Crime is a complex topic, and there is no academic (or popular) consensus on either the reasons for criminal behavior or the appropriate interventions to curtail such behavior. One theoretical intervention is reducing crime via changing the “built environment”—incorporating a spatial element to crime. This broadly ranges from land policy (zoning) to more targeted planning and landscaping interventions that focus on surveillance, access control, and target hardening (see Carter et al, 2003 and Katyal, 2002). The later has a long history: in 1285, King Edward I decreed that bushes should be removed along highways to deter robbery (Anderson et al., 2013).

Theoretically, exclusionary zoning practices can help create concentrations of poverty, which *could* create an environment where crime is more likely. The actual academic literature on the interaction between land policy and crime do find some associations (generally surrounding the debate over the merits of mixed-use residential zoning), but there are few empirical studies (Anderson et al. blame this on a lack of data). One of the more influential non-empirical works is Jane Jacobs’ 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which advocated for including commercial businesses in residential areas to reduce crime. Empirical investigations produced mixed results. Anderson et al.’s (2013) study of Los Angeles finds that commercial-only zoned areas are associated with higher crime rates, and that zoning changes that including residential parcels in prior commercial-zoned areas is associated with a reduction in crime. Browning et al. (2010) finds a curvilinear association between density – both commercial and residential – and assault and homicide.

The current housing crisis has caused many cities, and even states, to either consider or enact zoning reform. These reforms often effectively eliminate single-family residential zoning by allowing multi-family development (ranging from ‘granny suites’ to triplexes) in what was formally single-family residential neighborhoods. This push is also coming from the White House; the Biden infrastructure bill includes incentives for municipal zoning reform. Are these zoning changes associated with any changes in crime, at either the state or individual city level?

Citations

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