone in the neighborhood was told that the victim had been trying to break into the suspect’s car. A neighbor who did not know the suspect, upon hearing what had happened and knowing that the suspect was going to the victim’s house to confront him, offered the suspect a sawed-off shotgun, which the suspect accepted and used (Case 298). As noted above, in several cases residents were quite vehement in saying that the person killed was a legitimate victim, so disliked in the neighborhood that his passing was regarded as good riddance, and for this reason they would not cooperate with the police (e.g., Cases 667, 716, and 898 above).

Familial support for retaliatory violence is also evident in our data. In several instances, the killer proudly tells family members about a planned or completed killing—suggesting that the killer expects approval. In other cases, family members actively encourage the killing. In one incident (Case 421), the suspect had shot at the victim earlier in the day because the victim had sold one of the suspect’s guns. The victim then told his family that he would “have to kill” the suspect, but the suspect ambushed the victim and killed him. Apparently the victim had no compunction about telling his family that he would retaliate with a killing. In another case, after killing a man,

the suspects ran back to suspect 2’s house and told suspect 2’s mother, cousins, and aunt. Suspect 1 claimed they “had” to do it because the victim had stolen articles from suspect 2. Suspect 2 told the mother of another friend about the homicide. He laughed, and told her she should have seen the expression on the victim’s face when he was shot. (Case 239)

Note how the suspects readily informed relatives and others about the killing, suggesting that they believed others would agree that the victim’s death was a proper sanction for their own material loss.

Another incident began with a violent argument between the victim and a suspect, who were former lovers:

Suspect 1 called her husband (suspect 2) and said a man had broken into their home and was beating her. Suspect 2 arrived with his mother. Suspect 1 was waiting on the porch and told her husband, “go into the house and shoot that bastard.” Suspect 2 did, and then turned over the victim with his foot and said, “He’s not dead. Give me the gun.” Suspect 2’s mother said he shouldn’t shoot the man any more. Emergency Medical Services arrived. The victim was conscious and told paramedics he wanted to prosecute the suspects. Suspect 2’s mother said, “He’s got his nerve. He wants to prosecute my son. [My son] should have killed him.” She then started to take a gun from her purse, but a companion persuaded her to put it away. (Case 158)
Not only does the mother take offense at the victim’s request to prosecute her son, she is also prepared to personally administer summary justice on his behalf. In other cases as well, a parent demonstrates by his or her behavior, or instructs a child about, the street code of retaliation. For example,

During a party, the victim went upstairs and had sex with the suspect’s 13-year-old sister. The girl’s mother claimed that the girl was physically ill the next day and only after questioning did she learn of the rape. The mother told the girl’s brother to shoot the victim and drove him to the location. (Case 688)

Familial support for violence is also indicated in cases where parents take revenge against persons who have offended one of their children. One father was so angered by an assault against his son that he told police he would retaliate:

When the father [the suspect] was informed that his son was hit by the victim during an argument, he said to the police, “You mean his uncle [the victim] hit my son? I’ll kill the motherfucker.” He later hired another person to kill the victim. (Case 774)

Or consider the father of a 14-year-old boy who had been punched and knocked unconscious by another boy:

While driving the [injured] boy to the hospital, the father (suspect) decided to find the person who had hit his son. He drove up to where the youngsters were playing basketball, got out of the car and said, “Which one is it?” Either the son pointed to the victim or the father thought that he did; the father grabbed the victim by his collar and shot him in the face. (Case 877)

This was a case of mistaken identity.

Several other incidents involved killings of persons who were not the real culprits. This is part of a larger pattern in which offended parties often seem to have a short fuse, to react violently without taking the time to verify that a particular person had indeed committed the “offense” in question. On occasion, offenders seem prepared to mete out vengeance indiscriminately:

The victim’s sons had just robbed the suspect’s mother of drugs and money. According to a confidential informant, the victim’s sons had gone to the suspect’s mother’s residence and were admitted because they said they wanted to buy crack. Once inside, they used a sawed-off shotgun to rob the woman of drugs and money. When the suspect returned home, his mother told him. He and his brother went to ___ location, determined to shoot whoever opened the door [fatally shooting the father of the robbers]. (Case 471, our emphasis)

The accounts presented here illustrate how retaliatory homicides in impoverished neighborhoods can be shaped by conditions and motives associated with the street code—conditions and motives that are largely absent in more affluent neighborhoods, where retaliatory violence occurs rarely and is driven by other motives.

**Conclusion**

Our findings underscore the importance of two dimensions of neighborhood context in understanding patterns of retaliatory homicide: structural disadvantage and subcultural support for violence. Retaliatory homicide, and cultural retaliatory homicide in particular, more so than other types of homicide, is unevenly distributed across St. Louis and concentrated in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Few retaliatory homicides occurred in more affluent neighborhoods.

To fully understand why retaliatory killings take place in disadvantaged neighborhoods, one needs to explore the neighborhoods’ cultural and interpersonal dynamics. Drawing on earlier work, we expected that violent solutions to problems in disadvantaged communities
would be an essential part of the local subculture—a means of defending one’s honor and winning respect from residents. These cultural codes legitimate aggressive responses to individuals who show disrespect, “a rationale allowing those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way” (Anderson 1999:33). Residents have an acute sensitivity to signs of disrespect from others, which increases their inclination to respond violently to even minor insults.

Our narrative data support this cultural code perspective. In disadvantaged St. Louis communities, the cases illustrate the importance of retribution for disrespectful treatment experienced either personally or vicariously. Offensive behavior directed towards a woman who is associated with a man is often interpreted as an affront to both the woman and the man. We also found evidence of community and family support for retaliatory violence, which points to neighborhood subcultural influences on violent behavior in these communities. Far from being an isolated, individual affair, the narrative data show that retaliatory violence can be collectively tolerated, endorsed, and rewarded by other residents. The analysis also shows that the motives characterizing retaliatory homicides in disadvantaged areas differ from those in affluent communities. Only one of the 34 retaliatory killings in affluent areas bore any resemblance to the code of the street, where honor and social status figure so prominently.

Another condition conducive to retaliatory violence in poor communities is the neighborhood cultural response to problematic policing. Interpersonal violence may be seen as a way of resolving problems and asserting social control in neighborhoods where the agents of formal control are often “out of the loop” when it comes to crime and punishment. People settle scores on their own—because such action is subculturally supported, because they have little trust in the police, and because they fear for their own personal safety if they involve the police. One interesting dimension of this reliance on street justice is the possibility that violent retribution, and residents’ fear of it, may serve as a form of social control—perhaps preventing some types of crime in the community (Black 1983; Parenti 2000). Supporting evidence of this “crime as social control” phenomenon is found in Anderson’s (1999) and Mary Pattillo-McCoy’s (1999) discussions of the role of drug dealers, gang members, and other street criminals in exerting social control over other community residents in either conventional or deviant ways. It is possible that retaliatory killings have similar social control effects in a community, and this possibility deserves further attention in future research. Similarly, more research is needed on the role of policing in disadvantaged communities, and how this may condition residents’ informal social control practices.

References


