Abstract

In this study the factors contributing to crime perceptions and its effects on differing crime perceptions were explored in the college-town of Isla Vista (I.V.) looking at the responses of college-students residing in the area (n=76). Participants completed a survey that asked questions getting at information dealing with demographics, I.V. social behavior, experiences with crime, and crime perceptions itself. Results showed that only the respondent’s gender, social habits (party lifestyle), and experiences with crime affected their perceptions. From these factors, it was concluded that males, heavy partyers, and those personally affected by crime (especially violent crime) hold higher perceptions than their counterparts. The data ultimately suggested that those most exposed and most vulnerable to crime would view it more highly.

Introduction

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Crime and crime perceptions related to college-campuses and the residential areas surrounding them are different from regular crime and its perceptions because a key component is existent that is not always present in normal neighborhoods: the party lifestyle. In 1990 the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act and the subsequent Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, better known as the Clery Act, were passed to address these issues (Baker & Boland, 2011). These regulations require colleges and universities to provide statistics annually regarding on-campus crimes. For UCSB, a well-known “party school” the 2007-2009 report revealed that a majority of the crimes committed and citations given were alcohol and drug related, with offenders ranging in the 1000s. Following these offenses were thefts, burglaries, and then forcible sex offenses or assaults. Karen Weiss performed a study on this topic and she presented it in the form of a book titled Party School: Crime, Camps, Community. She discusses the “party subculture” of college-campuses that partake in extreme partying and how this normalized behavior is the cause to various negative consequences. Weiss analyzed both crime frequency related to crime victimization and students’ party routines using data from the Campus Crime Victimization Survey (CCVS), a self-report survey, and Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), which included police-known cases. Her data revealed that about half of the students experienced crime in their four years, with a majority involving intoxicated crimes. With the college “party subculture,” there exist unique factors that greatly contribute to differing crime perceptions.

Isla Vista (I.V.) is a small college-town located in the Santa Barbara County that includes about 23,000 inhabitants (Onboard Informatics, 2012-2013). These inhabitants are comprised of an ethnically diverse group with a large majority of young residents exhibiting a median age of 20.7 years (Onboard Informatics, 2012-2013). Most of the people living in Isla Vista are students from UCSB or SBCC, but there are exists single adult residents and Hispanic families residing in the college-town as well. Isla Vista has acquired a notorious reputation as one of the wildest party towns in the U.S. The party-subculture coupled with the large majority of youth and poverty in the area leads itself to also be one of the more dangerous places to live. According to Area Vibes (2010-2013), the estimated chance of being a victim of a crime in Isla Vista is 1 in 24. One article from the *Santa Barbara Independent* even claimed that Isla Vista is “the most dangerous neighborhood in the entire nation for property crime… based on FBI crime data and a proprietary computer model, you have about a one-in-one chance of being the victim of a property crime” (Neushul, 2010). The article argues that this is primarily due to the overwhelmingly large population of partyers in the area who do not take precautions in protecting themselves or their valuables.

*The Present Study*

The present topic was chosen because many students, faculty, and staff came to notice an increase in the prevalence of more violent crimes in Isla Vista. The purpose of this study was to further understandings and come to a finer conclusion as to what factors most contribute to the differing perceptions of crime in Isla Vista. The hypothesis was as follows: the factors that contribute most differing perceptions of crime would be the respondents’ residency, year enrolled, gender, their social habits (such as social life and partying), and whether or not respondents have been affected by crime. How these factors affect crime perceptions itself was also examined in the study. It was also hypothesized that students living in safer regions, the underclassmen, females, those who partake in heavier partying, and those personally affected by crime (especially violent crime) would perceive the crime in the Isla Vista area to be high. Students living in the danger zones, the upperclassmen, males, those who partake in light partying, and those not personally affected by crime would view the rate to be average or even low. There have been plenty of studies dealing with crime itself and the perceptions of crime, but much fewer on how a college-town with a “party subculture” ingrained in its community views crime. It was interesting to see whether these intensifying perceptions held true, and if this study could lead to implications in better safeguarding the Isla Vista community.

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Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through the codification and categorization of the questions in the survey. Survey questions were classified by the subject, or dimension, they primarily pertain to. These dimensions were demographics, security (victimization, police efficacy), social habits (party behavior and precautions), and location. Once this was accomplished the data, the responses, was tabulated and tallied in order to discern which factors contributed most to students’ crime perceptions of Isla Vista. Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations were used in the study to achieve this. The open-ended answers the respondents provided were also reviewed and then relative comparisons were performed with the other respondents.

Results

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Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations were used to analyze the data from the survey. Individual independent variables were taken from the sample whole. They then were compared with the dependent variable to get at the associations between them. In order to measure the dependent variable a few questions asked for the respondents’ opinions dealing with crime rate, police effectiveness, crime trends, and implications. Crime perception was primarily measured by responses to the question: “Please rate what you feel the level of crime is in your community.” Respondents were asked to rate it, choosing from five options ranging from “very low” to “very high” (only the three levels will be shown in the tables so they can be read more easily). Respondents were also asked to describe the crime trend. They could have chosen from the answers “it increased,” “it decreased,” or “not sure.” Another question asked respondents to rate police effectiveness on a *likert* scale (1-low, 5-high) and whether they felt more enforcement was needed. These questions provided facilitating information on how respondents base their perceptions.

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1. *Social Habits*

**Table** **4**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Social Life**  **(n= # of respondents)** | **Perceived Crime Rate Responses (%)** | | | | |
|  | **very low** | **low** | **avg** | **high** | **very high** |
| Everyday partyer  (n=4) | 0 | 0 | 25 | 0 | 75 |
| Weekend partyer  (n=39) | 5.1 | 12.8 | 33.3 | 48.7 | 0 |
| Special Occasion Partyer  (n=11) | 0 | 27.3 | 45.5 | 27.3 | 0 |

In testing how social habits affect crime perceptions the party subculture became a primary focus. Much of the social life in I.V. involves substance abuse. According to the survey 93.2% of the social events the respondents attended either sometimes involved substance abuse or did all the time. Three different groups exhibiting different types of social habits were pulled from the sample: “Everyday partyer,” “Weekend partyer,” and “Special Occasion partyer.” These sample groups present the two varying social extremes and the most common social habit, partying during the weekend. This time the outside portions of the table were shown, the “very low” and “very high” response options. Everyday partyers believed the rate to be very high, weekend partyers acknowledged the rate as being high, and special occasion partyers only saw it as being average. It is important to note that an equal portion of responses from special occasion partyers believed it to be “low” (27.3%) and “high” (27.3%) as well. When special occasion partyers were asked to describe the crime trend a majority (36.4%) marked unsure. They are not exposed to as much crime as everyday partyers and weekend partyers lead themselves to be. The data concludes that heavy partying leads to higher crime perception rates than those who party less. The hypothesis is supported by the data.

As expected everyday partyers were most victim to violent crimes and special occasion partyers were the least (see Appendix VI). 75% of everyday partyers claimed they were victims of violent crimes. Only 36.4% of special occasion partyers claimed they were victims, an overwhelming amount (63.7%) stated that they have never been victimized. Exposure to crime and its relation to crime perceptions will be further explained in the next section dealing with crime experiences.

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Discussion/Conclusion

This section will provide possible explanations as to why the results manifested as they did.

*1. Hypothesis Part 1: Factors contributing to crime perceptions*

According to the data the first hypothesis was fully supported. All of the independent variables analyzed in the study contribute to crime perceptions in I.V. This is evidenced by the noticeable differences the sample groups exhibited when asked to rate crime in the I.V. community. The sample groups held different perceptions of its counterpart part groups. For example, males viewed crime as being high, whereas females saw it as average. The data percentages yielded adverse responses of the sample groups. Possible reasons as to why different results were collected will be discussed further in the section regarding the second portion of the hypothesis. Irregularities with the sample sizes, however, deemed the results of two sample groups inconclusive. The results concerning the respondents’ current residencies and year enrolled needed to be disregarded. Therefore, it can only be concluded that gender, social habits, and experiences with crime contribute to crime perceptions.

*2. Hypothesis Part 2: Factors effects on crime perceptions*

The second part of the hypothesis concerning the independent variables’ effects on crime perception was disproven on various bases but true in a few others. From the findings it can be concluded that those students that are considered more exposed to crime and more vulnerable to crime would view it more seriously and recognize that it is a problem in their community. These would be the students living in I.V. danger zones, males, heavy partyers, and those who have previously experienced crime. The portions of the hypothesis that were disproven were so because they were formulated with the idea that such normalized behavior would be brushed off and seen less seriously. As evidenced from the data and the analysis it is just the opposite. Respondents accustomed to crime actually acknowledge the seriousness of it and it being an issue. The hypothesis was supported only in how social habits and experiences with crime affect perceptions. This makes sense because these variables are closely correlated with one another.

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*2.4. Social habits*

This portion of the hypothesis was supported by the data. It was presumed that those who party most would view crime in I.V. to be high. Everyday partyers believed the rate to be very high, weekend partyers acknowledged the rate as being high, and special occasion partyers only saw it as being average. It is important to note that a majority (36.4%) of special occasion partyers marked unsure. These people are not very much involved in the typical I.V. social life, and cannot make accurate decisions as to the I.V. crime rate. Since alcohol and substance abuse exposes everyday partyers to more situations where they can be affected by crime, it makes sense that they viewed it “very high.” Those who party more tend to take fewer precautions about their safety and this leads into the variable dealing with crime experiences.

*4. Implications*

This study can provide various implications as to what can be done with the issue of crime in I.V. For one thing students ought to take much more precautionary measures when in I.V. As can be seen in the table (see Appendix VIII & IX), victimization is directly associated with precautions. Those who took precautions were less likely to be victims. Open-ended questions from respondents in the danger zones and safe zones were analyzed to get at possible implications. According to the answers from both samples the highest contributor to crime in I.V. is alcohol consumption. If there were tighter regulations on this commodity crime rates would be expected to decrease. Many respondents from both categories aired their negative attitudes towards police. This is evidenced in the open-ended questions as well as the table dealing with police effectiveness (see **Chart 1**). The I.V. police enforcers are not viewed as very effective, and some even stated that they contribute to various issues as well. Though every sample asserted that they did not want an increase in enforcement, maybe a change in how their methods and practices are applied should be reexamined.