



## Social Disorganization, Intimate Partner Violence, and the Rural/Urban Divide

*Amanda Goodson, M.A.*

*Leana Bouffard, Ph.D.*

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has defined intimate partner violence (IPV) as, “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression (including coercive acts) by a current or former intimate partner” (2015, n.p.). Prevalence estimates have demonstrated nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men are affected by IPV (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), 2015). Acknowledging IPV as a widespread societal problem, researchers have pushed to examine this crime to better understand its etiology.

Social disorganization is a criminological theory largely used to explain crime in urban communities. This theory suggests economic disadvantage, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, and family disruption impact behavior and regulate crime within a community (Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Specifically, communities with greater levels of economic disadvantage, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, and family disruption may experience higher levels of crime because communities are unable to establish prosocial ties, values, and beliefs. Recently, researchers have used social disorganization to explain rates of IPV within urban communities (Miles-Doan, 1998). Given that nearly one third of the population in the United States resides in a community with a population of less than 50,000 individuals (defined as non-urban areas by the U.S. Census; U. S. Census Bureau, 2012), it is important to understand how social disorganization functions in rural communities. The limitations in the literature highlight the need for exploring the dynamics of IPV rates within rural communities using a social disorganization theoretical framework.

### Research Questions

The current study contributed to existing literature by focusing on two research questions:

1. Do characteristics of social disorganization predict incidents of IPV?
2. Second, do characteristics of social disorganization predict incidents of IPV similarly in urban and rural settings?

This research brief provides a summary of results from a recent study designed to examine the relationship between social

disorganization, IPV, and the rural/urban divide published in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (Goodson & Bouffard, 2017).

### Sample

The current report draws from data collected in 690 counties across thirteen states (Arkansas, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and West Virginia). Assault data were gathered from the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which was accessed through the Inter-University Consortium on Political and Social Research (ICPSR Study #36120; United States Department of Justice, 2013). Five-year estimates of county-level data on social disorganization characteristics were collected from the 2014 American Community Survey (ACS), which is managed by the United States Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The county classification codes were collected from the Economic Research Service (ERS, 2013), which is managed by the United States Department of Agriculture.

### Relationship-Specific Assault

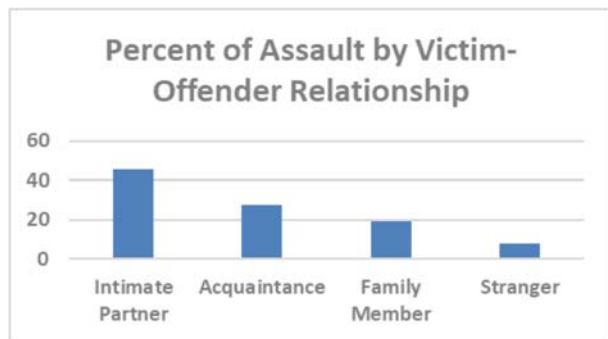
For this study, all NIBRS-defined assaults (i.e., aggravated assault, simple assault, and intimidation) were combined. The cases were divided based on the victim-offender relationship to compare counts of IPV to those occurring within other victim-offender dynamics. The relationship-specific categories of assault include IPV, family assault, acquaintance assault, and stranger assault. As shown in Table 1, there were 274,216 incidents of assault used in analyses.

**Table 1. Total Number of Assaults in 690 Counties**

<b>N</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Range</b>
274,216	397.41 (1,374.56)	0-22,738

Of those assault incidents presented in Table 1, the majority were committed by an intimate partner (45.30%), followed by acquaintances (27.90%), family members (19.19%), and strangers (7.61%) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percent of Assault by Victim-Offender Relationship



### Social Disorganization

Characteristics of social disorganization included residential instability, low socioeconomic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and family disruption.

*Residential instability* measured the percent of individuals who moved residences within the previous year. Table 2 demonstrates the average residential mobility within a county was about 13 percent ( $SD = 4.12$ ). *Low socioeconomic status* was measured using a concentrated disadvantage scale comprised of percent below the poverty line, percentage unemployed, and the percentage of single-female headed households ( $\alpha = .86$ ). These measures were combined to create an additive scale because they measure the underlying concepts of economic structural disadvantage in a neighborhood (Miles-Doan, 1998). Low scores represent low-level disadvantage and high scores represent increased disadvantage. County level concentrated disadvantage ranged from 0.00-122.34 ( $M = 35.28, SD = 13.99$ ). *Ethnic heterogeneity* was measured with a diversity index. Race was categorized into groups in terms of proportion of White versus Black versus Other in each county. Scores of the diversity index ranged from 0.00-0.67, with higher scores reflecting greater diversity within a county. Overall, counties were relatively homogenous ( $M = 0.17, SD = 0.15$ ).

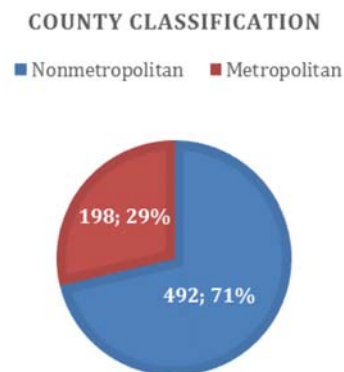
Social Disorganization	Mean (SD)	Range
Residential Instability	13.00 (4.12)	4.00-38.30
Concentrated Disadvantage	35.28 (13.99)	0.00-122.34
Ethnic Heterogeneity	0.17 (0.15)	0.00-0.67

### Rural/Urban Divide

The ERS categorizes counties on a geographic spectrum (2013). One end of the spectrum classifies counties as nonmetropolitan (rural) and the other end classifies counties as metropolitan (urban). Nonmetropolitan counties include a combination of rural towns of fewer than 2,500 persons, urban areas that have a population ranging from 2,500 to 49,999, and open countryside. Counties are considered urban if the geographic

area holds 50,000 or more persons and are economically tied to another urban county (ERS, 2013). Counties were coded into two distinct categories (0 = Metro County, 1 = Nonmetro County). As shown in Figure 2, the majority of counties were nonmetropolitan (71.0%).

Figure 2: County Classification



### Predictors of Assault

The analyses in this section focus on (1) whether characteristics of social disorganization can predict assault across various victim-offender relationships, and (2) whether characteristics of social disorganization predict different forms of assault similarly across rural and urban counties. Three models were conducted to determine predictors of assault across victim-offender relationships.

#### Social disorganization and assault

All of the counties were included in the first model to establish a baseline for the role of geography (see Table 3).

Several measures of social disorganization predicted assaults across victim-offender relationships. Residential instability increased rates of stranger assault and IPV. Higher levels of ethnic heterogeneity increased rates of assault across all victim-offender relationships. Higher levels of concentrated disadvantage increased rates of acquaintance assault, family assault, and IPV, but decreased rates of stranger assault.

Variables	Stranger	Acquaintance	Family	Intimate Partner
Residential Instability	+			+
Ethnic Heterogeneity	+	+	+	+
Concentrated Disadvantage	-	+	+	+

#### Social disorganization and assault in metropolitan counties

Table 4 only included metropolitan counties ( $N = 198$ ). Higher levels of ethnic heterogeneity increased rates of assault across each victim-offender relationship in metropolitan counties. Additionally, counties with more mobility had higher rates of

IPV. Counties experiencing higher levels of concentrated disadvantage had higher rates of familial assault and IPV.

**Table 4: Predictors of Assault in Metro Counties**

Variables	Stranger	Acquaintance	Family	Intimate Partner
Residential Instability				+
Ethnic Heterogeneity	+	+	+	+
Concentrated Disadvantage			+	+

**Social disorganization and assault in nonmetropolitan counties**

Table 5 included nonmetropolitan counties (N = 492). Residential instability is not related to any type of assault. Higher levels of ethnic heterogeneity increased assaults across every victim-offender relationship. Finally, higher levels of concentrated disadvantage increased every type of assault except those committed by a stranger.

**Table 5: Predictors of Assault in Nonmetro Counties**

Variables	Stranger	Acquaintance	Family	Intimate Partner
Residential Instability				
Ethnic Heterogeneity	+	+	+	+
Concentrated Disadvantage		+	+	+

**Discussion**

Results from this study partially align with prior research that has explored social disorganization in urban and rural communities. Assault was significantly associated with the level of ethnic heterogeneity within a community, and this association was demonstrated across each relationship type in every model. However, the relationship between mobility, concentrated disadvantage, and assault slightly varied between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties. These results indicate some of the characteristics of social disorganization may function differently between county classification.

Ethnic heterogeneity increased rates of assault across every victim-offender relationship regardless of whether a county was classified as metro or nonmetro. Prior research that has extended social disorganization to IPV suggests there should be no effect or it should be negatively associated with IPV. Extant research on social disorganization and IPV has focused on ethnic or immigrant populations, and research suggests these groups are already homogenous and relatively cohesive (Wright & Benson, 2010). Thus it would be expected to not have an effect on violence. The results of this study align with the original theoretical framework, which suggests more ethnically diverse counties are unable to exert social control, which

can lead to increased rates of assault across a variety of victim-offender relationships.

In the baseline model, residential instability was associated with increased rates of stranger assault and IPV. However, further analyses revealed residential instability was only associated with increased rates of IPV in metro counties. While prior research suggests residential instability predicts crime in rural counties (Osgood & Chambers, 2000), the results from this study support the original social disorganization theoretical framework. One explanation could be that metro counties experiencing higher levels of mobility have reduced social ties between community members, thus fewer residents may be willing to call the police or intervene (Van Wyk, Benson, Fox, & DeMaris, 2003). Consequently, communities can suffer from increased rates of violence, such as IPV.

In nonmetropolitan counties, concentrated disadvantage was associated with increased rates of assault perpetrated by acquaintances, family members, and intimate partners. In metropolitan counties, concentrated disadvantage was associated with increased rates of familial assault and IPV. These results suggest the likelihood of IPV increases in more highly disadvantaged neighborhoods. Prior research relating to social disorganization and IPV suggests disadvantaged communities suffer from substance abuse, mental and physical health problems, poverty, unemployment, and family disruption (Edwards, Mattingly, Dixon, & Banyard, 2014; Miles-Doan, 1998), which can increase the risk of violence within a community. Additionally, concentrated disadvantage is often related to an increase in strain and maladaptive coping behaviors and a reduction in help-seeking behaviors, thus leading to a heightening risk of violence (Edwards et al., 2014; Miles-Doan, 1998).

Overall, the majority of social disorganization measures functioned in the expected direction regardless of the victim-offender relationship or county classification. These results demonstrate the importance of incorporating community level characteristics when examining rates of violence such as IPV. Additionally, policies and programs designed to reduce violence both outside and inside the home should incorporate neighborhood components as these impact rates of violence within a community.

**References**

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2015). *Intimate partner violence: Definitions*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/definitions.html>.

Economic Research Service (ERS). (2013). *Urban influence codes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/urban-influence-codes/>.

Edwards, K. M., Mattingly, M. J., Dixon, K. J., & Banyard, V. L. (2014). Community matters: Intimate partner violence among rural young adults. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 53*, 198-207.

Goodson, A., & Bouffard, L. A. (2017). The rural/urban divide: Examining different types of assault through a social disorganization lens. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 1-24*. DOI: 10.1177/0886260517711179

Miles-Doan, R. (1998). Violence between spouses and intimate: Does neighborhood context matter? *Social Forces* 77, 623-645.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Statistics, 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncadv.org/learn/statistics>.

Osgood, D. W., & Chambers, J. M. (2000). Social disorganization outside the metropolis: An analysis of rural youth violence. *Criminology*, 38, 81-115.

Sampson, R. J., & Groves, W. B. (1989). Community structure and crime: Testing social disorganization theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, 774-802.

Shaw, C. R., & McKay, H. D. (1942). *Juvenile delinquency and urban areas: A study of rates of delinquency in relation to differential characteristics of local community in American cities*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Texas Council on Family Violence. (2012). *Texas State Plan*. Retrieved from: <http://tcfv.org/stateplan/index.html>.

United States Census Bureau. (2012). Urban and rural classification. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html>.

United States Census Bureau. (2016). *American community survey: Fact finder*. Retrieved from: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/searchresults.xhtml?refresh=t>.

United States Department of Justice. (2013). Uniform Crime Reporting Program Data: National Incident-Based Reporting System. ICPSR36120-v2. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2015-06-29. Retrieved from: <http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR36120.v2>.

Van Wyk, J. A., Benson, M. L., Fox, G. L., & DeMaris, A. (2003). Detangling individual-, partner-, and community-level correlates of partner violence. *Crime & Delinquency*, 49, 412-438.

Websdale, N. (1997). *Rural women battering and the justice system: An ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wright, E. M., & Benson, M. L. (2010). Immigration and intimate partner violence: Exploring the immigrant paradox. *Social Problems*, 57, 480-503.

## AUTHORS

**Amanda Goodson, M.A.**, is a doctoral student in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University. Her research focuses on victimology, specifically violence against women, system responses to crime victims, and gender and crime.

**Leana A. Bouffard, Ph.D.**, is a Professor and Chair in the Department of Sociology at Iowa State University and is the former Director of the Crime Victims' Institute at Sam Houston State University. Her research interests include violence against women, life-course and developmental criminology, and gender and crime.

## RESOURCES

**National Coalition Against Domestic Violence** (<http://www.ncadv.org/>)

**The National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233** (<http://www.thehotline.org/>)

**Texas Council on Family Violence** (<http://www.tcfv.org/>)

## Crime Victims' Institute Advisory Board

**Blanca Burciaga, Ft. Worth**  
Director, Victim Assistance Unit

**Victoria Camp, Austin**  
Consultant

**Dottie Carmichael, College Station**  
Texas A&M PPRI

**Stefani Carter, Austin**

**Robert Duncan, Austin**  
TTU System Chancellor

**Ana Elizabeth Estevez, Amarillo**  
District Judge

**Ann Matthews, Jourdanon**  
Domestic Violence

**Rodman Goode, Cedar Hill**  
Law Enforcement Teacher

**Henry Porretto, Galveston**  
Chief, Galveston Police Department

**Geoffrey Puryear, Georgetown**  
District Attorney

**Richard L. Reynolds, Austin**  
Psychotherapist

**Stephanie Anne Schulte, El Paso**  
ICU Nurse

**Jane Shafer, San Antonio**  
San Antonio PD Victim Liaison

**Debbie Unruh, Austin**  
Ombudsman

**Ms. Mary Anne Wiley, Austin**  
Office of the Governor

**Mark Wilson, Hillsboro**  
Hill County Sheriff's Office

## Texas State University System Board of Regents

**Rossanna Salazar, Chairman**  
Austin

**William F. Scott, Vice Chairman**  
Nederland

**Charlie Amato**  
San Antonio

**Veronica Muzquiz Edwards**  
San Antonio

**Dr. Jaime R. Garza**  
San Antonio

**David Montagne**  
Beaumont

**Vernon Reaser III**  
Bellaire

**Alan Tinsley**  
Madisonville

**Donna N. Williams**  
Arlington

**Kaitlyn Tyra**  
Student Regent, Huntsville

**Brian McCall**  
Chancellor

We're on the web

[www.crimevictimsinstitute.org](http://www.crimevictimsinstitute.org)