Getting Jumped in Vacationland: The Complicated Rhetoric and Realities of Assault in a Small Town

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ABSTRACT

Crime research often fails to recognize the context of small-town crime as meaningfully different from both urban and rural crime contexts. When distinctions are made, small towns remain an idealized counterpoint to problematized urban spaces. Even now, research fails to provide the detail and nuance needed to explain how complex local perceptions of small-town crime disprove the monolithic assumption of idyllic small towns. This study interrogates the disconnections between the realities of assault in a small town and the rhetorical constructions of perceived offenders. We analyze available police report data and local social media commentary to identify and explain gaps between what is known about assault in the town of Sandusky, Ohio, and related perceptions and discourses employed by Sandusky locals. We find that area residents construct their town as violent, crime-ridden, and beyond hope. Discourse surrounding fighting reinforces cynicism, seeks to levy blame, and relies on race, youth, and poverty tropes. This study constitutes a dramatic divergence from previous crime literature that considers small towns as generally less prone to violent crime than big cities and treats public perception of small towns as positive overall. We also contribute important axes for comparison between institutional and locally constructed rhetorical spaces and use theories of anomie to offer a different perspective on small-town crime.

Introduction

Small towns are not only an important and under-studied site for crime research, they also provide an opportunity for the dynamic interrogation of life and experience that is neither rural nor entirely metropolitan. Until recently, crime research treated small towns and rural areas as virtually synonymous (Weisheit, Falcone and Wells 2005). Undifferentiated non-urban space, however, makes it exceedingly difficult to describe the lives of non-urban residents, and the crime that occurs outside of the metropolis. Worse yet, in treating non-metropolitan spaces as monolithic, there is no nuance or capacity for studying the variations within small towns and rural spaces, much less the in-depth interrogation of extreme cases of crime outside of large urban environments. This is important because, far from longstanding cultural depictions of ideal and bucolic communities, non-metropolitan life has been newly problematized as drug-ridden and dangerous (Bell 2006, Camsari and Libertain 2017, Craig 2018, Spencer and Kochel 2018, Wuthnow 2019).

In discussing the non-metropolitan, we must first consider that there is a major difference between small towns and the outlying rural countryside. A *core-based* statistical system for differentiating residential zones was adopted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000. The new system defines towns with a population between 10,000 and 50,000 as the *micropolitan* serving as the socioeconomic core of the surrounding and related *micropolitan statistical area* (μSAs) (Kulcsar 2004). This distinction clearly delineates small towns, the surrounding area linked socioeconomically, and the outlying rural areas.

That is not to say that small towns are monolithic either. In fact, to consider them uniform and intractable further understates the reality small towns are both individually and collectively complex and varied social settings. While small towns were once viewed as idyllic embodiments of the American Dream, neither the uniformity nor the idyll remains (Suttles 1972). To that end, crime and crime-related problems are socially constructed differently from one town to the next (Wuthnow 2013, Wuthnow 2019). While one town may still maintain prototypical characteristics of small-town America, a nearby town of relative size might be suffering from higher poverty, higher violent crime rates, and an all but non-existent sense of community. Likewise, crime as socially constructed does not necessarily match the actual incidence of crime (Barton et al. 2017). Residents of both these hypothetical towns may view their town as idyllic and the neighboring town as the one with the serious social problems. Even within a town, residents may have widely different perceptions of the crime problem. As we know from the literature on crime myths, perception may be completely divorced from any statistically verifiable crime rates (Wright 1985). Therefore, we propose to consider both the local rhetorical and discursive constructions on small-town crime and institutional statistics of crime.

In this study, we combine two distinctly different sources of data to demonstrate the disconnect between the social construction and empirical reality of criminal assault in a specific small town. We focus on a small town in Ohio that is unique in some ways but is also expressive of understudied patterns in small-town crime more broadly. We unpack the current case through a multi-part analysis of online discourse and police reports that we contextualize using local historical and news media data. We identify and analyze discursive themes that frame the crime problem as hopeless, and as employing age-based, class-based, and racial tropes to contextualize the criminal landscape that varies significantly from the picture of crime presented in institutional statistics. We employ theories of anomie to understand how othering and blameworthiness construct these differing frames of discourse and institutional crime

statistics. We conclude that residents in our sample view their town as violent and maintain dispositions of cynicism and despair. Many use the discussion of crime to promote racial, anti-youth, and poverty tropes. Far from expressions of community cohesion, many of the commenters express exasperation and hopelessness while a few, a highly vocal minority, advocate for an acceleration of the violence.

Site of the Research

In the shadow of America's largest amusement park sits the small town of Sandusky, Ohio. Approximately 3.5 million people made the trip to the Cedar Point Amusement Park in 2016 with millions more visiting the larger Erie County (OTA 2017). Visitors travel to the area, dubbed Vacationland due to the largess of its tourism industry, to visit Cedar Point, area islands and shorelines, and three area indoor waterparks that operate year-round. Tourism peaks in the area between June and September (80%), bringing \$1.6 billion to Erie County each year (2017). Notably, Sandusky was even recognized by *USA Today* in 2019 as Best Coastal Small Town in America (Cimini et al. 2019), garnering national attention as a desirable vacation destination.

Despite this influx of visitors, wealth, and accolades, Sandusky also hosts widespread poverty and elevated crime rates compared to the rest of the country. Sandusky is part of America's Rustbelt and large industrial manufacturing plants in and around the town have experienced decades of layoffs, closures, and changes in ownership adding to economic instability and global market fluctuations – resulting in instability and hardships for many area residents (Hackworth 2018). Despite the high-powered tourism industry, 22% of Sandusky residents live in poverty, nearly twice the national average of 11.8% (Census 2019). The dynamic tension between Sandusky as a vibrant vacation locale and as a casualty of global industrial changes makes the town more than a simple micropolitan. Instead, it serves as a complex set of contradictory social constructions and a set of dynamic criminological problems and examples.

Local, Demographic and Crime Contexts

Sandusky, Ohio is located in the western portion of Erie County and is home to 25,000 of the county's 75,000 residents (see *Figure 1*). Sandusky's population is majority white (67.3%) and black (23.9%) and the town has substantially fewer college graduates (15.2%) than the national average (31.5%) (Census 2019). Employment inequality is evident in Sandusky, as the unemployment rate for whites in Sandusky is 6.41%, where the black unemployment rate is nearly double at 12.1%. Individuals who

identify as mixed-race fare even worse, with an unemployment percentage of 15.8% (Census 2018).

In comparison to the rest of the micropolitan statistical area, Sandusky is substantially more diverse and less educated. For example, the city of Sandusky is both the county seat, and the core micropolitan to the μ SA that encompasses the same land and borders as Erie County, Ohio (see Figure 1) (Census and Ruhrfisch 2006). Erie County's population is 86.8% white (higher than the national average of 72%), has a college graduation rate of 22.7%, and an overall poverty rate of 10.8% - slightly below the national average (Census 2019). Erie County's black residents make up 8.8% of the population and, importantly, almost exclusively reside in the town of Sandusky. This situates Sandusky as meaningfully different from its neighbors and, despite being the home of Cedar Point, more economically blighted than the rest of the County.

Sandusky also far outpaces the national average in violent crime, including assault crimes as defined by the Ohio Revised Code (Assembly 2013). In 2016, the United States averaged 119 assaults per 100,000 residents (FBI 2017). However, in Sandusky, a town with ~25,000 residents, there were 244 assaults reported to police in the same period. This translates to a rate of 976 assaults per 100,000 residents, a figure that dwarfs the national average nearly 9-fold. In the forthcoming analysis, we focus on assaults, though we might have selected several other types of crime in Sandusky. We believe an analysis of assaults is especially prudent because it is violent, normally involves at least one victim and one perpetrator or mutual combatants, and Sandusky has an exceptionally high rate of assault. In this study, we endeavor not necessarily to diagnose this phenomenon in its entirety, but rather we trace how the perceptions, discourses, and rhetoric of crime in Sandusky compare to its administrative and police statistics. In doing this, we also consider the unique dichotomy of Sandusky as Vacationland for its visitors and the criminal reality for its residents.

Figure 1: Map of Erie County, Ohio

Reconsidering the Idyllic Small Town

Before addressing the social construction of small-town crime, it is helpful to acknowledge the idyllic, idealized, view of small towns and the rural countryside and to separate the two often conjoined concepts. Rural and small-town America is often imagined in terms of safety and serenity, far removed from the perceived social disorganization of the urban metropolis (Bell 2006, Dinitz 1973, Suttles 1972). This idyllic view of non-urban life and its closely-knit communities is incomplete and non-urban spaces come with their share of social problems and maladaptive social situations, including heterogeneous economic and structural disadvantage, reliance on informal social controls, and a general distrust of government authority (Bouffard and Muftić 2006, Weisheit, Falcone and Wells 2005). Small towns are also distinct from the suburban context, not only because they are, by definition, not attached to a metropolis, but because historic development of towns and suburbs differ in ways that cause them to be both economically and demographically dissimilar (e.g. racial and economic homogeneity) (Singer 2014).

In the past, criminologists have suggested that rural crime may be a byproduct of rapid population changes, that violent crime in rural areas may be the result of obstacles in social bonding, and rural homicide an issue of religiosity (Deller and Deller 2010, Lee and Bartkowski 2004, Lee 2008, Lee and Thomas 2010). However, later research finds little to no relationship between non-urban assault and residential

instability but does find assault correlates with ethnic heterogeneity and economic disadvantage (Goodson and Bouffard 2017, Kaylen, Pridemore and Roche 2017). Once largely overlooked as a legitimate site for research in assault and other violent crime, non-urban spaces may provide a wealth of relevant insights. In one recent example, contextual factors surrounding non-urban assaults were found to be more highly variable with male-perpetrated than with female-perpetrated assaults among adults (Rennison and DeKeseredy 2017).

Until recently, criminological research had often lumped small towns in with rural areas, despite significant differences within the small-town context. Small towns are more similar to smaller cities than non-metropolitan rural areas in some senses (e.g. status as the central hub for social and economic life in a given area) (Kulcsar 2004). In other ways, small-town residents share similar experiences with their rural counterparts. Residents of rural areas and small towns tend to have smaller social networks than urban metropolitans, making the likelihood of being in physical proximity with an acquaintance more likely in non-urban spaces (Chan 2019, Freudenburg 1986, Schläpfer et al. 2014, Small and Adler 2019). In a rare early example, Dinitz (1973) studied the pseudonymous town of Lincoln (with a population of approximately 11,250 at the time) shunned what it saw as the encroachment of urbanicity and modernity. Yet their “Main Street” did have crime – though this was often overlooked through police discretion, and residents often treated the crime known to originate within the town as a matter for the parents to address and a topic of local gossip (Dinitz 1973). Dinitz’s focus on Lincoln provides a rare insight into both the crime and the perceptions of crime and criminality among residents in one small town in 1970s America.

Despite myths that idealize non-urban life, both crime and fear of crime exists in both rural and small-town America (Weisheit, Falcone and Wells 2005, Wright 1985). While small towns are generally idealized, residents within a given town may perceive their particular community’s crime situation to be highly problematic. Wide variations on the perception of small-town crime may exist. Furthermore, these perceptions may have little to do with the actual incidence of crime (Ferraro 1995, Hale 1996, Nofziger and Williams 2005, Poveda 1972).

Residents communicate with one another about their perceptions of neighboring areas and about the reputation of the next town over to form perceptual consensus regarding the level of criminality believed to exist, both in their town and in the next town over (Suttles and Suttles 1972). This co-constructed view of the local area crime

may not only exacerbate fear of crime but also, with the advent of social media, may now be an invitation for gossip, public shaming, and rage (Crockett 2017, Hale 1996, Salem and Lewis 2016). Though the disconnection between crime rates and the expression of moral outrage surrounding perceptions of criminality is not unknown, it is vital that criminology interrogate how these two phenomena overlap and intersect (Crockett 2017, Weisheit and Wells 1996).

Importantly, in recent years, an increasingly critical eye has been cast upon the problem of non-urban crime. For instance, the once idealized social situation of closely-knit small-town social networks has been recast as a potentially deadly social problem in communities dealing with widespread problem drug use (Draus and Carlson 2009). Relatedly, public perception of crime in non-urban spaces must also be addressed. For instance, public opinion has long endorsed the myth that rural and small-town crime is a relatively new phenomenon (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy 2013, Sampson 2012, Wright 1985). Interrelatedly, popular opinion still generally holds that small towns and the rural countryside maintain nicer residents and safer communities than their urban counterparts (Carrington, Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy 2014, Toughill 2007).

Analytic Strategy

We employ a blended multi-method analytic approach to understand the relationship between perceptions of crime in Sandusky and the reality of interfacing with the criminal justice system. First, we analyze the perceptions and attitudes of area residents by conducting a digital ethnography on social media as defined by Postill and Pink (2012), defining the online-offline as a continuous research site (Postill and Pink 2012). To that end, we focus our attention in the social media arena on a locally-based Facebook page *Erie County Scanner Uncensored* (ECSU), a public Facebook group dedicated to reporting and commenting on police and first-responder activity within this highly localized geographic area. Using a strategic qualitative coding scheme, we analyze social media comments to collect data on each commenter's perception of crime and criminality in the local area, as well as gathering discursive and rhetorical content using initial line-by-line coding. Next, we conducted focused coding for themes along perceptual and rhetorical lines, noting the discursive strategies employed. Finally, we code for salient characteristics of commenters and participants in this social media group to better understand who the primary participants are in these conversations about local crime. Importantly, we then construct a coded race variable for ECSU commenters. Using photographs from publicly accessible Facebook profiles, we code race on a small number of categories including Black, White,

Hispanic, Asian, and Other using a theoretically validated race-coding strategy (Campbell and Troyer 2007, Herman 2010, Saperstein 2006).

We then evaluate quantitative indicators from police reports and official statistics to understand the story of crime in Sandusky from a different perspective. In doing so, we can draw comparisons between the rhetoric employed by residents and the realities of interfacing with the police.

Data

To address the question of local perceptions on small-town crime, we conduct an ethnographic analysis on the ECSU Facebook group. ECSU had approximately 30,000 followers as of April 2018 (that number is now nearly 50,000) and is focused on police and emergency dispatch scanner chatter in Erie County, Ohio, where Sandusky is located. Almost all the scanner activity that ECSU posts to their Facebook group originate in Sandusky. The ECSU Facebook group is operated by a few amateur citizen journalists who listen to, and post, content from local police, fire, and EMS dispatch frequencies (Bruns, Highfield and Lind 2012). In many cases, the content of the ECSU posts consist of verbatim quotes from police scanner chatter. Using keywords searches of ECSU posts including the words “fights” or references to people being “jumped” between January 2016 and December 2018 we collected 381 comments from 222 unique individuals over 19 threaded discussions. One post was a live video posted to the ECSU page and all the rest were text-only posts.

We were able to obtain photographs for 213 of the 222 commenters (96%). 212 of these profiles were held by individuals and 1 was used by a pair of individuals. To verify that a photograph was of the account holder, we manually screened profiles for a) multiple profile photographs of the same non-juvenile individual, b) commenters referring to the subject of the photograph by name or inferred name, and c) tagged photographs of the individual. *Figure 2* presents the race distribution of commenters who are 87.9% white, 2.7% black, 4.5% Hispanic, and 0.9% were not identifiable.

Figure 2: ECSU Commenter Coded Race & Ethnicity				
Race/Ethnicity		Percent (%)		Number
White		87.89		196

Black		2.69		6
Hispanic		4.48		10
Other		0.90		2
No Photo Available		4.04		9
N=223				

To compare perception with institutional data, we also collect and analyze law enforcement incident report data on assaults from a publicly available data source unique to the local area. Sandusky makes individual police report data available using an online reporting system referred to as “glyph reports,” which allowed us to code police reports on a variety of factors. All 244 reported assaults in 2016 were coded for the race of both victim and perpetrator, residency status of victim and perpetrator, the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, the location type of the assault, whether drugs, guns, or alcohol were involved, and whether the incident was gang-related. Importantly, we adopt a strategy of believing the presenting victim that an assault occurred unless the police report was explicitly skeptical or responding officers acted in a way that explicitly dispelled the possibility of the presenting victims’ truthfulness. For example, in several cases, the police noted inconsistencies in the pattern of injury on the alleged perpetrator and victims and ended up arresting and charging the presenting victim for assault. In those cases, we responded by reversing the codes for victim and offender.

Figure 3: Incident Level Data

Variables		Percent (%)		Number
Location				
Bar		8.20		20

Street		17.62		43
Dwelling		52.05		127
Other		22.13		54
Relationship				
Stranger		14.75		36
Known		59.43		145
Unknown		16.80		41
Other		9.02		22
Romantic		24.59		60
Alcohol		24.59		60
Drugs		6.15		15
Guns		2.05		5
Gangs		0.82		2
N=244				

Figure 3 (above) presents some descriptive information about Sandusky assaults at the incident level. The most common location for assault reports were in residential dwellings, in public streets, and bars. Most assaults in Sandusky were perpetrated by someone that the victim knew, with less than 15% of assaults described as by a stranger. In 16.8% of police reports, there was not enough detail in the narrative to

firmly code the relationship between the victim and offender. The single largest relationship group was romantic connections, with 24.59% of assaults stemming from romantically involved combatants. Very few assaults explicitly involved guns (5) or gang activity (2). More common were drugs and drug use (15) or alcohol involvement (60).

Figure 4: Race and Residence of Assault Victims and Perpetrator				
Variables		Percent (%)		Number
Victim Race				
White		64.40		161
Black		35.20		88
Other		0.40		1
Victim Residency				
Sandusky Resident		88.93		225
Nearby Resident		6.72		17
Non-Resident		4.35		11
Perpetrator Race				
White		39.17		94

Black		59.58		143
Other		1.25		3
Perpetrator Residency				
Sandusky Resident		90.00		198
Nearby Resident		5.45		12
Non-Resident		4.55		10
N=220-253				

Figure 4 (above) breaks down demographic information along two key axes of local police reports regarding assault, namely, the race and residency of both the victim(s) and alleged offender(s). Across 253 victims, 225 (88.9%) were known to be residents of Sandusky. This is important to note because it illustrates how violence affects local people in large numbers even though millions of non-local people visit Cedar Point and other area tourist attractions in each year. Victims in reported assaults were a majority white (64.40%) or black (35.20%). The residential breakdown of the 251 identified perpetrators was very similar, with 90% of known perpetrators described as local to Sandusky. The alleged perpetrators were more often black (59.6%) than white (39.2%). Note that residential and racial identifications for perpetrators were more often missing. 31 offenders were not provided a clear residential status, and 11 were not proscribed a racial category. We stress here that these figures are neither a complete nor entirely representative measure of assaults in Sandusky. Due to structural factors and non-reporting, the true number of assaults is unobservable. While these figures do provide some estimations of prevalence, they most accurately tell the story of who reports assaults to the police and how the responding officers describe the involved parties.

The overall result of this dual data collection is a dynamic and keenly focused consideration of the relationship between perception of violent assault and the available police data. In the analysis that follows we identify important themes from

the digital ethnography, employing Gill's (2000) discourse analytic strategy for identifying and addressing rhetorical themes and situating them in conversation with quantitative indicators and historical considerations (Gill 2000, Leach 2000, Pink 2016, Postill and Pink 2012).

Findings

The Cynical-Despair Discourse

Erie County Scanner Uncensored commenters often first viewed topic posts on their Facebook home screen or wall, and as all ECSU posts are set for public display, anyone can view and comment. The public nature of both ECSU posts and comments, however, does little to cause commenters to self-censor. For instance, when, in 2016, ECSU posted "Jaycee park, 20 subjects fighting, called in 911" the first comment came from Bill (a pseudonym), calling for an escalation in the violence when he suggested, perhaps sarcastically, "just throw in 19 hammers" (ECSU 2016a).

ECSU comments regarding assault often follow one of two interrelated discursive frames - one of extreme cynicism and one of earnest despair. Sarcastic, even cruel commentary on the ECSU Facebook posts suggests that not only is there an obvious us-versus-them framing of violence at work but that this framing is deeply ingrained in the way that quite a few commenters see the problem of assault in the local area and police response to crime in general. Frequently, when ECSU makes a post involving a fight, Al responds, simply with the word, "Purge", referencing the dystopian movie and television series by that name (ECSU 2017a, b). Al's suggestion is not only one of zero tolerance, but also that legal protections of the involved parties should be suspended. The same commenter, when confronted by another commenter on the suggestion of a Purge, he responds:

I have no fucking tolerance for these worthless fucking kids doing dope. Fucking people don't know how to raise kids these days. They needed their asses whooped, but the fucking courts thinks it's wrong. They're all stupid. (ECSU 2017b)

Without any further detail, Al makes several of his assumptions clear - the general ages of the involved parties, the potential involvement of drug use, and what he perceives to be the real reasons behind all the fighting - that a failure to punish bad behavior by the parents and the contemporary rejection of corporal punishment have created an anomic dystopian present. Al's reference to "kids doing dope" is not unique.

Even though ECSU does not mention drug use in any of the selected posts, commenters regularly suggest drug use as a potential catalyst for the violence.

When ECSU commenters are not cynically calling for increased violence or a return to corporal punishment, there is another distinct tone that is taken - one of sadness and despair at what is often contextualized as the hopeless state of the town. The despair discourse has a decidedly moralizing tone, as is the case in 2017 when ECSU posted about a bar fight ending in the statement “officer on scene is requesting a squad for a pregnant female that was punched in the stomach” (ECSU 2017c). Immediately, commenters question why a pregnant woman was in the bar. In response, a woman claiming to be the bartender at that time asserted in several comments and replies that the pregnant woman was served alcohol, but did not look pregnant and at no time did she say that she was pregnant. The bartender also claims that, in fact, it was the pregnant woman that started the entire fight to begin with. Not only was the pregnant woman blamed by the bartender for starting the fight and hiding her pregnancy until police arrived, but her mere presence in a bar while “with child” was questioned by several commenters.

A pregnant woman drinking and fighting in a bar serves as a discursive image, embodying the depths of depravity that some commentary suggests is endemic to the local area. While Adele comments “I can't believe she would drink and start fights with people while she is pregnant!! So sad! This poor baby doesn't stand a chance!!” (ECSU 2017c). Janice separately considers “What has happened to Sandusky??? Seems like something tragic at least once a day...so sad.” Both comments express sadness and despair, but while Adele expresses disbelief in the pregnant woman’s capacity to put herself and her unborn child at risk, Janice’s comment suggests that the situation is part of a larger issue in the local area - that tragedy has become constant and irreconcilable. Throughout the ECSU comments, the despair discourse generally combines these two aspects - that the persons involved are acting out of a moral failing, and that this is part of an overall corruption of norms and values in town.

Vigilante Reporting and Local Gossip

The overlapping cynicism and desperation expressed in the commentary on *Erie County Scanner Uncensored* is indicative of a larger rejection of traditional authority in favor, whether tacitly or expressed outright, of vigilantism - something that is echoed in the existence of ECSU itself. ECSU fashions itself as a newsgroup, following-up on the goings-on of the town, driving to crime and emergency scenes as they are happening, taking pictures and video, then posting or streaming this content to

Facebook and their associated YouTube page. They tell any resident who questions their presence, or the fact that they are taking pictures or filming, that they are “with the news” and are, at times, aggressive in their attempt to get as close to the action as possible. Rather than waiting for local newspapers or television news to decide that a given story is worth reporting, ECSU members became self-appointed journalists of the local area. For example, in a video posted on December 26, 2016, an ECSU member went to the scene of a house fire. When a woman asked what he was doing, the person streaming video for ECSU said “I’m with the news.” When pressed further he backed away from the woman, but complained audibly “and as usual, we get shit for being on the scene, but what’s new, right? We do our job, we get cussed out for being here.” Since they post directly from police, fire, and EMS scanner chatter, they sometimes share sensitive information directly to Facebook - where it becomes the subject of gossip, rumors, sarcastic jokes, and moral indignation.

This vigilante-style of reporting and the associated gossip-mongering in the small town is part of a larger pattern of distrust and pessimism for established social institutions. In the area surrounding Sandusky, for instance, several stories provide examples of growing skepticism towards law enforcement. After weeks of searching, the remains of a missing Port Clinton boy, 14-year-old Harley Dilly, were uncovered in the chimney of a nearby abandoned house. Area residents immediately began questioning the veracity of the “official story” and began questioning if police were engaging in a cover-up (Anderson 2020). Local police in another town held a press conference two weeks later, on a completely unrelated set of incidents, in which a group calling itself “Dads Against Predators” (DAP) pose as adolescent children on dating apps to lure sexual predators to public places and filming their responses. After four such videos went viral locally, a local law enforcement agency issued a statement saying that the actions of DAP are unlawful and advised against any continued actions (Durbin 2020).

The response to the discovery of Harley Dilly and the police statement regarding DAP was criticized by many locals on social media, in public Facebook posts as well as in public Facebook groups. There are several Facebook groups dedicated to topics of interest in the Vacationland area. At least three such groups also exist for neighboring Norwalk (e.g. *The REAL Talk of Norwalk*, and *The Talk of Norwalk, Ohio*), one for Port Clinton (*The Talk of Port Clinton (uncensored)*), as well as a rival group focused on police and other first responder scanner chatter (*Sandusky Scanner Live*). All but one of these groups has over 30,000 followers, a follower count that often dwarfs the residential population count of the corresponding locale. Members of the “talk groups” can post gossip directly, and often do - allowing personal grievances and vendettas to

spill out into the public sphere. These pages allow their content to be shared to followers' Facebook and other social media platforms, thus virtually nullifying any reasonable expectation of privacy and providing multiple platforms for harassment and the promotion of antisocial messages and targeting of one another. These groups also allow for wild speculation and unfettered criticism of social institutions, such as law enforcement and media outlets, owing to the groups' descriptions as being a space for "uncensored" talk.

The Rhetoric of Blame

The contemptuous nature of local perceptions on established social institutions relates to both the despair and cynicism discourses, as well as to the rhetoric surrounding the topic of fighting in Vacationland. There appears to be plenty of blame to go around, according to ECSU commentary, suggesting that the rhetoric employed is epideictic (arguing that individuals be worthy of praise or blame). The abrupt way eye-catching and emotionally charged ECSU content appears on its followers' Facebook feeds (e.g. the pregnant woman punched in her stomach) likely creates an abrupt, emotionally charged response (e.g. "This poor baby doesn't stand a chance!!!") (ECSU 2017c).

Whether intentional or not, ECSU posts involving fights incite severe judgment from commenters. When searching for posts, the number of involved parties was not a search term, but 44% of selected posts included either the mention of a "large fight" or noted ten (10) or more combatants, two posts stated that there were twenty (20) combatants (ECSU 2016a, b, c, d, 2017a, c, d). With references to large fights, users begin to make sweeping generalizations about large groups of people. Using the parlance of the police radio frequency, curt descriptions of events are almost universally tied to locations. Commenters then base their assumptions about the location in question on the situation and the combatants involved (Leach 2000).

Regardless of the level of information provided, the prevailing commentary was that the combatants were likely juveniles, poor, African American, or some combination of the three. Police noted that juveniles were involved in only one of the incidents analyzed, but commenters asserted that "young punks" were fighting in the streets and that when a fight broke out in the parking lot of a bar that "they cater to the ones under 21" (ECSU 2017e, 2018a) In the twenty-person fight at Jaycee Park mentioned above, one person commented "let me guess, juveniles" (ECSU 2016a).

In the one instance that police dispatch reported "20 juvenile females fighting in the street, Fulton street" (ECSU 2016b) the conversation shifted to what block the fight

was on. Comments appeared to come from residents that lived near Fulton Street and who not only had an opinion about the block, but also the house the fight originated from. “That house,” as they described it “needs to be put on a nuisance watch.” Though one of the apparent neighbors to “that house” intended to call the city about the issue, she did not believe that anything would be done - because, she asserts, they are renters and not homeowners. Additional comments suggest that someone should contact the municipal authorities to pressure the landlord to address the problem, reasoning that the tenants were likely receiving housing assistance. For instance, one commenter suggests “I’m guessing the tenants they have are not responsible for their own rent, and so since rent is a given from Metro Housing they most likely do not care who’s living there” Thus, commenters make direct links between fighting and poverty.

References to poverty, however, are rare within this sample. More common to ECSU comments on fighting were the sometimes coded, if not explicit, stigmatizing racial language. When a large fight broke out in a local bar (one of seven such incidents during our reporting period), Carol linked youth and poverty when she opines that it’s the “immature ones ... who like to gang jump the innocent ones. Get the trash off your streets and you wouldn’t have these calls” (ECSU 2017d)). Carol then shares a link to a government website that references the federal penal code defining criminal street gangs. There was no explicit reference to race, however Carol seemed to be making a statement which she wanted first couched in euphemism and then legitimized through hypertext - that what must be going on is “gang” violence perpetrated “trash” that needs to be removed from “your streets.” While “trash” could easily have hearkened to the *poor White trash* pejorative, references to “gangs” and “streets” serve as coded references to oft-repeated stereotypes of black Americans.

Other, less veiled, more aggressive racialized language appears in the comments of ECSU posts. When ECSU posted about a fight outside of a black-owned and operated billiard hall, Tucker responded in all caps: “MORE “GHETTO RATS” RIOTING AGAIN?” (quotation marks in original post) (ECSU 2017b). Tucker knew what he was alluding to when he put parentheses around “ghetto rats” and he likely had every reason to believe that anyone who read his comment did as well. While others comment that the local area judge must have let all the criminals out and sarcastically call the combatants “Sandusky’s finest,” Tucker intends for readers to comprehend not just his disgust for the violence, but for the perceived race of the involved parties. Tucker is not the only one who makes use of quotation marks to suggest a racist subtext. Al, the same person who repeatedly suggesting a “purge” to get rid of those he deems undesirable, says of a large group fight in unseasonably warm February

2017: “Warm weather brings “them” out” (ECSU 2017c). Another ECSU follower asks what Al means by “them” and places a laughing-face emoji before and a thinking-face emoji after the question. Al replies “Those” and refuses to elaborate (quotes in original) (ECSU 2017c). But Tucker and Al’s comments suggest that they have a specific group in mind but are reticent to make their meaning explicit. Notably, the context for the incident that inspired Tucker’s “ghetto rats” comment took place outside of Even Breaks Billiards & Bar, a black-owned and operated business.

“Hancrack Street”

Much of the racially charged rhetoric is tied to local locations with a racialized backstory. A stretch of Hancock Street in Sandusky has been a small, yet highly visible black neighborhood for generations. In the 1980s, with the appearance of crack cocaine in Sandusky, the street came to be referred to pejoratively as “Hancrack” or “Handcrack” among some area residents. Over thirty years later, when ECSU posted a report of shots were fired outside of a drive-thru grocery on Hancock Street, Patrick commented “GET THOSE PEOPLE OUT OF SANDUSKY!!” (ECSU 2018b) When an ECSU citizen journalist decided to get in his car and drive to the scene of an ongoing investigation at the drive-thru, the driver’s personal commentary was accented, both by the sound of police scanner chatter, and by the time-stamped comments of the area residents viewing the feed (ECSU 2018a).

Although the amateur journalist and ECSU commenters don’t seem to notice, about twenty seconds in, police dispatch relays to law enforcement officers that the caller who reported that shots were fired did not hear the shots themselves but was informed by a friend that shots were fired (ECSU 2018a). A comment time-stamped at around twenty seconds in simply says “Hancrack Street.” At a minute in, as the ECSU driver begins moving forward, he abruptly says “Oh, we got a chase, we got a chase” and his vehicle accelerates audibly as he speeds up after two people he believes to be involved in the alleged incident. “I don’t know if the cops see this or not,” he says, “these ones are running here.” As the driver simultaneously acts as the self-appointed neighborhood watch and reporter, ECSU viewers are commenting that the area around Hancock Street is a “bad neighborhood.” One person comments “typical Hancock,” another calls the neighborhood “Little Chicago” while others sarcastically feign surprise at the goings-on – “Hancock Street? No way!”

One comment exclaims “Move out now!” though it is not clear to whom the intended recipient is (ECSU 2018a). Still, others express disgust, not just at the situation, but at the town itself - with statements like “I’m glad I don’t live there anymore, Sandusky

went to hell” and “Typical Handcrack Street. I’m glad I don’t live in Sandusky. I love it out here in cornfield country.” The weather, again, is referenced: “It did warm up to about 50 today so what else would you expect outta this area?”

While commenters heap aspersions on “Hancrack” and Sandusky, the vigilante citizen reporter continues his disembodied commentary while driving. Two minutes into the six-minute video the ECSU driver gives up his search, commenting “I don’t know if they were involved or not, it’s just weird that they started running as soon as the cops showed up” (ECSU 2018a). The car remains parked a few blocks from where police have the road blocked. Dispatch says the 911 call came from two blocks away, making the accuracy of the information questionable. Another commenter chimed in “Either a bad drug deals or beefing over some chick most likely.” References to drug deals and “beefing” over women continue the trend of using stigmatizing and racializing language as a way of making sense of the situation, even as the video is being live-streamed from a parked car in a small town. The cavalcade of comments demonizing Hancock, its residents, and the town of Sandusky - alongside the growing likelihood that the call was a false alarm provides compelling reasons to compare the racializing rhetoric with verifiable police data.

Racialized Reality

The rhetorical space occupied by the 87% white commenters of the ECSU looks different than the world defined by police reports. In our investigation of all police reports for assault in 2016, we were able to confirm some of the sentiments expressed by the Facebook commenters, but not others. We found that approximately 90% of victims and offenders were Sandusky locals and that less than 15% of assaults were committed by strangers. Notably, the abundance of comments on ECSU typecast crime in Sandusky as a young, black, male problem. In the coded police reports, we found that 39% of reported perpetrators were white. Not only does this population invalidate the uniformity of the racially-charged rhetoric of ECSU comments, it is also, more than likely, an underrepresentation of the incidence of assaults by white offenders due to extant patterns of policing and racialization in Sandusky.

As we noted earlier in the text, economic hardship is not felt equally in Sandusky. Unemployment is higher for black residents, and income is statistically lower. *Figure 5* (below) first gives a visual depiction of racialized areas in Sandusky. *Panel A* shows white occupied households, while *Panel B* shows black occupied households. Notably, the neighborhoods most commonly associated with Sandusky’s black residents are also areas known to be heavily policed. Also notable, though Hancock Street is highly

visible as a main traffic artery into downtown Sandusky, the majority of the street's black residents live on either side of a few blocks of Hancock Street itself which is not apparent in this map consisting of block-level data.

Figure 5A: Racialized Areas of Sandusky, Percent White

Maps adapted from Census (2019) hosted by Statistical Atlas

Figure 5B: Racialized Areas of Sandusky, Percent Black

Maps adapted from Census (2019) hosted by Statistical Atlas

Figure 6 (below) is a second map that plots all of the assaults coded in the 2016 police reports and clusters them by location. We see substantial overlap in many of the assault clusters and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. However, we also see large clusters of assaults in areas that are largely commercial. An important consideration in understanding assault reporting is the agency and social capital required to submit a complaint. The crime itself is unobservable. Instead, what we can observe is how many times people call the police to report said crimes, which we often think has something to do with the underlying amount of crime. Therefore, it is hard to know whether higher rates of white victims are a measure of white individuals being more likely to call the police or if it is truly representative of higher levels of victimization. Either way, there is substantially more white involvement in assault crimes in Sandusky than the rhetoric focusing on young black combatants across local discussion groups reveals.

We also coded police reports for mentions of gangs, guns, drugs, and alcohol. Neither gangs nor guns were prevalent in this sample of assaults to a statistically meaningful level. Drugs appeared to be more prevalent with an occurrence rate of 6.15%, but this percentage was only achievable with a generous category that allowed for any drugs seized at the scene (even if not involved in the active incident) to count. Much more common was alcohol, which was mentioned or noted in 24.59% of cases, while an additional 8.2% of cases occurred in bars. This finding does not dismiss concerns of

drugs in the community but does illuminate a disconnect between the tropes employed by the Facebook group and the institutional records of events.

Figure 6: Map of 2016 Assaults, Clustered

Discussion

In *The Great American City*, Sampson argued that moral cynicism, concentrated disadvantage, and a lack of collective efficacy are counterfactual to altruistic behavior (Sampson 2012). Like much of the canon of criminology, Sampson makes effective use of Chicago's vast and readily accessible data on crime and community. An altruism typology was used to show that social altruism relates to community well-being in at least one important measure, homicide rate (2012). Disregarding the population differences between Chicago and Sandusky Ohio, we may then ask where the cynicism of local area residents comes from in much the same terms as Sampson provides. Considering that altruism and collective efficacy can count among their near opposites both egotism and hopelessness, any community that regularly experiences these social ills may well find their perception of the situation cynical and rankled from despair. We also argue that relative and even perceived disadvantage, have no less capacity to incite despondence (Dawson et al. 2019, Marchlewska et al. 2018). Whether this despondency is localized to a momentary thought and fades from mind or compounds after successive exposure to stimuli, comments like those from ECSU members after

they read text or witnessed video of suggesting a lack of collective efficacy appear to lend support to Sampson's assertion.

The other side of the ECSU assault discourse – the earnest, yet moralizing, despair for the perceived loss of the small-town idyll seems to provide a way for area residents to express their displeasure at stories of group violence in a way that does not also cause them to lose any modicum of respectability (Smith 2014). That such a respectability appears to have racial undertones in the predominantly white digital space of ECSU should come as no surprise, but it does force a careful reading of colorblind racist language, the use of terms such as “them” and “those people” as well as noting the racialization of space and place to create a colloquial racist subtext (Bonilla-Silva 2017, Fishkin 1995, Moon, Nakayama and Martin 1999). Perhaps it is known, perhaps not, that over a third of reported assaults involved a white perpetrator despite the overwhelmingly implied, yet never uttered, assertion that all or almost all fighting in Sandusky is done by juvenile black males.

The use of word “despair” in the discourse is not an accidental allusion to *Deaths of Despair* (Case and Deaton 2015). That the very population, non-urban whites with lower educational attainment than the national average, should simultaneously see a decrease in life expectancy and an increase in cynicism and desperation in their community outlook is not a new discovery at all – nor is it exceptionally surprising (Metzl 2019, Monnat 2016). That said, this case study may be the first explicit example of small-town perceptions in a high-GDP market that, due to the differential between the wealth and prosperity of generations past and their own, have adopted a posture of impotent rage or one of morose moral indignation. When Case and Deaton revisited the data in 2017, they acknowledge that income and economic stagnation alone cannot account for the increased mortality of white Americans, but propose a narrative of cumulative disadvantage (Case and Deaton 2017). While Case and Deaton focus on potential economic causes for increased mortality, it is worthwhile for sociologists and criminologists to consider how the same factors may affect perceptions on topics like collective efficacy and the adoption of a pessimistic view of one's own community.

As with any research study, there are several limitations we were unable to completely resolve. First, this analysis focuses on one social media group and the dialogue it produces. We purport that this group is particularly large and influential, making it the logical choice for analysis, but it is true that a segment of voices (predominantly African American) are completely absent from this space. While we consider this disparity an important finding about perceptions of crime in Sandusky, in the future we

intend to specifically seek out additional rhetoric and voices for analysis. Second, we only quantify assault crimes from 2016. Data is available from 2014-2019 to extend this analysis, but in 2018 the Sandusky Police force stopped coding race of involved persons. This may make racialized comparisons of more recent data challenging. With these limitations in mind, we are optimistic about the future applications of the data sources and theoretical contributions in small-town crime and perceptions of crime as both a bridge between rural and urban crime and crime myth literatures and as a distinct and worthwhile arena for crime study in its own right. We further assert that the comparison of disconnections between institutional and popular constructions of small-towns in general, and small-town crime in particular, will provide vital contexts for the complex and contradictory experience of the late-modern micropolitan town.

Conclusion

In this article, we used multiple complimentary methods to study patterns and perceptions of crime in the understudied small-town crime context. Far removed from the idealized notion of the small-town, even America's Best Coastal Small Town has complicated problems that are worthy of criminological scrutiny. The perspective of residents does not necessarily match the idyllic view held by those who drive in, visit the parks, try the wine, and go back home. That is not to say that residents have an entirely accurate perception of the situation in their own town either. With acknowledgement that police incident data also has its own set of assumptions, the information that it does provide is adequate in disconfirming the most cynical racialized rhetoric of ECSU users. Future research in small-town crime will hopefully address more complex questions regarding crime and the experience of crime (e.g. fear of crime) in important ways in the small town, as distinct from rural, suburban, and urban contexts.

Implications

This article adds substantively to the understanding of how modern micropolitans understand crime in their communities. It constitutes an advance in mixed methods approaches by demonstrating how difference sources of data (qualitative and quantitative) tell contextually different stories about phenomenon. Importantly, when we consider these methods together, a more nuanced picture of the underlying perception of small-town crime emerges. We also advance methods practically by showing how institutional data and qualitative data in online communities can help us learn about those communities. The digital trace data analyzed here is produced by a community for a community – rather than being produced by an external researcher.

Our work might also be applied to policy and practice by taking the unique issues uncovered in small-town crime and using them to motivate strategic initiatives within communities.

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