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# Cultural Mechanisms and the Persistence of Neighborhood Violence<sup>1</sup>

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Sociologists have given considerable attention to identifying the neighborhood-level social-interactional mechanisms that influence outcomes such as crime, educational attainment, and health. Yet, cultural mechanisms are often overlooked in quantitative studies of neighborhood effects. This paper adds a cultural dimension to neighborhood effects research by exploring the consequences of legal cynicism. Legal cynicism refers to a cultural frame in which people perceive the law as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety. The authors find that legal cynicism explains why homicide persisted in certain Chicago neighborhoods during the 1990s despite declines in poverty and declines in violence city-wide.

## INTRODUCTION

Our most nuanced theories of the relationship between culture and crime come from ethnographic studies of single neighborhoods, places with names like Cornerville, the Addams Area, Germantown, and Winston Street. One of the most resilient findings across such studies is the seem-

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ingly paradoxical coexistence of law-abiding and deviant cultural systems. Indeed, a variety of ethnographic accounts since Whyte's ([1943] 1993) *Street Corner Society* demonstrates how residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods navigate mainstream (read middle class) and deviant cultural systems as they go about their everyday routines. Most residents of socially disadvantaged neighborhoods believe in the substance of the law and express little tolerance for violence and crime (Sampson and Bartusch 1998), yet many still engage in violations of the law despite these beliefs.

How, then, does one explain this coexistence of law-abiding beliefs and law-violating behaviors? For the most part, neighborhood research over the past 20 years has made few attempts to answer this question—or even to ask it—largely because of the failure to incorporate contemporary notions of culture in explanations for behavior. This neglect of cultural explanations is puzzling because a concern with culture was once core to theorizing in urban sociology. In particular, classic social disorganization theory considered cultural transmission an essential mechanism in the persistence of delinquency in disorganized neighborhoods (Park [1925] 1967; Shaw and McKay 1942). While in recent years research on neighborhood effects has done much to advance our understanding of the social-interactional and structural mechanisms of social behaviors (e.g., collective efficacy and concentrated poverty), only a handful of studies, mainly ethnographies, consider the role of culture in explanations for crime or in the study of neighborhood effects more broadly. This study aims to address this research shortfall by injecting a cultural dimension found within the ethnographic tradition into the quantitative study of neighborhood effects. We argue that above and beyond social structural conditions such as poverty and structural disadvantage, neighborhood levels of violence can be explained by the presence of a specific cultural frame—legal cynicism.

Legal cynicism refers to a cultural orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement, such as the police and courts, are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety. Legal cynicism resolves the aforementioned paradox—while individuals may believe in the substance of the law, antagonism toward and mistrust of the agents of the law may propel some individuals toward violence simply because they feel they cannot rely upon the police to help them resolve grievances. Under such conditions, violence can serve as an additional form of problem-solving behavior in one's cultural repertoire (Hannerz 1969; Black 1983), augmenting but not necessarily replacing other types of problem-solving behaviors such as calling the police.

The conception of legal cynicism has received important theoretical attention in recent years (Sampson and Bartusch 1998). By and large, prior theorizing has utilized a definition of culture as norms and values. For instance, Sampson and Bartusch (1998, p. 782) conceive of (and em-

pirically measure) legal cynicism in a normative manner—that is, as a component of anomie, “a state of normlessness in which the rules of the dominant society (and hence the legal system) are no longer binding in a community.” Yet, our study theoretically and empirically departs from prior work in three important ways. First and foremost, we seek to integrate theory and research from cultural and urban sociology (e.g., Small 2002, 2004; Harding 2007) by conceiving of legal cynicism as a cultural frame. That is, legal cynicism is a lens through which individuals observe, perceive, and interpret situations (Lamont and Small 2008). This distinction between norms and frames may be subtle but has important implications for our understanding of the sources of social behavior such as interpersonal violence. As Lamont and Small (2008, p. 81) note: “The norms-and-values perspective posited a cause-and-effect relationship between values and behavior, whereas the frame perspective tends to posit . . . a constraint-and-possibility relationship. Frames do not cause behavior so much as make it possible or likely.” Thus, we contend that violence results because people’s perception of their context leads them to believe that they have few options to handle a conflict or to protect themselves besides violence. Empirically, we measure legal cynicism using indicators of resident perceptions of the legal system and the police, in contrast to earlier work that measured legal cynicism using indicators of social norms (Sampson and Bartusch 1998).

Second, while we contend, as do Sampson and Bartusch, that legal cynicism originates as an adaptation to neighborhood structural conditions such as concentrated poverty, we also argue that legal cynicism is cultural precisely because individual perceptions of the law are augmented and solidified through communication and social interaction among neighborhood residents. In this way, residents arrive at a shared, though not necessarily identical, meaning of the law and its viability (Hannerz 1969). Once such cultural understandings emerge, cynicism exerts an influence on neighborhood rates of violence independent of the structural circumstances that originally produced such cynicism. Thus, culture plays a more important role in neighborhood violence than prior quantitative research may suggest.

Finally, whereas prior theoretical and empirical work addresses the sources of legal cynicism, our focus is directed toward the consequences of cynicism for neighborhood violence. While we do consider how legal cynicism emerges, the main empirical focus of this article is on how legal cynicism influences levels of neighborhood violence. And while some prior work has examined how views of the law influence an individual’s compliance and disobedience to the law (e.g., Tyler 1990), our interest is in exploring the social and cultural characteristics of neighborhoods that

explain differential rates of violence across space.<sup>2</sup> By examining the relationship between legal cynicism and neighborhood violence, this study adds a dimension to a small yet resurging interest in identifying the cultural mechanisms at root of the neighborhood effects on behavior (e.g., Small 2004; Sampson and Bean 2006; Harding 2007, 2009).

Drawing upon a unique assemblage of data on the sociodemographic, social-interactive, and cultural characteristics for every neighborhood in Chicago, this study seeks to answer the following questions about the effects of neighborhoods on lethal violence: Is neighborhood violence the product of a subculture that values such behavior? Or, is violence explained by legal cynicism, such that violence may be common in cynical neighborhoods even if few residents value and tolerate acts of violence? And, if so, does legal cynicism explain the persistence of violence in some Chicago neighborhoods over time, even as structural conditions such as concentrated poverty improved? Our findings reveal that tolerant attitudes toward deviance and violence have little bearing on neighborhood rates of violence. Legal cynicism, however, has both a near-term and enduring influence on violence, net of neighborhood structural characteristics and social processes such as collective efficacy. Neighborhood culture is a powerful determinant of neighborhood violence and partially accounts for why rates of violence remained stable (and even increased) in some Chicago neighborhoods during the 1990s despite declines in poverty and drastic declines in violence citywide.

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by describing our conception of cultural frames and then focus attention on the sources and consequences of legal cynicism. After that, we address three empirical objectives. First, we examine the correlates of legal cynicism (objective 1). Second, we examine the cross-sectional relation between neighborhood violence and legal cynicism as well as the relation between neighborhood violence and tolerant attitudes toward violence and deviant behavior (objective 2). Third, through a dynamic investigation of neighborhood change, we seek to determine whether legal cynicism predicts the change

<sup>2</sup> As Sampson (2008) notes, much recent attention in the “neighborhood effects” literature has been directed toward explaining how neighborhood conditions influence individual outcomes like criminal behavior, educational attainment, employment, birth weight, and so on. Yet there is a long tradition in sociology dating back to the Chicago school and before of examining how neighborhood characteristics influence rates of behavior. With the latter analytic approach, one could investigate how a neighborhood-based intervention, such as the implementation of a community-policing initiative, influences neighborhood crime rates. This type of approach to examining neighborhood effects contrasts initiatives such as the Moving to Opportunity housing mobility program, which intervened in the lives of impoverished families (see Kirk and Laub [2010] for a discussion).

in neighborhood violence over time, net of changes to the structural conditions of a given neighborhood (objective 3).

#### FROM CULTURE IN VALUES TO CULTURAL FRAMES

While little recent theorizing has been directed toward the culture-crime nexus, cultural explanations of crime do have a long tradition in sociology. One prominent cultural explanation, generally thought of as the “culture of deviance” model, explains differential levels of violence as the by-product of a unique lower-class subculture whose main tenets diverge from or come into conflict with the values of mainstream society (Sellin 1938; Cohen 1955; Miller 1958; Lewis 1966; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). This approach conceives of culture as something deep inside individuals and social groups—a bundle of norms, beliefs, attitudes, and values that provide a worldview and, more importantly as far as crime is concerned, a motive for action (e.g., Parsons 1951). From this perspective, deviance is conformity, albeit conformity to a set of values that diverge from mainstream society (Sellin 1938).

A softer version of the culture of deviance argument is found in Shaw and McKay's (1942) classic social disorganization model, although the cultural mechanism affecting behavior is still values.<sup>3</sup> For Shaw and McKay (1942), the persistence of delinquency in the same neighborhoods despite population turnover and ethnic succession results from both structural conditions (i.e., economic status, population heterogeneity, and residential mobility) and a process of cultural transmission whereby the character of a community is passed on to subsequent neighborhood inhabitants. Shaw and McKay's argument follows directly from Robert Park ([1925] 1967, p. 5), who argued, “In the course of time every section and quarter of the city takes on something of the character and qualities of its inhabitants. Each separate part of the city is inevitably stained with the peculiar sentiments of its population.” As the character of a community persists and is transmitted, so too does the level of delinquency persist. In particular, youth in high-delinquency neighborhoods are more likely to encounter differential systems of values, such as those touted by youth gangs, which thrive because weakened social institutions cannot fend them off.

Of course there are very good reasons why the recent resurgence of neighborhood effects studies has generally neglected the role of culture despite the theoretical groundwork laid by Shaw and McKay and earlier

<sup>3</sup> See Kornhauser (1978) for a thorough and critical review of the social control and cultural deviance components of Shaw and McKay's disorganization model.

work in urban sociology. In particular, exploring a cultural explanation for inner-city problems could be misconstrued as favoring a “culture of poverty” interpretation of behavior. Relatedly, empirical research has largely disproved the existence of a unique lower-class culture (Kornhauser 1978). Members of all classes, including those living in impoverished neighborhood conditions, share uniform opinions of crime and subscribe to so-called middle-class values (Short and Strodtbeck 1965; Liebow 1967; Suttles 1968; Hannerz 1969).<sup>4</sup> Even if residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods become socially isolated as a result of middle-class flight (Wilson 1987), it does not mean that they become culturally isolated and embedded in an oppositional culture (Harding 2007).<sup>5</sup> In fact, research reveals that residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods are no more likely to tolerate violence than are residents of advantaged neighborhoods (Sampson and Bartusch 1998, p. 796).

Why, then, do crime and violence proliferate in certain areas when such courses of action are not valued? We suggest that the answer to this question lies in a revised conceptualization of culture that views culture not as values but as a repertoire of tools that ultimately serve as a guide for action (Hannerz 1969; Swidler 1986). The core arguments of Hannerz’s (1969) magnum opus, *Soulside*, reflect a fundamental shift in the sociological notion of culture away from the view of culture as a system of values. For Hannerz, ghetto dwellers are not necessarily engaging in behaviors they value; rather, they must often suspend their core values in order to engage in behaviors necessary when faced with a given situation and context. Through adaptation, ghetto dwellers develop a repertoire of modes of action, which include both mainstream and ghetto-specific forms of behavior. Similar to Hannerz, Kornhauser (1978) argues that it is not the content of values that varies across neighborhoods, but rather the strength of values. Accordingly, mainstream cultural values may be weak or lack relevance in certain contexts (in Kornhauser’s terminology), yet other cultural tools in one’s repertoire (e.g., frames) may provide a more robust guide for action.

<sup>4</sup> Evidence of mainstream values among the poor is not limited to beliefs about crime. For examples of the widespread adoption of mainstream values related to work, education, parenting, and family formation, see Newman (1999), Young (2004), Carter (2005), and Edin and Kefalas (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Liebow (1967, pp. 220–22) offers an illuminating discussion on this point. What has often been regarded as a culturally distinctive pattern of “serial monogamy” among women in ghetto neighborhoods (i.e., a succession of mates during procreative years) may instead be viewed as women and men striving to achieve a “durable, permanent union” in the mold of mainstream ideals, but often unable to do so because of the influence of structural challenges. The mainstream ideal of marriage is still upheld in disadvantaged areas, yet factors like weak labor markets contribute to its repeated demise in practice (see also Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Swidler's (1986) theory of culture as a tool kit has further guided the intellectual shift away from "culture in values." As Swidler (1986, p. 273) notes, "The reigning model used to understand culture's effects on action is fundamentally misleading. It assumes that culture shapes action by supplying ultimate ends or values toward which action is directed, thus making values the central causal element of culture." As an alternative to this traditional view of culture, Swidler (1986, p. 273) suggests that "culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action.'" In other words, culture has causal significance not because it spells out the desired ends of action, but rather because culture shapes choices for action. In particular, culture provides a repertoire of evaluation schema, scripts, and frames people use to understand their social context and to choose courses of action.

In this study, we similarly conceive of culture as a tool kit for action, and focus on one particular element of the tool kit that has bearing on action, namely, cultural frames. The notion of cultural frames can be traced to the work of Erving Goffman (1974). For Goffman, cultural frames provide meaning to situations and contexts; in other words, individuals' perceptions of the world are filtered through a particular frame. Thus, the objective world may be different from the world an individual subjectively perceives, and cultural frames serve to simplify the complexity of the objective world by highlighting certain elements of reality while excluding others (Lamont and Small 2008). In turn, cultural frames provide a guide to action in a given situation. Quite simply, how people act depends on how they cognitively perceive of themselves and the world in which they live.

One illustrative example of the use of cultural frames for understanding neighborhood organization and behavior is Small's (2002, 2004) ethnographic study of Villa Victoria, a housing project located in Boston's South End. Small finds that the type of frame residents use to give meaning to their neighborhood directly influences the extent to which residents engage in community participation. Even though the first (older) cohort of residents of Villa Victoria faces the same neighborhood structural conditions as the later cohort, this first cohort is more likely to participate in the community life of Villa Victoria because of the way it perceives the neighborhood. The first cohort frames the neighborhood as a place of historical significance, as a community created out of the struggle of activists in the late 1960s to thwart impending geographic displacement in the face of urban renewal initiatives. In contrast, the more recent cohort of residents (both younger and more recent occupants) perceives of Villa Victoria as "the projects"—a place characterized by disorder, disrepair, and disor-



ganization. These contrasting frames of the same ecological space explain why some residents invest in the community through local participation while others do not. For our purposes, Small's work highlights (1) that multiple frames can exist within the same neighborhood and (2) that cultural frames are a driver of community action net of neighborhood structural conditions.

The notion of cultural frames has only rarely been applied to explain violence, most notably in the assertion that a southern culture of honor explains regional variations in the prevalence of violence in the United States. For example, Corzine, Huff-Corzine, and Whitt (1999, p. 46) contend that "culture provides ways of organizing sensory experiences. . . . Culture's primary influence on violence is through 'definitions of the situation,' 'frames,' and/or 'attributional styles' that affect the likelihood that an individual will define a situation as one in which physical assault, perhaps with the intent to kill an opponent, is appropriate or even demanded." Likewise, Nisbett (1993) argues that insults and threats are more likely to lead to acts of aggression and violence when interpreted through a culture of honor that is more pervasive in the South relative to the North. The implication is that threats and insults are interpreted through different cultural frames by southerners and northerners and, as such, conflicts are more likely to be defined as situations requiring the use of violence in the South.

The present study is concerned with a specific cultural frame—legal cynicism—and how it relates to neighborhood levels of violence. We are interested in how individuals frame the legitimacy of the law and the way illegitimacy constrains individuals' options for resolving conflicts. Cynicism can be used to understand why some individuals use violence to resolve disputes while others do not, and also to understand why some neighborhoods have more violence than others. The next section describes our conception of legal cynicism.

#### LEGAL CYNICISM

Legal cynicism is a frame through which individuals interpret the functioning and viability of the law and its agents, especially law enforcement. When the law is perceived to be just, legitimate, and responsive, then individuals are more likely to cooperate and comply with the law.<sup>6</sup> There-

<sup>6</sup> An analog of the argument we are making with respect to cultural frames and neighborhood violence is found in the collective action and social movements literature (e.g., Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Snow et al. 1986). Mobilization of movement participants is dependent upon how issues are framed (Snow et al. 1986; see also Lamont and Small 2008). Gamson et al.'s (1982) distinction between legitimating frames and

fore, it is vital to understand what influences perceptions of the law as well as the consequences of cynicism toward the law.

### The Sources of Legal Cynicism

We suggest the legal cynicism is the product of two related influences: (1) neighborhood structural conditions and (2) neighborhood variation in police practices and resident interaction with the police. Drawing upon previous work (Wilson 1987; Sampson and Wilson 1995; Anderson 1999), we assert that cultural tools, in this case the frame of legal cynicism, originate as an adaptation to neighborhood structural conditions. Cynicism, in turn, is culturally transmitted through the interaction patterns of neighborhood residents. In socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, people come to understand that the dominant societal institutions (of which the police and the justice system are emblematic) will offer them little in the way of security, either economic or personal (Wilson 1987; Anderson 1999). Self-reliance emerges as an essential adaptation to this alienation from mainstream society, especially under conditions of racial segregation, intense poverty, and deficient educational, economic, and employment opportunity structures. Evidence of alienation and adaptation is seen vividly in Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street*: "The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor. . . . The code of the street is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system" (pp. 32, 34). This code consists of a set of informal behavioral principles centered on the search for respect, the use of violence as a status-conferring mechanism, and the perpetual need to avoid victimization. In this case, individuals do not necessarily value violence; rather, the code of the street represents an adaptation to the deleterious conditions of inner-city life, which renders values irrelevant and self-reliance mandatory: "The local streets are . . . tough and dangerous places where people often feel very much on their own, where they themselves must be personally responsible for their own security" (Anderson 1999, p. 317). As such, knowledge of the street code is essential if only to navigate potentially dangerous places and situations.

The emergence of street gangs is another oft cited form of cultural adaptation to neighborhood structural conditions. Earlier studies of gangs theorized that gangs form as the result of an attenuation process in disorganized and disadvantaged neighborhoods, as an ersatz way for youth to fulfill status-seeking and peer group needs (Thrasher 1927; Shaw and

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injustice frames resonates with our interest in legal cynicism. Through a legitimating frame, individuals are guided by the legitimacy of authority figures. When authority figures violate shared understandings of justice, "injustice frames" arise that provide a reason for noncompliance to authority.

McKay 1942; Cohen 1955). Similarly, contemporary research considers the persistence of gangs in disadvantaged neighborhoods a response to massive shifts in economic and structural conditions since World War II, but especially the deindustrialization of the economy (e.g., Hagedorn 1988; Venkatesh 1997). Venkatesh (1997, p. 89) notes, “The contemporary street gang is a product of postwar systemic factors that have deleteriously affected the economic and institutional fabric of inner cities. Specifically, the gang partially fills the void left by other community-based institutions. *Adaptation* is the central trope.”

Most relevant for our argument, Sampson and Bartusch (1998), using the same survey data that we employ in our study, find that neighborhood variation in cynicism toward the law is not simply the product of resident compositional differences across neighborhoods; rather, legal cynicism is a product of neighborhood disadvantage. To the extent that neighborhood disadvantage inhibits the upward mobility of residents because of social isolation or restricted opportunities, such disadvantage breeds cynicism toward societal institutions. Sampson and Bartusch (1998, p. 801) conclude: “Perhaps we should not be surprised that those most exposed to the numbing reality of pervasive segregation and economic subjugation become cynical about human nature and legal systems of justice—even as they personally condemn acts of deviance and violence.”

A second root source of legal cynicism is the actions of the criminal justice system, particularly law enforcement. While perceptions of the law will not exactly mirror objective reality, they do tend to be correlated. Matza (1964, p. 101) contends that cynical views toward the law are produced by seemingly contradictory factors: an approval of the substance of criminal law, yet an antagonism directed at the agents of the law. This antagonism and the consequent cynicism are the product of police conduct, particularly harassing behavior, and insufficient and ineffective crime control (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). In short, the way justice is administered influences legal cynicism.<sup>7</sup>

While the law manifests itself in numerous ways in our everyday lives, perhaps the most visible and palpable symbol of the law is the police. A growing body of literature demonstrates that police behavior varies across neighborhood context and that the police have wide discretion to carry out their functions (see Black and Reiss [1970] for an early examination of police discretion). For instance, Smith (1986) finds that police are less

<sup>7</sup> Research on procedural justice demonstrates that the manner in which the law is enforced drastically affects individuals’ willingness to accept legal decisions and to comply with the law in the future (Paternoster et al. 1997; Tyler 2004). Put another way, if individuals think they are being treated fairly, they are more likely to accept the outcomes of legal action even if the outcome is detrimental to their self-interest (e.g., a sentence of incarceration).

likely to file incident reports following a crime in high-crime neighborhoods than in low-crime neighborhoods. In addition, Smith finds that police are more likely to use coercive authority (i.e., to use or threaten to use force against suspects) in nonwhite and racially mixed neighborhoods, relative to predominately white neighborhoods. More recently, Terrill and Reisig (2003) find that police contact is significantly more likely to result in police use of force in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and Kane (2005) finds that police misconduct is dramatically more prevalent in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

There are numerous potential reasons underlying the neighborhood variation in policing, many of which contend that policing itself is a product of the structural conditions of neighborhoods (Kirk and Matsuda 2010). A first explanation is ecological contamination, a process whereby every person encountered in a “bad” neighborhood is perceived by the criminal justice system to embody the “moral liability” of that neighborhood (Werthman and Piliavin 1967; see also Smith 1986). Thus, characteristics of the neighborhood where police-suspect contact occurs influence the outcome of the contact (e.g., use of force, arrest), independent of the characteristics of the criminal event that led to the contact. To manage risk and ensure public safety, the police may be more likely to use certain tactics in one neighborhood versus another. Second, and related to ecological contamination, Klinger (1997) argues that the level of crime in a given neighborhood profoundly affects police behavior. While police administration does to some extent attempt to balance workloads and resources across police districts in a city, it is typically still the case that higher crime districts have greater call-to-officer ratios and therefore fewer resources to devote to any particular incident than in low-crime districts. Consequently, a smaller proportion of criminal incidents will be investigated—and arrests made—in a high-crime neighborhood than in a low-crime neighborhood. In addition, Klinger notes that it is well understood by police officers that victims of crime oftentimes have been offenders previously (see Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub 1991; Lauritsen and Laub 2007). Thus, in high-crime areas, proportionally more victims are prior criminals, and, consequently, the police are more likely to perceive victims as deserving of the crime committed against them (Klinger 1997; see also Stark 1987). For our purposes of understanding legal cynicism, the root causes of neighborhood variation in police behavior are not as consequential as the possibility that variation in policing may, in part, account for differentials in legal cynicism across neighborhoods.

Empirically, research validates the argument that legal cynicism is a product of direct experience with the justice system. For instance, respondents from Brunson’s (2007) study of youth experiences with the police mentioned frequent personal instances of police harassment and

mistreatment as well as misconduct and brutality. In turn, these experiences cultivated negative perceptions of the police. Likewise, Carr, Napolitano, and Keating (2007) observe that youths in disadvantaged neighborhoods often develop a negative disposition toward the police that is a product of police harassment and repeated victimizations. Anderson (1999) finds that many residents of disadvantaged areas are afraid to even report crimes for fear that the police, even if they show up, might harass them or reveal their identities to the perpetrators of the crime. Such views are molded by past experiences with the law, and the realization that any protection the police can provide will be fleeting at best.

### Transmitting Legal Cynicism

While we argue that legal cynicism has roots in neighborhood structural conditions and direct interactions with law enforcement, it is important to emphasize that culture is relational, not merely adaptive (Hannerz 1969). Individuals acquire culture relationally, through their interactions in social networks. Direct experiences with harassing police may influence an individual's cynicism, but this cynicism becomes cultural through social interaction. In this sense, individuals' own experiential-based perception of the law becomes solidified through a collective process whereby residents develop a shared meaning of the behavior of the law and the viability of the law to ensure their safety.

Harding (2009) provides an illuminating discussion of the ways in which neighborhood disadvantage and violence provide constraints on the types of social networks available to adolescents, which, in turn, influences their exposure to alternative cultural models. Harding observes that in violent, disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston, many male adolescents adapt to their surroundings by staying close to home and avoiding interaction with males from other neighborhoods. Consequently, because of a limited number of same-age peers within the bounds of the neighborhood and because of frequent use of public spaces, adolescents in these violent neighborhoods are more likely to come into contact with and associate with older peers than would adolescents in less violent neighborhoods. While even in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods many adult residents work or go to school, those older peers available in the neighborhood to socialize youths are often those residents with idle time, including the unemployed or individuals employed in the underground economy. These older peers expose adolescents to alternative cultural models related to romantic relationships, education, and strategies for handling violent confrontations. In the case of an older youth named Marcus, Harding (2009, p. 457) observes that one message adolescents receive from older peers is that the police are a source of harassment. In this sense, perceptions and injustices

of the past become part of a legacy that is transmitted to new generations. It is not surprising then that youth in violent, disadvantaged neighborhoods often would not even consider the police a viable resource for protection. Our main point, though, is that while culture is rooted in neighborhood conditions (e.g., economic disadvantage and violence), it is transmitted and collectively shaped through social interaction.

As we earlier suggested, residents' cynical views, while collectively shaped, will not be uniform within a neighborhood. Even in the most violent, disadvantaged neighborhood, many residents will hold favorable frames of the law. Thus, a key component of the cultural transmission of legal cynicism is the frequency of exposure to cynical perceptions. Hannerz (1969, p. 185) argues, "Cultural transmission . . . is most likely to be efficient when a mode of behavior is encountered frequently and in many different persons." Consider that in certain neighborhoods, it can be quite risky for residents to express pro-police views and to cooperate with the police (Anderson 1999; Kane 2005). Thus, even in a neighborhood with an abundance of both positive and negative views about the law and the police, residents may still encounter relatively more legal cynicism than optimism.

In sum, residents of a neighborhood share a common existence and are subject to the same ecological constraints. From this shared existence, as well as direct and vicarious experiences with the police, emerges a culture. Resident experiences, with the police and with structural conditions, coalesce to produce a cultural frame. To be clear, we are not arguing that legal cynicism among neighborhood residents is static; rather, it is shaped and reshaped by neighborhood conditions and direct and vicarious experiences with agents of the law. And while we do not deny that individuals within the same neighborhood will vary in their extent of cynicism, our core argument is that perceptions of the law and legal institutions are collective.

### The Consequences of Legal Cynicism

While Sampson and Bartusch (1998) direct their research focus to the sources of legal cynicism, unresolved in the research literature is the consequence of legal cynicism.<sup>8</sup> We suggest that the consequence is constraint—that is, cynicism constrains choices for resolving grievances and

<sup>8</sup> An important exception to the lack of attention to the consequences of cynicism is work by Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush (2005). Relative to our theoretical argument and definition of legal cynicism, however, they employ a conception and measurement of cynicism, as do Sampson and Bartusch (1998), that more broadly focus on anomie as well as moral and legal cynicism.

protecting oneself because individuals are more likely to presume that the law is unavailable or unresponsive to their needs. In the face of such constraints, individuals may choose to engage in their own brand of social control because they cannot rely upon the law to assist them.

To illustrate the mechanism, take, for example, a situation where a neighborhood resident is faced with a threat of violent victimization. Individuals have a range of potential strategies of action for handling the situation: they can avoid violent individuals and hazardous places, seek protection from older neighborhood peers, travel in groups to dangerous locations, call the police for protection, or resort to violence to resolve a conflict.<sup>9</sup> These strategies are dependent upon each other—legally cynical individuals may view reliance on the police as an ineffective strategy for handling the conflict, thus making it more likely that individuals will solve the dispute through violence. To be clear, cynicism toward the law does not directly cause neighborhood violence yet makes it more likely because mistrust of the agents of the law opens up the possibility that individuals will resort to illegal violence to redress a problem instead of abiding by the letter of the law. As Hannerz (1969, p. 186) argues, “Man is not a mindless cultural automaton . . . when people develop a cultural repertoire by being at the receiving end of cultural transmission, this certainly does not mean that they will put every part of it to use.” In this sense, culture is not a deterministic force; rather, by constraining the available choices for avoiding victimization—because reliance upon the police is not perceived to be a viable option—legal cynicism makes violence more likely.

Roots of our argument are found in the work of Black (1983) on self-help and social control. Black (1983, p. 34) defines self-help as “the expression of a grievance by unilateral aggression such as personal violence or property destruction,” whereby violence becomes the vehicle through which such grievances are resolved. Black makes the case that violence, in both traditional and modern societies, has often been used as a form of social control, to induce others to conform in some manner. For our purposes, the key point is that this aggression as a form of dispute resolution is more likely to occur in the absence of the law. When the law is unavailable to someone—or in our argument, when he perceives that it is unavailable—that individual has to help himself. One important means for avoiding victimization is to protect oneself using any available means, including violence.

Anderson’s (1999) observations from Philadelphia support such a view

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, perhaps the most often cited reason for joining a gang is mutual protection (see Klein and Maxson [2006] for a recent review).

of violence as a form of self-help.<sup>10</sup> The code of the street is pervasive in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, and even “decent” individuals understand that the “credible threat of vengeance” may save their lives. Anderson (1999, p. 34) observes, “The police, for instance, are most often viewed as representing the dominant white society and as not caring to protect inner-city residents. When called, they may not respond, which is one reason many residents feel they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined to aggression.” Legal cynicism constrains choices, making it more likely that individuals will undertake “extraordinary measures” of self-help.

### CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Figure 1 translates the foregoing arguments into a conceptual model. We contend that negative interactions with the police and other institutions of the law as well as neighborhood structural conditions such as concentrated poverty lead to legal cynicism. These conditions structure how individuals perceive the functioning and relevance of the law. Through communication and interaction, experiences with the law and neighborhood conditions coalesce so residents form a shared perception of how the police will operate in a given context. In turn, legal cynicism fosters violence by constraining the available strategies to resolve disputes and ensure personal safety. The perceived inadequacy or illegitimacy of formal institutions of social control means that individuals may no longer regard the use of formal control institutions as an option to mediate their grievances. In other words, calling the police will not solve their problems or remedy disputes and victimizations (Carr et al. 2007). In the face of such a constraint, the use of violence as a form of self-help or social control may become a situational response to legal cynicism (Black 1983; see also Anderson 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006). When the law is unavailable—or when the law is perceived to be unavailable—individuals may choose to disperse social control by their own means, thus increasing the probability of violence.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Research on revenge and retaliation in the criminal underworld further supports this Blackian idea of violence as a form of self-help and social control (e.g., Phillips 2003; Jacobs and Wright 2006).

<sup>11</sup> We do not contend that only culture matters and that legal cynicism fully accounts for the relationship between neighborhood structural features and violence. In fact, in our empirical tests to follow, we also examine the association between collective efficacy and homicide, and the role of collective efficacy as a mediator of both neighborhood structural conditions and legal cynicism. The conceptual model in fig. 1 is meant to highlight the specific role of legal cynicism for explaining neighborhood violence.



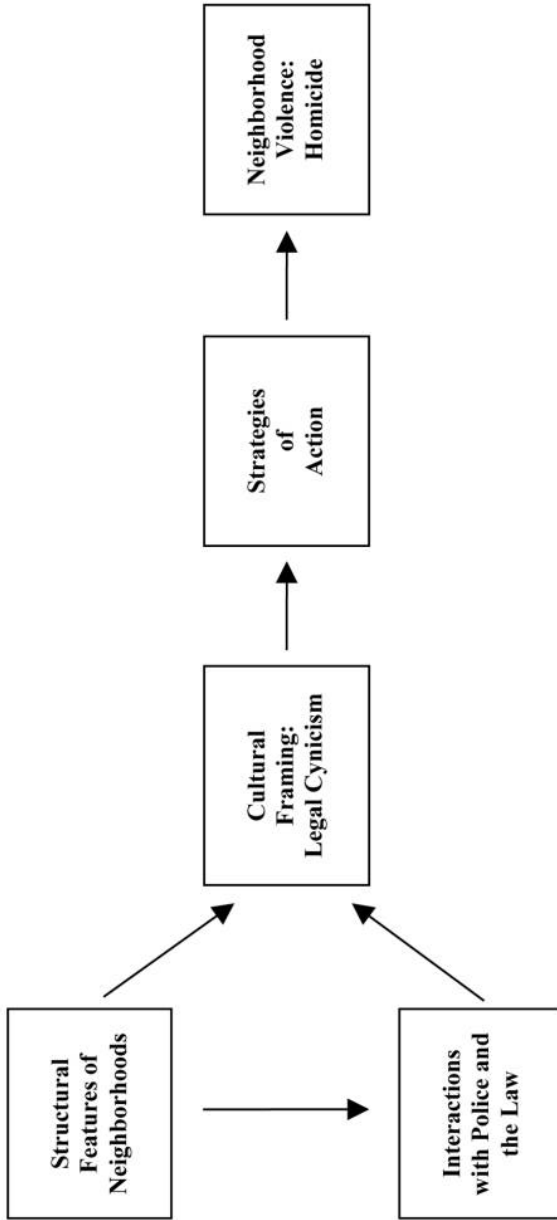


FIG. 1.—A conceptual model of cultural adaptation and constraint on action. Note that this conceptual model does not represent the only path to neighborhood violence. Our intent here is to emphasize the sources and consequences of legal cynicism. For instance, while not represented in the model, structural features are also important insofar as they affect neighborhood social organization (e.g., structural features → collective efficacy → homicide; see, e.g., Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls [1997]).

In the present study, we focus on a single type of violent act—murder. While the act of murder is, at its core, a dyadic event, our focus is on determining whether differentials in homicide across neighborhoods are associated with neighborhood differences in aggregate levels of legal cynicism.<sup>12</sup> While it is an important question to consider whether a cynical individual is more likely to kill, our goal is to examine the ecology of homicide. Because of differences in structural conditions, the behavior of the law, and the consequent cultural transmission across neighborhoods, we have every reason to assume that legal cynicism does vary across neighborhoods. Given this reality, we seek to determine whether legal cynicism explains why some neighborhoods have drastically more homicides than others.

#### DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Data used in this study come from three sources: the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), the Chicago Police Department, and the U.S. census. The PHDCN is an interdisciplinary project that focuses on understanding the causes of juvenile delinquency, adult crime, and violence, among other outcomes. Indicators of neighborhood cultural and social mechanisms come from the 1994–95 PHDCN Community Survey. Survey questions include items about legal cynicism, tolerance of deviance, and the social organization of neighborhoods, including an emphasis on the cohesiveness of ties among neighborhood residents and their willingness to engage in social control (i.e., collective efficacy). For the purposes of the PHDCN, neighborhood boundaries were operationally defined by combining all of the census tracts in Chicago into 343 neighborhood clusters, constructed to be “as ecologically meaningful as possible, composed of geographically contiguous census tracts, and internally homogeneous on key census indicators” (Sampson et al. 1997, p. 919). These census indicators include socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, housing density, and family structure. An average of 8,000 residents comprises each of the 343 neighborhood clusters. The Community Survey yielded a probability sample of 8,782 Chicago residents situated within the 343 neighborhood clusters. Our unit of analysis is the neighborhood cluster defined in the PHDCN data.

<sup>12</sup> That said, a recent study (Papachristos 2009) suggests that gang murders in Chicago create an enduring network structure that extends beyond isolated dyadic events and, therefore, may further bolster the use of violence as a form of self-help within the gang milieu.

## Variables

*Legal cynicism.*—We conceptualize legal cynicism as a frame through which individuals interpret the functioning and usefulness of the law and its agents. To measure legal cynicism, we combine three items from the PHDCN Community Survey. Respondents of the survey were asked the extent to which they agree with the following: (1) laws are made to be broken, (2) the police are not doing a good job in preventing crime in this neighborhood, and (3) the police are not able to maintain order on the streets and sidewalks in the neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> Details of our scaling strategy are presented below.

*Tolerance of deviance.*—This measure, which has previously been developed by Sampson and Bartusch (1998), serves as an indicator of residents' views about the morality of engaging in certain forms of deviant behavior, including violence. Four items are used to construct the scale, which all concern "how wrong" it is for a 13-year-old to engage in various behaviors: (1) smoke cigarettes, (2) use marijuana, (3) drink alcohol, and (4) get into fistfights. Higher scores equate to higher levels of tolerance for these behaviors (i.e., belief that these behaviors are not wrong).

*Collective efficacy.*—Our measure of collective efficacy is identical to the scale developed by Sampson et al. (1997) and represents a combined measure of neighborhood social control and social cohesion and trust. Neighborhood social control refers to the willingness of residents to intervene in the following situations: (1) children were skipping school and hanging out on a street corner, (2) children were spray painting graffiti on a local building, (3) children were showing disrespect to an adult, (4) a fight broke out, and (5) the fire station closest to the respondent's home was threatened with budget cuts. The measure of social cohesion and trust is based on the level of respondent agreement to the following survey statements: (1) people around here are willing to help their neighbors, (2) people in this neighborhood can be trusted, (3) people in this neighborhood generally get along with each other, (4) this is a close-knit neighborhood, and (5) people in this neighborhood share the same values.

<sup>13</sup> We utilize an operationalization of "legal cynicism," which differs to some degree from the one employed in previous research on legal cynicism using the PHDCN. The scale used by Sampson and Bartusch (1998; see also Sampson et al. 2005) taps a broader construct that combines legal cynicism, moral cynicism, and anomie, while our intent is to focus on perceptions of the "legal" system. Their scale included the following items: (1) laws are made to be broken, (2) it's okay to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone, (3) to make money, there are no right or wrong ways anymore, only easy ways and hard ways, (4) fighting between friends or within family is nobody else's business, and (5) nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself. The correlation between the Sampson and Bartusch scale and our scale is .75.

Following the measurement strategy of Sampson et al. (1997), we construct the legal cynicism, tolerance of deviance, and collective efficacy scales, respectively, via a multilevel item-response model using HLM (hierarchical linear and nonlinear modeling). In this model, item responses to each of the survey questions are nested within a respondent, and respondents are nested within neighborhoods. From this item-response model, we output a neighborhood specific empirical Bayes (EB) residual to use as our scale. These scales represent the average level of legal cynicism, tolerance of deviance, and collective efficacy across residents of each given neighborhood.

*Homicide.*—To assess the consequences of legal cynicism for neighborhood violence, we use rates of homicide as a dependent variable. The use of homicide data in studies of violence has several advantages over the use of data on other crime types. In contrast to other forms of violence, there is a close match between known homicides and the true number of homicides. Furthermore, homicide is less susceptible to the definitional problems an investigating officer or detective may face when determining exactly which type of crime was committed.

Incident-level homicide data were obtained from the Chicago Police Department (CPD).<sup>14</sup> Address information from each incident was used to geocode the location of the homicide to the corresponding PHDCN neighborhood cluster. To address the second objective of our study—to examine the influence of legal cynicism on neighborhood violence—we use homicide data from 1996 to 1998. Given that homicide is a rare event, it is a common practice to construct rates based on three-year averages (see, e.g., Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush 2001). For our measure of homicide from 1996 to 1998, we calculated the average yearly homicides. We then computed an empirical Bayes homicide estimate with an unconditional Poisson model (controlling for population exposure), which produces an estimate of the neighborhood-specific homicide rate that is a weighted average of each neighborhood's homicide rate and the grand mean across the city.<sup>15</sup> We import this EB estimate as the dependent variable in our regression models to address objective 2. This procedure reduces the extreme skewness of the homicide rates and makes the measure suitable for spatial regression modeling.

To address our third objective—to determine whether legal cynicism explains changes in neighborhood violence net of structural changes—we use a measure of the residual change in homicide. This measure is con-

<sup>14</sup> Data were provided by CPD's Division of Research and Development. Findings from use of these data in no way represent the views of CPD or the City of Chicago.

<sup>15</sup> In calculating all homicide rates, we use a linear interpolation of the population count based on the 1990 and 2000 censuses as our measure of exposure.

structed by regressing the 2000–2002 yearly average on the 1991–93 homicide rate, again with a Poisson model in HLM. We then output the EB residual following estimation. These residuals represent the unexpected change in homicide after accounting for prior levels of homicide.<sup>16</sup> By using a residual change score, our measure of change in homicide in the 1990s is uncorrelated with initial levels of homicide (i.e., the rate in 1991–93). For theoretical reasons, we find the use of a residual change score to be more advantageous than a raw change score. Specifically, residual change scores are useful for identifying neighborhoods that changed more or less than expected as homicide declined in Chicago in the 1990s, where the expected change is a function of citywide changes in homicide. In equation form (Cronbach and Furby 1970), it can be seen that the residual change score for a given neighborhood  $j$ , ( $\hat{R}_j$ ), is a function of the observed change in homicide from time 1 to time 2 ( $D_j = X_{2j} - X_{1j}$ ) and the average observed change citywide ( $\bar{D}$ ):

$$[\hat{R}_j = D_j - \bar{D} - \hat{\beta}_{DX_1}(X_{1j} - \bar{X}_1)].$$

The residuals used in analyses are positive when homicide declined less than expected (or when it increased). Residuals are negative when homicide declined more than expected.

*Neighborhood structural characteristics.*—Neighborhood structural data come from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. censuses. Consistent with the social disorganization thesis and recent work in the tradition (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick 1993), we use four measures of neighborhood structure: concentrated poverty, residential stability, immigrant concentration, and the proportion of youth in the neighborhood. In the analyses, we use the 1990 measures, as well as measures of the residual change from 1990 to 2000.<sup>17</sup> Scales for concentrated poverty and residential stability for both 1990 and 2000 were created via factor analyses. Specifically, we pooled data from both years into the same data set (i.e., each neighborhood had two observations). By doing so, the factor loadings for each of the census items do not vary across the two time points, thus ensuring comparability across time. The two resulting factors are based on the following six items: (1) concentrated poverty: the percentages of families below the poverty

<sup>16</sup> Another option is to simply include the 1991–93 rate as an additional covariate in a model of the 2000–2002 rate. Yet one particular advantage of examining the residual change score instead of merely regressing the 2000–2002 rate on the prior homicide rate and other covariates is that the residual specification allows us to model the spatial dependence of change directly. We model the spatial dependence in the change in homicide, instead of the spatial dependence with the 2000–2002 rate. Theoretically, we consider it more informative to model the spatial dependence of change.

<sup>17</sup> These are computed by regressing the 2000 values of the respective neighborhood measures on the 1990 values and outputting the unstandardized residuals.

line, of families receiving public assistance, of unemployed individuals in the civilian labor force, and of female-headed families with children; (2) residential stability: the percentage of residents five years old and older who lived in the same house five years earlier and the percentage of homes that are owner occupied. Immigrant concentration is measured as the percentage of foreign-born residents in the neighborhood, and the proportion of youth is measured as the proportion of the neighborhood population under the age of 18.

*Individual-level characteristics.*—In models of legal cynicism (objective 1), we adjust for a number of respondent characteristics derived from the PHDCN Community Survey: age, gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status (first principal component of education, income, and occupational prestige), marital status (single, married, separated or divorced), home ownership, residential mobility (number of moves within the preceding five years), years in the neighborhood, and violent victimization. Violent victimization is a binary indicator of personal victimization occurring specifically within the respondent's neighborhood derived from the following survey item: "While you have lived in this neighborhood, has anyone ever used violence, such as in a mugging, fight, or sexual assault, against you or any member of your household anywhere in your neighborhood?"

### Analytic Strategy

Analyses follow three paths. In the first set of analyses, we test the hypothesis that legal cynicism is a cultural adaptation to neighborhood structural conditions (hypothesis 1). At the first level of our statistical model, we estimate each individual's mean response to the three legal cynicism questions as a function of the  $P$  individual-level characteristics described in the preceding section, as in equation (1):

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \sum_{p=1}^P \beta_p X_{p ij} + r_{ij}. \quad (1)$$

At the second level of the model, we model the neighborhood mean of legal cynicism as a function of  $Q$  neighborhood-level covariates, as follows in equation (2):

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \sum_{q=1}^Q \gamma_{0q} X_{qj} + u_{0j}. \quad (2)$$

In the second set of analyses, we assess the repercussions of cynical cultural frames as well as tolerant attitudes toward deviance by modeling neighborhood rates of homicide from 1996 to 1998 as a function of legal cynicism, attitudes, and other relevant neighborhood covariates. For the

purposes of temporal ordering, we chose this time period because it falls just after the period in which the PHDCN Community Survey was administered and legal cynicism was measured (1994–95). Per our argument that violence proliferates in certain areas even when such courses of action are not valued, we hypothesize (hypothesis 2a) that neighborhood-wide attitudes toward deviance and violence are unrelated to neighborhood rates of homicide. In contrast, we hypothesize (hypothesis 2b) that legal cynicism is positively associated with neighborhood rates of homicide. We test these hypotheses with spatial regression models (described to follow).

In the third set of analyses, we seek to determine whether the influence of neighborhood culture, in the form of legal cynicism, explains the persistence of violence in certain neighborhoods over time. We hypothesize that legal cynicism is significantly and positively associated with the unexpected (residual) change in homicide during the 1990s, net of structural changes to Chicago neighborhoods (hypothesis 3). For this analysis, we use rates of homicide from the early 1990s (1991–93) and the early 2000s (2000–2002) to model the residual change in homicide.

*Spatial regression.*—Spatial regression models are used to test hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 3. We maintain that neighborhoods are interdependent ecological units, such that the conditions in one neighborhood are influenced by the conditions of spatially proximate neighborhoods. Relatedly, Morenoff et al. (2001) argue that a focus on internal neighborhood explanatory factors will not fully explain neighborhood variation in homicide levels, and that spatial proximity to homicide must also be considered. Theoretically, there are several reasons to model homicide as a spatially dependent process. First, murder is an interaction between two parties, and most of the time these two parties know each other (Papachristos 2009). Based on this interaction, acts of violence in one neighborhood may, through diffusion, lead to retaliation and retribution in proximate neighborhoods. For instance, Harding (2009) observes that much of the serious violence in disadvantaged Boston neighborhoods is the result of neighborhood rivalries. As another example, Papachristos (2009) shows that acts of lethal violence between rival gangs resemble an epidemic-like contagion, creating a temporal and spatial pattern of conflict as gangs battle over turf and dominance. Second, because offenders typically commit acts of violence near their homes, geographic proximity to these offenders and the neighborhood conditions that fuel their behavior may increase violence in a focal neighborhood (Morenoff et al. 2001). In this sense, legal cynicism in proximate neighborhoods may prompt homicide in a focal neighborhood. Theoretically then, accounting for spatial dependence is crucial for understanding the causes and nature of homicide in a focal neighborhood. Empirically, ignoring spatial dependence may

lead to biased parameter estimates and erroneous conclusions about statistical significance (Anselin 1988; Messner et al. 1999; Baller et al. 2001).

Given the existence of spatial autocorrelation, it must then be determined how to incorporate spatial dependence into model specification. There are two general approaches for introducing spatial dependence into regression models: spatial lag regression, which models autocorrelation in the dependent variable, and spatial error regression, which incorporates spatial dependence in the error term. In spatial lag regression, a term is added to the regression equation that is the weighted average of the values at neighboring locations (Anselin and Bera 1998), which in this case is the homicide rate or the residual change in homicide.<sup>18</sup> In equation form:

$$Y = \rho W y + X\beta + \epsilon, \quad (3)$$

where  $\rho$  is the spatial autoregressive parameter, and  $W$  is the spatial weights matrix. In contrast, spatial dependence is incorporated in spatial error models as follows:

$$Y = X\beta + \epsilon, \quad \text{where } \epsilon = \lambda W\epsilon + \xi. \quad (4)$$

Spatial error dependence arises from the omission of spatially correlated independent variables, while a spatial lag is said to be indicative of a diffusion process whereby homicides in one neighborhood are predictive of, or influence, homicide in proximate areas (Anselin and Bera 1998; Baller et al. 2001). Past studies (Baller et al. 2001; Morenoff et al. 2001) have concluded that a spatial lag specification is more appropriate to model homicide. We use a Lagrange multiplier test to assess spatial autocorrelation and to assess the exact form of spatial dependence (Anselin and Florax 1995; Anselin et al. 1996). We find evidence of spatial autocorrelation with respect to homicide and that a spatial lag model is most appropriate for modeling our homicide measures.

While we noted that a spatial lag model (eq. [3]) is considered a diffusion model, the interpretation is not so straightforward for several reasons. First, as Morenoff and colleagues describe (Morenoff et al. 2001; Morenoff 2003), diffusion implies a process that occurs over time. With largely cross-sectional data, we are not actually modeling diffusion as a longitudinal process. Second, the coefficient  $\rho$  captures the effect of homicide in contiguous neighborhoods on the focal neighborhood, as well as the effect of

<sup>18</sup> We create a spatially lagged homicide measure using a rook-based contiguity spatial weight matrix. The rook criterion designates a neighborhood as contiguous with a focal neighborhood if they share a common border. An alternative method is queen-based contiguity, which defines a neighborhood as contiguous if it shares a common border or vertex.



spatial proximity to observed and unobserved covariates of homicide. In essence, the data-generating process for homicide in a focal neighborhood is more aptly characterized as a spatial multiplier process whereby homicide ( $Y$ ) in a focal neighborhood is a function of  $X$  and  $\epsilon$  in the focal neighborhood, as well as homicide in first-order contiguous neighborhoods; in turn,  $Y$  in a contiguous neighborhood is a function of  $X$  and  $\epsilon$  in that neighborhood, as well as  $Y$  in second-order contiguous neighborhoods. In sum, through a spatial multiplier process, a change in  $X$  or  $\epsilon$  in a given neighborhood influences not only  $Y$  in that neighborhood but also  $Y$  in every other neighborhood within the entire spatial region. Thus, equation (3) can be rewritten as follows in order to reorient the interpretation of the spatial lag model as a spatial multiplier process:

$$Y = X\beta + \rho W\beta + \rho^2 W^2\beta + \dots \rho^m W^m\beta + \epsilon + \rho W\epsilon + \rho^2 W^2\epsilon + \dots \rho^m W^m\epsilon, \tag{5}$$

where  $m \rightarrow \infty$ .<sup>19</sup>

## RESULTS

To situate our analysis, it is important to point out that homicide declined dramatically in Chicago during the 1990s, the time period of our study. Figure 2 displays the trend in homicide rates from 1965 to 2005. Homicide rates in the early 1990s were considerably higher than at any point since 1974. Yet, by the start of the new millennium, homicide was lower than it had been at any point during the previous 30 years. As we will illustrate in our analyses, however, the decline in homicide, and violence more generally, was not distributed evenly across Chicago (e.g., Papachristos, Meares, and Fagan 2007). This fact becomes important when we consider the structural and cultural factors that influence the stability and change in homicide.

Table 1 displays a descriptive summary of the social, cultural, and sociodemographic characteristics of Chicago neighborhoods. Several interesting findings emerge from this table. In accord with Sampson and Bartusch’s (1998) analysis, we find little relation between tolerant attitudes toward deviance and concentrated poverty. However, results reveal a substantial, positive association between concentrated poverty and legal cynicism (.66). We also find a sizable positive correlation (.67) between

<sup>19</sup> All models reported to follow were estimated with a spatial lag model in the GeoDa program. Spatial lag models as well as spatial error models are estimated in GeoDa via maximum likelihood.

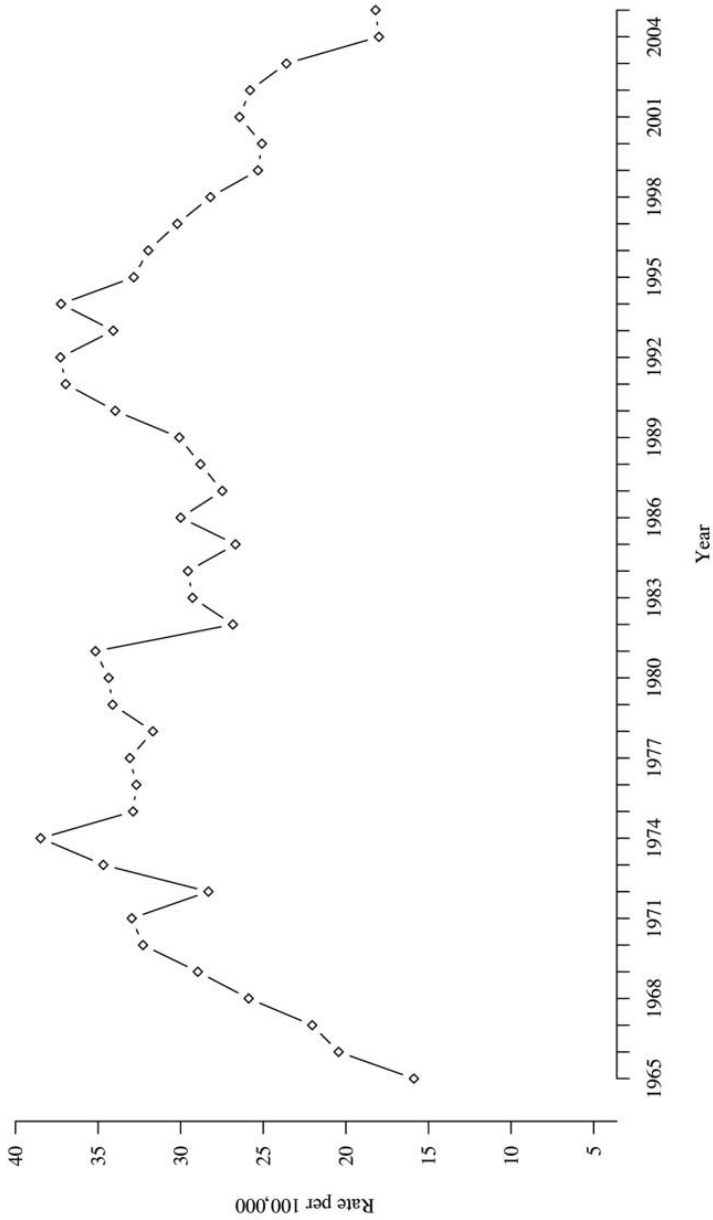


FIG. 2.—Trends in homicide rate in Chicago, 1965–2005. *Source:* Chicago Police Department (1999, 2005), Block, Block, and Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (2005).

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS OF NEIGHBORHOOD-LEVEL VARIABLES, CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTERS

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Concentrated poverty	.04	1.07	-1.35	4.15												
2. Resid. change conc. poverty (1990-2000)	.00	.30	-1.23	1.08	.00											
3. Immigrant conc.	.17	.16	.00	.65	-.47***	-.17***										
4. Resid. change immig. conc. (1990-2000)	.00	.07	-.21	.27	-.23***	.01	.00									
5. Residential stability	-.03	1.02	-2.66	2.18	-.16**	.19***	-.29***	.22***								
6. Resid. change res. stability (1990-2000)	.00	.35	-1.26	1.15	.03	.17**	-.01	.02	.00							
7. Proportion youth	.27	.09	.04	.56	.74***	.10	-.11*	-.18***	.14*	.13*						
8. Resid change prop. youth (1990-2000)	.00	.04	-.16	.10	-.03	.49***	-.16**	.43**	.33**	.37**	.00					
9. Tolerance of deviance	.79	.12	.50	1.20	-.07	-.19***	-.03	-.18***	-.42***	-.20***	-.32***	-.35***				
10. Collective efficacy	3.89	.26	3.17	4.73	-.62***	-.11*	-.03	.15**	.41***	-.02	-.54***	.06	.01			
11. Legal cynicism	.00	.64	-1.77	1.14	.66***	.15**	-.11*	-.19***	-.14**	.08	.67***	-.04	-.27**	-.69***		
12. Homicide rate (1991-93)	35.25	41.70	.00	517.64	.73***	.17**	-.41***	-.19***	-.06	.02	.53***	.04	-.10	-.45***	.49***	

NOTE.—N = 342 (excludes O'Hare Airport).

\*  $P < .05$ .

\*\*  $P < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $P < .001$  (two-tailed test).

proportion youth and legal cynicism, a finding that is consistent with prior research (e.g., Sampson and Bartusch 1998; see also Hindelang 1974; Decker 1981). Legal cynicism is generally more common among adolescents and young adults than older neighborhood residents, which reflects the fact that youths are more likely to have negative personal or vicarious interactions with the police than adults.

We find a significant, yet modest, negative association between legal cynicism and tolerance of deviance. In contrast, we find a strong, negative association between legal cynicism and collective efficacy ( $-.69$ ). We maintain that cynicism toward the law deters neighborhood residents from collectively acting to control crime. While somewhat novel, this finding is unsurprising. A basis for the movement toward community policing programs over the past two decades is that positive views toward the law and its enforcers will empower neighborhood residents to assist in the crime-fighting process (Silver and Miller 2004). If there are widespread, cynical views toward the law in a neighborhood, then residents may be unwilling to intervene to thwart local crime because of the absence of police support (Tyler and Fagan 2008; Kirk and Matsuda 2010). There are potential risks to intervening to prevent crime, and neighborhood residents are more likely to take those risks if they perceive to have the support of a responsive police force. While our focus in the ensuing analyses is on the direct association between legal cynicism and homicide, the strong association between legal cynicism and collective efficacy is suggestive of an indirect relationship as well.

### *Correlates of Legal Cynicism*

Table 2 examines the relationship between legal cynicism (measured at the individual level) and various individual- and neighborhood-level characteristics. In model 1, we present an unconditional model in order to produce an estimate of the total within- and between-neighborhood variability in legal cynicism. We find that the within-neighborhood variance ( $\sigma^2$ ) equals .610 and that the between-neighborhood variance ( $\tau_{00}$ ) equals .429. The intraclass correlation, which is calculated by dividing the amount of between-neighborhood variation by the total variation in legal cynicism, equals 41%, thus revealing that most of the variability in cynicism is found among respondents in the same neighborhood. This finding accords with our argument that cynical views of the law, while collectively shaped, will to some extent vary within a neighborhood. Still, there is considerable variation between neighborhoods in legal cynicism, which may explain between-neighborhood differences in levels of violence.

Model 2 reveals significant differences across demographic and familial characteristics in legal cynicism. Black and Latino respondents are more likely to perceive the law cynically than white respondents. It can also be seen in model 2 that cynicism varies inversely with age and socioeconomic status and that women report less cynicism than men. Controlling for compositional differences across neighborhoods in model 2 explains more than half of the between-neighborhood variability in legal cynicism, yet there is still significant variation left to explain.

Model 3 includes a measure of violent victimization. If victimized, residents may perceive that the police are unable to ensure their safety or that of others. As expected, victimization appears to have a rather dramatic effect on levels of cynicism; victims of a violent crime have much more cynicism toward the law than nonvictims.

Model 4 assesses the association between neighborhood structural characteristics and legal cynicism. Results reveal that mean levels of legal cynicism are higher in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, residential instability, and greater proportions of youth. Related to our conceptual model in figure 1 as well as hypothesis 1, we find support for our assertion that legal cynicism is an adaptation to neighborhood structural conditions.

### *Consequences of Legal Cynicism*

Table 3 presents a total of six iterative models, which we use to assess hypotheses 2a and 2b.<sup>20</sup> Model 1 shows that concentrated poverty and the proportion of youth in the neighborhood are positively related to homicide, while residential stability and immigrant concentration are unrelated to homicide. Consistent with other research (e.g., Morenoff et al. 2001), the positive and significant coefficient for the spatial lag term suggests that the homicide rate in a focal neighborhood is significantly influenced by rates of homicide in contiguous neighborhoods.

Model 2 tests whether cultural values significantly influence violent behavior. Recall from our preceding theoretical discussion that residents

<sup>20</sup> Several sizable correlations from table 1 suggest the potential for multicollinearity in our regression models. Therefore, we estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models similar to the spatial lag models presented in tables 3 (model 6) and 4 and then calculated variance inflation factors (VIF) for all independent variables in the models. A high VIF indicates that a given variable is highly correlated with the other independent variables in the model. For both models, VIF values all fell well below the generally accepted threshold of 10 (Kennedy 1998). Concentrated poverty had the highest VIF in both models, yet with values still below 5. We also assessed multicollinearity with the condition number of the data, where high values (over 30) suggest the presence of problems due to collinearity (Kennedy 1998). Condition numbers for OLS models similar to tables 3 (model 6) and 4 equaled roughly 7.

TABLE 2  
CORRELATES OF THE MEAN LEVEL OF LEGAL CYNICISM, PHDCN COMMUNITY SURVEY (1994-95)

FIXED EFFECT	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Intercept	2.251	.050***	2.276	.042***	2.279	.042***	2.270	.040***
Individual-level (N = 7,485):								
Black			.519	.062***	.532	.061***	.345	.068***
Latino			.314	.061***	.333	.061***	.253	.060***
Other race/ethnicity			.276	.075***	.278	.075***	.182	.074**
Female			-.063	.034*	-.066	.034*	-.074	.034*
SES			-.168	.015***	-.169	.015***	-.143	.016***
Age			-.003	.001*	-.002	.001*	-.002	.001
Married			-.044	.041	-.044	.040	-.036	.040
Separated/divorced			-.033	.046	-.047	.045	-.048	.045
Own home			-.040	.046	-.049	.045	.008	.045
Residential moves			.021	.014	.025	.014*	.031	.014*
Years in neighborhood			.003	.002*	.003	.002	.002	.002
Violent victimization					.350	.049***	.325	.049***

Neighborhood-level ( $N = 342$ ):

Conc. poverty .....						.143	.067*
Immigrant conc. ....						.173	.259
Residential stability .....						-.088	.034**
Proportion youth .....						2.563	.540***
Homicide rate (1991-93) .....						.000	.001
Random effect	Variance Comp.	$\chi^2$	Variance Comp.	$\chi^2$	Variance Comp.	$\chi^2$	Variance Comp.
Within-neighborhood variance	.610	10,627.91***	.602	10,574.98***	.594	10,533.16***	.584 10,466.00***
% explained .....			1.4%	2.6%	2.6%	4.3%	
Between-neighborhood variance	.429	1,933.99***	.180	1039.57***	.168	453.82***	.086 683.43***
ance % explained .....			57.9%	60.7%	79.9%		

\*  $P < .05$ .

\*\*  $P < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $P < .001$  (one-tailed test).

TABLE 3  
 SPATIAL LAG MODEL OF HOMICIDE, CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTERS (1996-98)

	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4		MODEL 5		MODEL 6	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Intercept	-.132	.072*	-.231	.141	-.243	.141*	-.242	.149	.598	.373	.389	.360
Spatial lag	.485	.047***	.488	.047***	.448	.049***	.448	.049***	.443	.049***	.430	.048***
Conc. poverty	.160	.033***	.161	.033***	.151	.033***	.151	.033***	.134	.034***	.073	.034*
Immigrant conc.	-.185	.142	-.164	.144	-.187	.144	-.187	.144	-.250	.145*	-.188	.139
Residential stability	.012	.019	.018	.021	.032	.021	.032	.021	.045	.022*	.043	.021*
Proportion youth	.583	.312*	.612	.314*	.389	.323	.388	.327	.340	.325	.361	.312
Tolerance of deviance			.112	.136	.211	.141	.211	.141	.186	.140	.227	.135*
Legal cynicism (mean)					.093	.033**	.093	.033**	.059	.036*	.060	.035*
Legal cynicism (variance)							-.006	.389	-.027	.386	.061	.370
Collective efficacy									-.204	.083**	-.187	.080**
Homicide (1991-93)											.002	.000***

NOTE.— $N = 342$  (excludes O'Hare Airport).

\*  $P < .05$ .

\*\*  $P < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $P < .001$  (one-tailed test).



of disadvantaged areas tend to hold mainstream values, but these values lack relevance when confronted with particular situations (Hannerz 1969; see also Liebow 1967; Suttles 1968; Kornhauser 1978). Thus, we posit that there is little direct relation between tolerance of violence and deviance and the neighborhood homicide rate. As hypothesized (hypothesis 2a), model 2 demonstrates that this particular type of value has little relevance for explaining neighborhood violence.

We add the legal cynicism measure to model 3 and find, as expected, that the addition of this measure partially mediates the effect of concentrated poverty on homicide. One reason why homicide tends to cluster in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty is because such neighborhoods have more cynical views of the law than advantaged neighborhoods. Similarly, legal cynicism mediates the association between the proportion of youth and homicide, suggesting that homicide clusters in youthful neighborhoods because youth are more cynical than adults. Most important for testing our conceptual model, model 3 reveals a positive, significant association between legal cynicism and homicide. This finding supports Hypothesis 2b. Neighborhoods where the law and the police are seen as illegitimate and unresponsive have significantly higher homicide rates than in neighborhoods where the law is viewed more favorably.

While between-neighborhood differences in mean levels of legal cynicism are associated with differences in homicide, it is important to consider the nature of the underlying distribution. It might be the case that there are a few extremely cynical individuals in a neighborhood, thus pulling the mean of the distribution to the right.<sup>21</sup> For instance, moderate mean levels of legal cynicism in two different neighborhoods could be produced by two very different distributions of survey responses. One neighborhood could have uniformly moderate levels of cynicism while the second neighborhood is composed mostly of residents with positive views of the law but with a microgrouping with extremely cynical views. These two different distributions could have different consequences for homicide. It could be the case that the neighborhood with uniform views has little violence while the neighborhood with dispersed views has numerous homicides because of the actions of a few cynical individuals. In this scenario, the within-neighborhood heterogeneity of legal cynicism may be a significant predictor of homicide, in addition to or instead of the mean level of cynicism.

In order to provide an accurate depiction of the relationship between legal cynicism and homicide, in model 4 we include both a measure of

<sup>21</sup> We do find a significant, positive correlation between the mean level of cynicism in a neighborhood and the variability in cynical views in the neighborhood, yet the correlation is modest in size (.223;  $P < .001$ ).

central tendency of legal cynicism (as in the previous models) as well as a measure of dispersion.<sup>22</sup> Results reveal that the mean level of cynicism in a neighborhood is associated with homicide but not the within-neighborhood variability in cynical views. Thus, what separates violent from nonviolent neighborhoods is not that violent neighborhoods have a heterogeneity in cynical views about the law, but rather that violent neighborhoods have more cynicism, on average, than nonviolent neighborhoods.

Given the strong association between collective efficacy and neighborhood rates of violence demonstrated in prior research (Sampson et al. 1997; Morenoff et al. 2001; Papachristos and Kirk 2006), we next seek to determine whether results concerning legal cynicism hold once accounting for the influence of collective efficacy on homicide. Consistent with prior research, the results from model 5 reveal a negative association between collective efficacy and homicide. The relation between legal cynicism and homicide is attenuated once controlling for collective efficacy, though the association is still statistically significant. As we posited earlier, negative cultural frames toward the law deter neighborhood residents from collectively working to control crime. Accordingly, legal cynicism operates both directly and indirectly through collective efficacy to affect the likelihood of neighborhood violence.

To account for the possible confounding effects of prior homicide, model 6 includes a control for the average yearly homicide rate from 1991 to 1993. It could be the case that residents in neighborhoods with high prior levels of violence become quite cynical. As we saw in table 1, prior homicide is positively related to legal cynicism (.488;  $p < .001$ ). In model 6 of table 3, we find that prior homicide is a significant predictor of the rate from 1996 to 1998, yet the association between legal cynicism and homicide remains virtually the same when controlling for prior homicide. In sum, we find that the mean level of legal cynicism is positively associated with neighborhood rates of homicide, and this relationship holds when accounting for neighborhood structural conditions, social-interactional mechanisms, and the confounding effects of prior violence. Values—in this case, related to a tolerance of violence and deviance—have little bearing on neighborhood violence.

### *The Persistence of Violence*

The 1990s were marked by an unprecedented decline in violence in major U.S. cities, yet declines were not uniform across city neighborhoods (see,

<sup>22</sup> Our measure of dispersion is estimated from the same three-level regression model used to produce the scale for the mean level of legal cynicism. Postestimation, we compute the residual standard deviation in legal cynicism for each neighborhood (see Raudenbush and Bryk 2002, pp. 219–22).

e.g., Weisburd et al. 2004; Papachristos et al. 2007; Braga, Papachristos, and Hureau 2010). To motivate our analysis of legal cynicism and the temporal changes in neighborhood violence, we chart the geographic distribution of homicide changes across Chicago. Figure 3 presents a map of homicide residuals representing the neighborhood change in homicide from the early 1990s (1991–93) to the early 2000s (2000–2002), where the residuals are grouped into quartiles. The 1st quartile represents neighborhoods where homicide declined the most during the 1990s, while the 4th quartile depicts neighborhoods where homicide stayed roughly the same or even increased over the course of the decade despite the fact that homicide declined drastically citywide.

The neighborhoods depicted in the map inset comprise the Grand Boulevard and Douglas community areas of Chicago. This area of Chicago is more commonly known as Bronzeville and is at heart of the “Black Metropolis” so vividly described in the seminal work of Drake and Cayton (1945). The promise of prosperity, employment, and a better way of life brought substantial numbers of black residents from the South to this part of Chicago during the first part of the 20th century. Yet starting in the 1940s, Bronzeville began a long spiral of decline; segregation, institutional racism, the development of high-density public housing, black middle-class flight, and the decline in manufacturing in the Midwest all contributed to the demise of this historic neighborhood (Hirsch 1983; Wilson 1987; Hyra 2008). Violence, drug use, and crushing poverty all became commonplace. Yet after decades of economic and physical decline, Bronzeville began gentrifying near the turn of the twenty-first century (Hyra 2008). This recent period has been marked by rising home values and substantial increases in income and home ownership.<sup>23</sup>

Despite drastic changes in the 1990s and early 2000s to this historic area of Chicago, Bronzeville still had unexpectedly high homicide rates. In fact, in the four full subsections of Bronzeville depicted in the map inset, homicide increased from an average rate of 59.5 homicides per 100,000 residents in the early 1990s to a rate of 94.6 in the early 2000s.

<sup>23</sup> In Douglas, the median home value grew from \$164,472 in 1990 (year 2000 dollars) to \$208,449 in 2000, while in Grand Boulevard, home values rose from \$81,312 in 1990 (year 2000 dollars) to \$179,849 (Chicago Fact Book Consortium 1995; North-eastern Illinois Planning Commission 2002). From 1990 to 2000, the percentage of owner-occupied housing units increased from 5.5% to 12.5% in Douglas, and from 8.2% to 13.5% in Grand Boulevard. From 1990 to 2000, median family income increased from \$13,962 (year 2000 dollars) to \$25,720 in Douglas, and from \$10,126 (year 2000 dollars) to \$18,159 in Grand Boulevard. However, the socioeconomic gains of the 1990s and the increase in home ownership may be fleeting. New research reveals that Bronzeville has been particularly hard hit by the home foreclosure crisis occurring from 2007 to 2009 (Kirk and Hyra 2010). The extreme concentration of foreclosures in Bronzeville may reverse whatever socioeconomic gains coincided with gentrification.

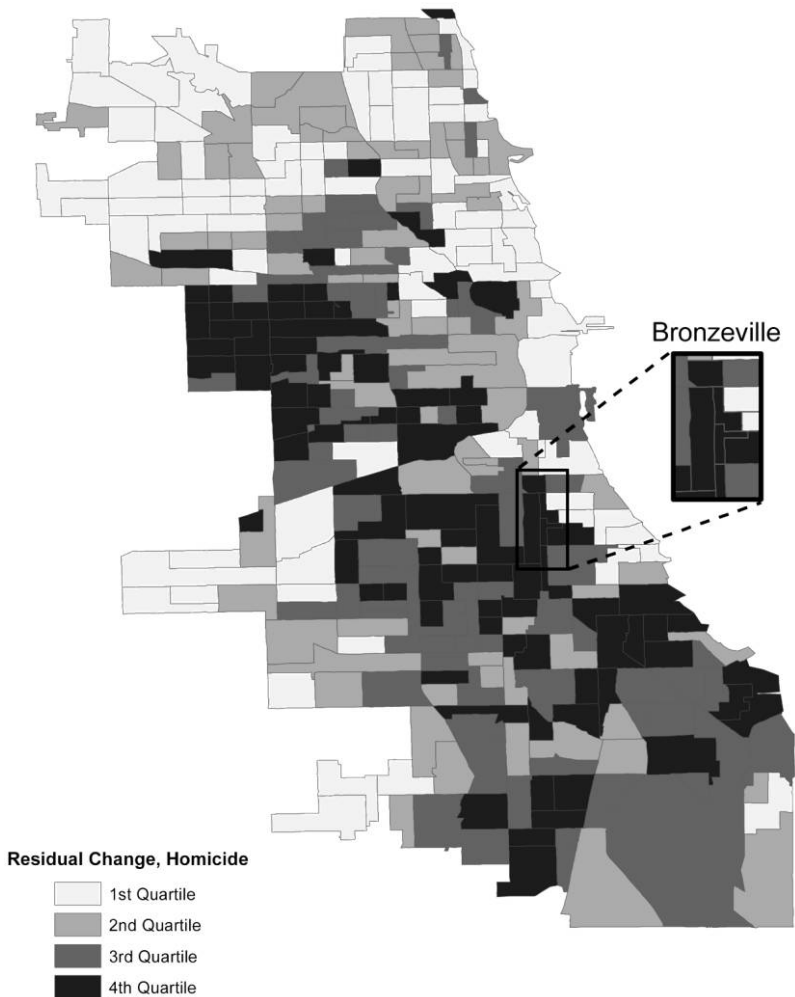


FIG. 3.—Residual change in homicide by quartiles, Chicago (1991–93 to 2000–2002)

We argue that legal cynicism, at least in part, explains why such gentrifying neighborhoods had increases in homicide. These neighborhoods are characterized by some of the highest levels of legal cynicism relative to anywhere in the city, which likely contributes to the persistence of high homicide rates even in the face of structural and compositional change. We now turn to tests of this argument in table 4.

Table 4 presents models of the change in homicide from the early 1990s (1991–93 yearly average rate) to the early 2000s (2000–2002). As noted

## Neighborhood Cultural Mechanisms

TABLE 4  
RESIDUAL CHANGE IN HOMICIDE (1991–93 TO 2000–2002),  
CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTERS

	<i>b</i>	$\beta$
Intercept .....	.439 (.332)	
Spatial lag .....	.330 *** (.066)	.330
Concentrated poverty .....	-.022 (.030)	-.089
Resid. change conc. poverty (1990–2000)	-.122 ** (.049)	-.140
Immigrant conc. ....	-.242 * (.130)	-.146
Resid. change immig. conc. (1990–2000)	-.469 * (.212)	-.118
Residential stability .....	.010 (.019)	.041
Resid. change res. stability (1990–2000)	.021 (.038)	.028
Proportion youth .....	.484 * (.291)	.171
Resid change prop. youth (1990–2000)	1.180 ** (.436)	.184
Tolerance of deviance .....	-.015 (.125)	-.007
Collective efficacy .....	-.120 * (.073)	-.122
Legal cynicism (mean) .....	.057 * (.030)	.141
Legal cynicism 03(variance) .....	-.520 (.328)	-.072

NOTE.—*N* = 342 (excludes O'Hare Airport). Numbers in parentheses are SEs.

\* *P* < .05.

\*\* *P* < .01.

\*\*\* *P* < .001 (one-tailed test).

previously, the residual change score is interpreted as the unexpected change in homicide, where residuals are positive when homicide dropped less than expected, and residuals are negative when homicide declined more than expected.

In table 4, we see that tolerance of deviance is unrelated to the change in homicide. As hypothesized, we find that legal cynicism is positively and significantly associated with the unexpected persistence in homicide in Chicago neighborhoods, even after accounting for neighborhood structural changes from 1990 to 2000. Legal cynicism, at least partly, accounts for why rates of homicide remained stable in some neighborhoods such

as Bronzeville, despite structural changes and a citywide decline in homicide.

To conclude our analysis, in figure 4 we use the standardized coefficients from table 4 to compare the effects of concentrated poverty, proportion youth, tolerance of deviance, collective efficacy, and legal cynicism on the persistence of homicide. Through this analysis, we seek to determine which among these correlates of homicide are crucial for understanding why homicide persists in some neighborhoods over time. The bars displayed in this chart represent the association between homicide in a focal neighborhood (in terms of standard deviations) and each respective measure in the focal neighborhood.<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, the proportion of youths in a neighborhood in 1990 strongly predicts the persistence of homicide from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. Homicide statistics show that young adults (ages 18–24) have the highest victimization and offending rates by a large margin (Fox and Zawitz 1999, 2004). Thus, if we assume that neighborhoods with high proportions of youths (under 18) in 1990 subsequently had high proportions of young adults (18–24) over the course of the ensuing decade, then such neighborhoods would be exposed to heightened risks of homicide victimization and offending because of the age distribution of the neighborhood population.

Most crucial for our core arguments, figure 4 reveals quite vividly the importance of legal cynicism for explaining the persistence of neighborhood violence. Even more so than collective efficacy, legal cynicism explains why rates of homicide remained stable in some Chicago neighborhoods (e.g., Bronzeville) during the 1990s when homicide declined dramatically citywide.

## DISCUSSION

The study of neighborhood effects has become a cottage industry over the past two decades, and much has been learned about the neighborhood-level social-interactional mechanisms that influence violence and other social outcomes (Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). Outside of a few noteworthy examples, however, quantitative studies of neighborhood effects have paid relatively little attention to cultural mechanisms

<sup>24</sup> Recall that we model homicide as a spatial multiplier process (see eq. [5]). For ease of presentation, in figure 4, we only present results of the relationship between homicide and each variable in a focal neighborhood, yet the spatial lag effect revealed in table 4 indicates that homicide is also the product of these correlates in adjacent neighborhoods. To show the full cumulative effect of legal cynicism, we would need to include the effects of cynicism in first-order neighborhoods as well as second order, third order, and so on.

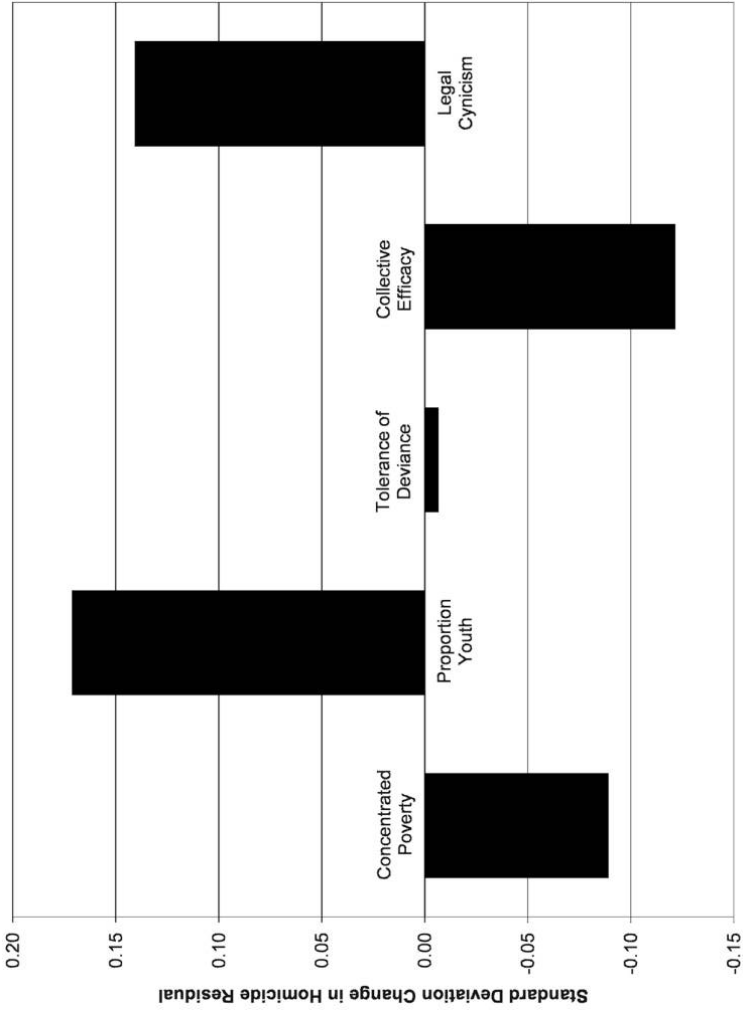


FIG. 4.—Standard deviation change in homicide per standard deviation change in neighborhood characteristics in the focal neighborhood

in comparison to the usual suspects such as economic disadvantage and social capital. While structural and social-interactional factors are crucial for understanding neighborhood violence, cultural mechanisms are vital for understanding why neighborhood conditions such as disadvantage are associated with violence (i.e., because of adaptation) and for understanding why violence and other neighborhood-based outcomes may persist even as neighborhoods change structurally.

There are very good reasons why the recent resurgence of neighborhood effects studies has generally neglected the role of culture. In particular, for too long, academia conceived of culture as values despite an accumulating volume of ethnographic research that demonstrates that values become attenuated in the face of societal structural conditions, and play but a minimal role in guiding individual action. Thus, in order to explore the role of culture as a determinant of neighborhood violence, the theoretical challenge is to reorient discussions away from the “culture in values” framework and toward a more nuanced understanding of cultural mechanisms. Accordingly, this study examines the consequences of one particular cultural mechanism—legal cynicism. Legal cynicism is a cultural frame that structures the way residents perceive the legitimacy of the law, and the utility of the law as a guide for behavior.

In regards to our empirical objectives, the findings presented in this article reveal (a) individual-level perceptions of legal cynicism vary as a function of neighborhood conditions such as concentrated poverty and residential stability (hypothesis 1), (b) that homicide is unrelated to resident attitudes toward deviance and violence (hypothesis 2a), (c) that neighborhood rates of homicide are positively associated with legal cynicism net of structural and social factors (hypothesis 2b), and (d) that legal cynicism explains the unexpected (residual) change in homicide in Chicago from the early 1990s to early 2000s (hypothesis 3). We assert that when the law is perceived to be unavailable—for example, when calling the police is not a viable option to remedy one’s problems—individuals may instead resolve their grievances by their own means, which may include violence (Black 1983). In this sense, cultural frames have a constraining influence; cynicism constrains choice if individuals presume that the law is unavailable or unresponsive to their needs, thus pushing individuals to engage in their own brand of social control.

While our results provide valuable information about the importance of considering both cultural and social mechanisms when examining neighborhood violence, study limitations provide ample opportunities for future research. For one, we assess whether legal cynicism explains the persistence of homicide in certain neighborhoods over time and find the legal cynicism does explain the residual change in homicide. In our view, this finding gives credibility to the argument that culture is more than a



mere adaptation to structural circumstances—culture exerts an independent causal force on neighborhood rates of behavior. Yet, while we assessed whether the influence of legal cynicism explains the persistence of homicide, we did not assess whether neighborhood legal cynicism itself persists as neighborhood structural conditions are changing. In our view, legal cynicism is not static, but it may persist for some time—that is, a cultural lag—even if the factors that led to its promotion somehow vanish. We intend to take up this issue of cultural lag in future research. Thus, our present findings provide an initial test of what arguably should be modeled as a dynamic relation between social-structural conditions, cultural mechanisms, and violence.

Urban ethnographies have for decades revealed the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of law-abiding beliefs and law-violating behaviors in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Our findings suggest that cultural frames such as legal cynicism go a long way toward explaining this paradox. Legal cynicism emerges not as some monolithic set of values but as an adaptation to neighborhood structural conditions and interactions between neighborhood residents and the law, especially the police. Once emerged, cynical perceptions of the law become solidified through social interaction, whereby neighborhood residents develop a shared meaning of the behavior of the law. In addition to supporting much of the findings of urban ethnography, our quantification of legal cynicism further allows us to compare and contrast the impact of such cultural frames and more traditional structural determinants of neighborhood violence. The strong effect of legal cynicism, net of structural conditions and neighborhood social processes, suggests that “neighborhood effects” research needs to consider both social-structural and cultural mechanisms in order to fully understand the bases of neighborhood rates of homicide. More traditional structural analyses of neighborhood behavior would do well to bring culture back into deeper theoretical and empirical consideration.

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