

THE SOCIAL CORRELATES TO FEAR OF VIOLENCE: A REFERENDUM ON GUN CONTROL IN MARYLAND

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ABSTRACT: *The political opinions expressed in voter referenda are often associated with not only the socio-economic status of the voters, but also with the perceived effect of the referendum on the status of their personal lives. Such was the case in a 1988 statewide referendum in Maryland on handgun control. Data on the percent favoring handgun control was available at the voting district level in Maryland to show that socio-economic class, rural-urban status, and degree of homicide and suicide violence were correlated with the vote on the referendum. A multiple regression model explained some 80 percent of the vote for the handgun law using 1990 census variables. Further verification was obtained from a map of homicides from the Baltimore City Police Department. The results generally support the notion that urban citizens that are better educated and employed in high-paying jobs or that are physically closer to frequent violent death by gunfire are disposed to favor gun control legislation. Rural citizens, who are farther removed from violent death and consider possession of firearms a basic right, voted against gun control.*

INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of research has been done since the early 1980s on the ecological correlates of violence and homicide in the United States. These studies confirm statistical relationships among intentional violent death (IVD) – homicide and suicide – poverty, overcrowded housing, social disintegration (e.g., high levels of drug and alcohol use, single-parent families, low education levels, high unemployment, infant mortality and low birth weights, etc.), and gun ownership/possession (Harries, 1995; Harries and Powell, 1994; Centerwall, 1991; Wallace, 1990; 1993; 1996). In this paper, I seek to demonstrate that some of these ecological correlates also may explain the outcome of a referendum on gun control.

The statistics differ depending upon the scale of research and/or the region of the country under study. I focus here on the differences between urban and rural places in the state of Maryland. An exploration of race, education, occupation, income, and homicide incidence variables and their statistical association with a

measure of citizen desire for gun control in Maryland reveals that there is a clear cut division of opinion on this issue between urban and rural voters. The fact that urban voters favor gun control and rural voters do not leads to the hypothesis that proximity and fear of violence in part motivated urban voters to approve gun control legislation.

WHY ARE POOR URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS UNSAFE?

The background for this analysis relies heavily on the work of Rodrick and Deborah Wallace and their associates (1990; 1993; 1996) and Harries (1990; 1995). Wallace and associates have been analyzing the ecology of crime, disease, and inequality in New York City for at least a decade. Wallace, conducting a small-area analysis of Bronx Borough, found a marked borough-wide rise of IVD and a rising correlation between substance abuse and poverty, after large sections of the Borough lost between 50 and 80 percent of housing and population between 1970 and 1990. The determining

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independent variables for that study were indices of the "mechanical" and "social" pressures of poverty involving overcrowding, relative income level and rate of immature births (Wallace, 1990).¹

The process which leads to this condition is well documented by Knox (1994, Chapter 11). A cycle of urban poverty begins with low incomes, poor housing and overcrowded conditions. Extreme overcrowding contributes to vulnerability to physical ill-health. It also produces psychological stress that contributes not only to ill-health but also to behavioral responses. As a result, such places tend to foster anomie, social disorganization, and a variety of pathological behaviors, including crime and violence. Because they are gradually emptying out as people who can afford to live elsewhere move away, these neighborhoods often contain abandoned housing and large tracts of vacant cleared land. Wallace (1990) describes how former Bronx residents fled substandard housing, lack of employment opportunities, and IVD associated with drug trafficking. As households flee, residential structures are often abandoned. Faced with escalating maintenance costs, rising property taxes, and a depressed inner-city housing market, landlords simply wrote off their property by abandoning it to long-term vacancy, or resorted to arson in an attempt to at least salvage insurance monies. Abandoned structures provide good sites for vagrancy and crime. There follows a "psychological abandonment" of the wider area by realtors, financiers and landlords and by public agencies, which begin to cut back on maintenance and service delivery.

There is a substantial literature that verifies the strong association between higher levels of social stress and neighborhood violence. Harries (1995, 45-48) builds a solid literature review of the complexity of stress, citing, among others, the works of Mirowsky and Ross (1989), Mulroy and Lane (1992) and Wilson (1987). He demonstrates how poverty is clearly a source of stress which in turn is associated with various antisocial behaviors, including violence. As Harries (1995, 45) puts it, "... violence may be seen as a result of stress, but also as a contributor to it, in that victimization and fear of victimization constitute stresses in themselves". Poverty has a tendency to generate feelings of powerlessness and of being exploited and

manipulated, especially among the young and the elderly.

To understand the gravity of this urban problem, consider that males in Bangladesh have a higher probability of survival after age 35 than men in the community of Harlem in New York City (Wallace 1990, 801). It would probably be safe to make similar comparisons for males in countries in the Fourth World with urban minorities in many cities in the United States (Greenberg and Schneider, 1996, 26). In the city of Baltimore alone, there were 354 homicides in 1993, while there were 467 such deaths in the nation's capital, Washington D.C. (Harries, 1995).

FEAR AND ITS RESPONSE

In her study of an inner-city housing project, anthropologist Sally Engle Merry (1988) maintains that danger cannot simply be equated with the statistical probability of being the victim of a crime. Instead, it is the individual's interpretation of their surrounding environment. The process of forming attitudes about people and places, and the cues which identify safety or danger, is one facet of the elaborate process by which an individual comes to know their life space.

"Information from the mass media, from friends and neighbors, and from the urbanite's own experience is constructed into a mental map of the city which guides behavior and creates a sense of safety in the midst of danger. What the individual considers harmful is itself a cultural product" (Merry, 1988, 68).

The stress that people associate with places may also be found in their mental maps. Specific streets, blocks, or neighborhoods may be regarded in any number of ways, but one very vivid and specific aspect of a person's imagery concerns their perceptions of threats to personal safety.

In larger cities, entire districts may be generally perceived to be dangerous. One is reminded of the frequently referenced "geography of fear in New York," in Paul Knox's urban geography textbook (Knox, 1994, 281). At a more detailed scale, residents familiar with such neighborhoods develop mental maps that highlight danger points

near gang hangouts, abandoned buildings, crack houses, drug markets, and so on. A person's best developed mental imagery is of their own and proximate neighborhoods. The relevance of this observation is that, given the chance, a person will exercise whatever prerogatives that are available to them to insure their personal safety. I will argue below that the voting patterns on a gun-control referendum is in itself a surrogate of the mental maps of the voters.

How do people living in or near what they perceive to be dangerous neighborhoods cope with their environment? According to Merry, some adopt a defensive strategy, turning their homes into fortresses barricaded with multiple locks, window bars, living with large guard dogs, calling police to report every incident, and even stockpiling guns. These are the people whose lives are most constricted by the fear of crime: the elderly and social isolates. Their defense is escape and retreat, so that if the fragile shell of safety around their homes is violated by a forced door or broken window, the loss of a sense of security is devastating. These people may be likely to be fatalistic about their plight, convinced that there is little that can be done.

Others adopt offensive strategies, trying to develop reputations as being dangerous themselves; tough people who are willing to fight back if abused, either by violence, by calling the police or by going to court. Even though these individuals remain vulnerable to victimization, they do not feel the same sense of helplessness in the face of anonymous dangers. These people may even be optimistic enough to believe that if laws are enacted that would control violent crime, such as a ban on sale and manufacture of certain weapons, they might be safer within their environment.

STUDY AREA, DATA, AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this analysis is to examine citizen response to IVD through one narrow approach: a referendum on handgun control in the state of Maryland. In the spring of 1988, the Maryland General Assembly passed into law a

measure intended to restrict the manufacture and sale of cheap, unreliable, and undetectable handguns (Teret et al., 1990). Concerned that such a law might impact on peoples' ability to purchase inexpensive firearms, a citizens' group called the Maryland Committee Against the Gun Ban mounted a campaign to repeal the law. The Committee collected over 50,000 signatures statewide to force a referendum on the issue in the 1988 general election. This referendum took on special significance as Maryland's state law on limited licensing and manufacture was the first of its kind in the nation.

In the November, 1988, general election, the voters were presented with a simple alternative - support the law, or render it void. The vote count, as reported the day after the election, was 871,312 in favor (58 %), and 630,478 against. Only seven of the state's 24 major political jurisdictions (counties and the City of Baltimore) registered plurality votes in favor of handgun control, but those seven jurisdictions happened to lie in the densely-populated central urban sector of the state.

The vote on the referendum suggested a geographical analysis and a chance to test the notion that there is an ecological explanation for this pattern. I undertook this project in an inductive mode, being aware that socio-economic status, race, and proximity to high-crime neighborhoods probably were associated with the outcome of the referendum, but not having any specific hypotheses about relationships. The area with greater than 50% vote for handgun control is in the urban corridor that runs between Washington and southeastern Pennsylvania. Over 90% of the state's population, business establishments and labor force are found here. Per-capita annual incomes in the corridor exceed those of the non-metropolitan and rural parts of the state by about \$4,000 (Bureau of the Census, 1991).

There are several measures of socio-economic status that are usually intercorrelated in U.S. cities, including education, occupation, unemployment, race, and income. In Maryland, farming, forestry, and fishing occupations are likely to be associated with rural areas, and near the ocean or the Chesapeake Bay. In the urban corridor, we are more likely to find managerial and professional specialty occupations, and higher incomes. Census data at the election district (minor

civil division) level were obtained from the Census Bureau (1992) for the following variables:

- X1- Percent black population;
- X2 - Percent of population over 24 years of age that have not graduated from high school;
- X3 - Percent of population over 24 years of age that hold baccalaureate or advanced college degrees;
- X4 - Percent of labor force engaged in farming, forestry, fishing, transportation and material moving occupations, handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers;
- X5 - Percent of labor force engaged in managerial and professional specialty occupations;
- X6 - Percent of males in labor force that are unemployed; and
- X7 - Median family income.

The count of votes in favor of gun control were also collected at the election district level. Data were obtained for all 324 minor civil divisions in Maryland. Multiple regression was employed to ascertain the relationship between the dependent variable (pro-gun control) and the independent variables listed above.

RESULTS

The independent variables correlated either positively or negatively with the referendum vote. Pro votes were more likely to be associated with (X3) college educations, (X7) high family incomes and (X5) white collar occupations. Negative votes were more likely to be associated with (X2) low education levels, and (X4) farming and blue-collar occupations. In fact, about 80% of the statistical variation in the vote for the handgun control law is explained by this handful of independent variables (statistically significant beyond $p < .001$ level).² Figures 1 and 2 show the 1990 distribution of some socio-demographic variables in Maryland. A comparison of these figures illustrates the negative geographic association between urban and rural characteristics.

DISCUSSION

There is a body of literature that discusses the relationship between social proximity and voting behavior (Almy, 1973; Cronin, 1989; Rumley, 1979; 1981; Taylor and Johnston, 1979). Almy demonstrated that the greater the social and spatial difference between classes, the greater the cohesion within classes in terms of attitudes toward issues. Judging from the rhetoric in the media before the election, there were sharp ideological differences between persons of different class and political persuasion (Atwood, 1988; Banisky, 1988; Bock, 1988b; Bock and Alvarez, 1988; Fletcher, 1988; *Free State Journal*, 1988; Kelly, 1988; Lancaster and Morin, 1988). Racial differences were not as clear cut. The black clergy in Baltimore supported handgun control, but in the black community at large, there were many who voiced fear that they would be unable to defend themselves if they could not obtain inexpensive handguns (Bock, 1988a; Shen, 1988). The gun lobby played on that fear in their pre-election advertisements.

Taylor and Johnson cite evidence that people will vote in concert with neighbors, acquaintances at the workplace, club or union members, or friends. They posit that the more dominant the socio-economic class in one of these constituencies, the greater the proportion of its members who will vote along "expected" lines, especially if the issue is relatively straightforward, e.g., whether or not to support NAFTA. Other issues are more complex. In the case of gun control, the metropolitan population is involved in a set of processes that are intrinsically related to issues like public health or safety v freedom of expression.

The geographic distribution of homicides in Baltimore is heavily concentrated in poor central city neighborhoods (Fig. 3). Some form of crime or violence is reported almost daily in Baltimore and Washington. Thus, many inner-city people might be inclined to vote for gun-control legislation as a method for protecting themselves. Cosmopolites in the suburbs rarely if ever witness a violent crime first hand. Free of the direct impacts of poverty, crime and violence, the affluent should be inclined to favor handgun control in a society that is becoming increasingly known for its civil violence

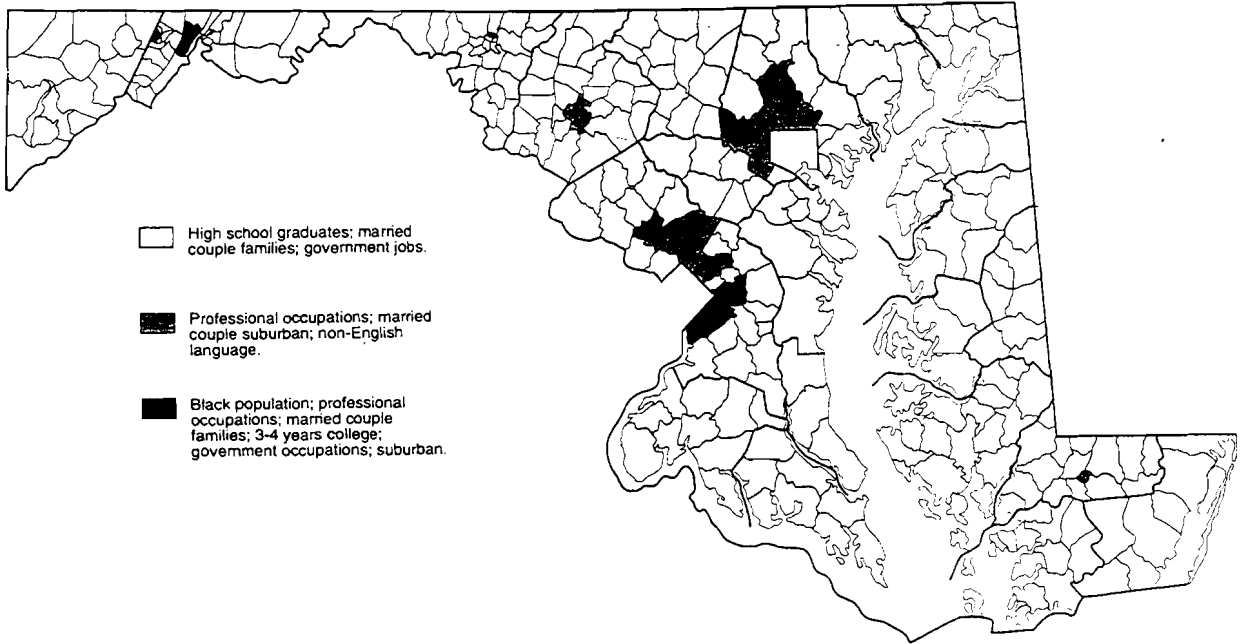


Figure 1: Characteristics of the population in urban districts of the state, 1990.

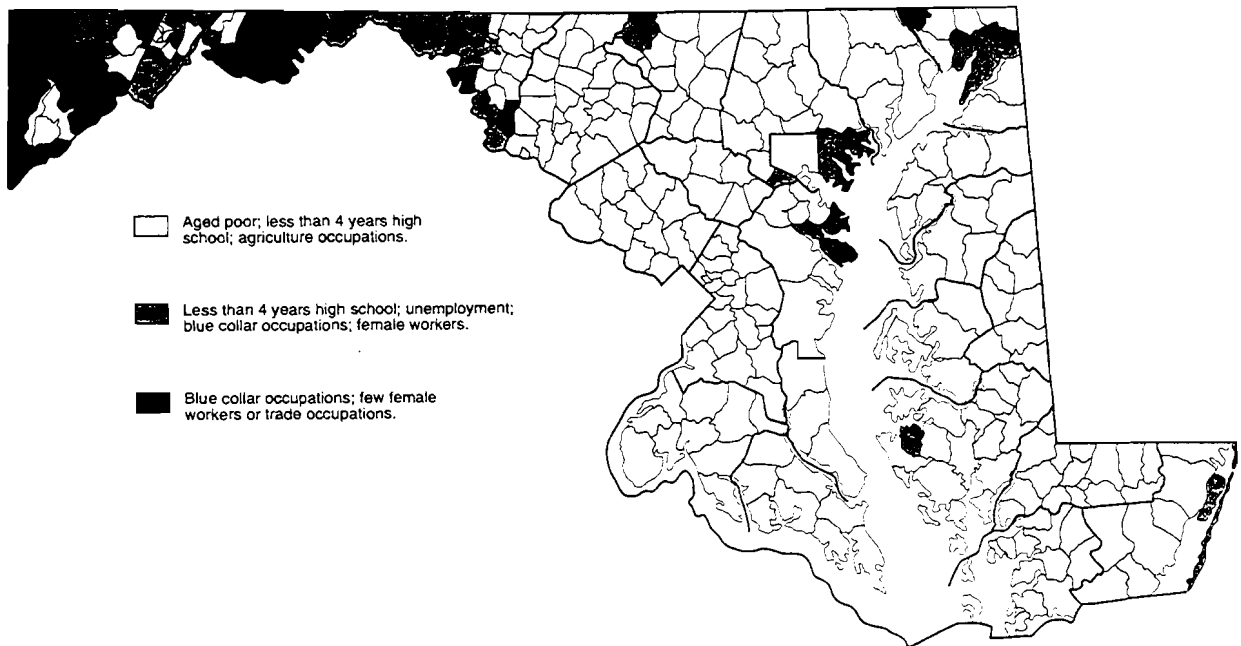


Figure 2: Characteristics of the population in rural districts of the state, 1990.

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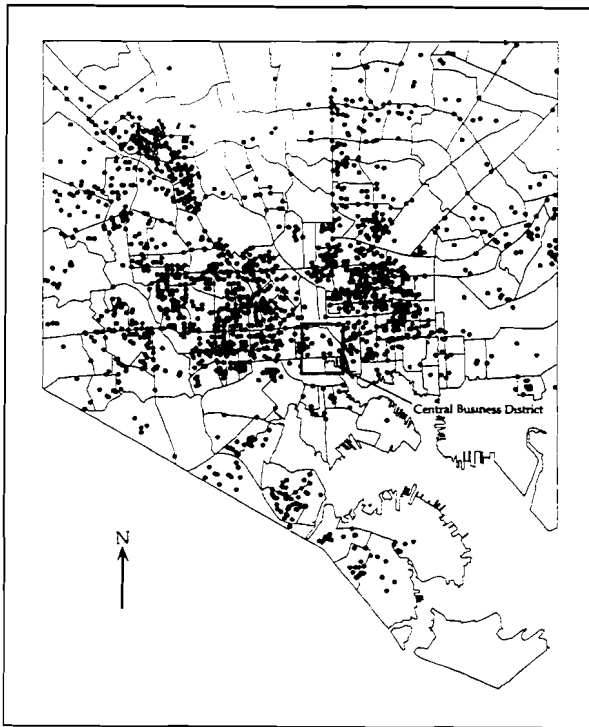


Figure 3 Distribution of juvenile gun crimes in Baltimore, 1980-90 (Source: Courtesy of Keith Harries).

(Harries, 1990). The pro-vote pattern demonstrated that the districts in the central city of Baltimore and its suburbs supported handgun control in the referendum. Rural dwellers, conversely, are more likely than urban voters to favor ownership of guns of all kinds for the purpose of hunting, target shooting, and control of animal pests. What appears to some people, both rural and urban, as a reasonable method of reducing access to guns by criminals, children, or the mentally disturbed seems to others an unconscionable infringement upon the legitimate rights of the American gun-owning public.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has demonstrated the systematic differentiation of the social structure of the population of the state of Maryland, and

suggests that the vote on a handgun control referendum is related to that structure. Despite scattered instances where the model failed to predict pro-vote statistics, the results support the notion that voters' attitudes on issues like public safety can be attributed, in large part, to ecological variables like education, income, occupation and proximity to IVD. As Langbein and Lichtman (1978, 61) state, "theory, not technique, is the key to ecological inference," and there is ample evidence here and in the literature that social structure differences affect election outcomes. Clearly, however, more complete knowledge of the social and political environment of all of the communities involved is needed to augment statistical analysis of electoral processes.

ENDNOTES

1. In a replication of Wallace's Bronx analysis in Washington, DC, this author is discovering statistical results that are remarkably similar. Over half the variation in Cirrhosis and IVD mortality are explained by the same variables that account for high levels of premature death in the poor communities of New York.
2. It is worth noting that a runs test on the residuals from the regression model was highly significant ($p < .001$), indicating spatial autocorrelation. It is likely that the regression surface is best described by a polynomial equation. Variables like income, years of school completed, and percent of managerial and technical occupations form a nonlinear gradient between areas of affluence and areas of deprivation. Although autocorrelation interferes with the interpretation of parametric correlation statistics, the reality of social and economic distributions within neighborhoods is unassailable.

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