Guest editorial: Safer communities, the environment and social justice: introduction to Special Issue

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Introduction

There is a long tradition of community focused scholarship in the discipline of criminology (e.g. Bursik and Webb, 1982; Sampson and Groves, 1989; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Tannenbaum, 1938; Taylor, 1995; Walklate, 1998). This is not surprising since the community plays a central role in crime reduction and crime prevention efforts. However, what is often missing from many criminological studies of the community are ways crime and the community are related to both social justice and the natural environment (except, see Pellow, 2004; Prelog, 2016; Stretesky *et al.*, 2018; Taylor and Shumaker, 1990). The goal of this special issue is to encourage the expansion and scope of criminology to be more inclusive of both social justice and the natural environment. Before describing the contributions of the papers that make up this special issue we briefly consider the definition of community, the role of social justice, and the importance of the natural environment.

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Definition of community

Most social science scholars would agree that there are differing and sometimes contested operationalisations of the concept, "community" (Crow and Mah, 2012). As a result, what constitutes a community is difficult to precisely define as it means different things to different people, in different contexts. From our point of view, criminologists often use the concept of community to describe (1) geographically bounded area or physical space and/or (2) a web of kinship, social and cultural relations to which people perceive they belong. While both types of studies are important, we suggest that a sense of dependence and belonging is critical to the concept of community (see McMillan, 1996). This feeling of belonging could apply to the idea of imagined communities as described in the work of Anderson (1983) on modern nationalism, where communities are "imagined" in that the members are dispersed and most members never meet each other. In particular this more contemporary conceptualisation suggests that communities provide important values and norms and create a sense of identity. As a result of Anderson's work, the concept of community might even be expanded to include interest-based associations that join together over common passions or grievances (Manifold, 2012). As such community can play an important role in the creating and desistence of crime and/or the promotion of social justice.

An emphasis on social justice

Regardless of the definition of community, one negative aspect of a community is that it can produce differential experiences among its members according to existing social

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inequalities such as those produced by class, age, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity (among others). Understanding how these hierarchies operate within communities to influence issues of crime and justice are therefore an essential component of much criminological research. As a result, we suggest that community development must include "social justice" as an integrative component that ensures equitable opportunities and rights for all community members (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Social justice within and for communities can only be accomplished when values and moral codes of the community being built emphasise the creation of an equitable, safe and secure environment for everyone. Meeting the goals of an equitable, safe and secure environment are entangled with a multitude of factors, one of which is the natural environment.

Considering the natural environment

As we previously noted, criminologists have begun to address the ways the natural environment intersects with social life and communities. But there is more to be done. The role of the natural environment in producing crime and social injustice is an area criminologists (and sociologists) can no longer ignore as there is growing evidence of the way changes in the natural environment change communities and influence crime social justice. In particular, planetary boundaries (e.g. Biermann and Kim, 2020), biosphere disintegration and changes and the social impacts on humans and human wellbeing (e.g. Folke *et al.*, 2021) will all shape the ways people experience their quality of life within their community. And, importantly, the human impacts on the ecosystem are strongly connected to social inequalities (King and Harrington, 2018). From forced migration, food insecurity, disruption of electricity supplies and increased conflict, researchers have examined how humans and nature interact, and how external forces and institutions use nature as a site for both social justice and injustices. Moreover, criminologists have started to examine how important ties between humans and the environment and how engagement with the natural world enhances social cohesion and produces safer communities (e.g. Arbuthnott, 2023). Given this broad, all-encompassing area of research, this special issue aims to showcase the diversity and interdisciplinary nature of criminology and social justice studies, bringing together authors working in criminology and other social science disciplines that explore the intersection of the environment, communities, and social justice.

Papers in this special issue

Rebecca Oswald considers how exposure to the natural environment can promote desistance amongst persistent offenders. Horticultural interventions and sustainability programmes adopted by criminal justice related systems are used because they can provide supposed healing and rehabilitative qualities (e.g. Delsesto, 2022). Moreover, those engaged in meaningful employment during and post-incarceration are more likely to desist from offending. Therefore, training and vocational roles in environmentally related employment (e.g. flood mitigation programmes) that work with young offenders provide opportunities for rebuilding community attachment, decreasing the likelihood of serious offending or reoffending altogether (Long *et al.*, 2019). Drawing on data from interviews and participant observation, Oswald highlights that the natural environment can provide a "neutral ground" for young people, where they can build positive relationships, learn valuable skills, and reconnect with the world outside of the high-pressure, conflict-driven spaces they typically occupy. The author's insights illuminate the possibilities of a natural environment, reintegration and building safer communities.

While green spaces and the environment can play a meaningful role in reducing reoffending, the misuse of and failures to promote environmental safety and protection from hazards for both offenders and those that live close to correctional facilities can create unsafe communities when correctional facilities are situated near hazardous environments, (e.g. Bradshaw, 2018; Pellow, 2021) as well exposure to environmental justice as "criminal/

harmful/state sanctioned offences and a form of ecological violence" (e.g. Kojola and Pellow, 2021). Experiences of environmental injustice differ by race (e.g. Hendricks and Van Zandt, 2021), gender (e.g. MacGregor, 2020), sexuality (e.g. Goldsmith and Bell, 2022), intersectionally (e.g. Di Chiro, 2020) and the contributions from Fedgedal and Lynch, Sibley *et al.* and Estes *et al.* in this special issue provide insight into these concerns and broader environmental justice issues.

Michelle Estes *et al.* provide an illuminating discussion on correctional facilities, incarceration and exposure to environmental harms. Using a case study approach of correctional facilities across the USA, the authors conclude that carceral spaces observed in the US are non-therapeutic and cause perpetual harm for those incarcerated and employed in those facilities. These people are exposed to environmental harms which can cause long term health problems and continue to punish incarcerated people well beyond their sentence. They conclude that safer communities require more than reducing crime and preventing criminal victimization, they also must promote environmental safety and protection from hazards that cause sickness and disease.

Averi Fedegal and Michael Lynch's case study of Native American victimization and resistance to uranium mining in the Northwest and Northern Plains highlights the capitalism-genocide nexus to explain the ways Native Americans have historically and continue to be exposed to ecological violence. Applying literature on settler colonialism, toxic colonialism and treadmill of production, their case study demonstrates that the social, economic and political inequalities associated with the capitalist power structure that have produced unjust living conditions for many Native Americans have resulted in irreparable destruction of tribal lands and innumerable health disparities. Importantly, we learn from this article that building safer communities requires re-exploring and examining alternate ways of sustainable development and land use reimagined outside of existing capitalist power structures.

Martha Sibley *et al.*'s contribution considers the risk-landscape of extreme and severe weather events and its impact on communities. Their study, using a random sample of 2,687 Oklahoma, USA, adults, explores how race impacts citizens' risk perceptions of global climate change, concerns with water and energy infrastructure, environmental justice and trust in institutions such as local state and policy makers, elected officials and private companies, which interact with water, land use, and infrastructure central to human life. In other words, how does race, along with other variables, relate to concern for the natural environment and many of the perceived ingredients of safer communities, such as trust in institutions. Interestingly, education, income and political ideology are important predictors of perceptions of institutional trust and environmental justice.

The final paper in this special issue focuses on the importance of food security, social justice and community safety. As Sumner (2011, p. 63) notes, "[w]hile food represents many things to many people, it has always been a life good or a means of life—that which sustains life". In fact, without food security, individuals and communities are negatively affected, with heightened levels of mortality and health impacts (e.g. Banerjee *et al.*, 2021), mental distress and increases in economic and social problems (see also Murrell and Jones, 2020). In this special issue, Julie Schweitzer *et al.*, provide readers with an understanding of how people in stigmatized spaces confront and resist this stigma. These authors highlight how people access food when there are food system limitations, linking micro and meso dimensions of food access. Furthermore, they highlight that food assistance programme users operate in a space in which people may be stigmatized. Yet, at the same time, these spaces allow individuals and communities to construct dignity via, for instance, engaging in dignity work that enhances self-esteem such as volunteering and taking pride in the practice. Confronting and resisting these stigmatized places then builds and enhances social justice and as a consequence promote safer communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this special issue celebrates (and extends) the diversity of criminological and social science research that incorporates the complex set of relationships between the community, natural environment and social justice. These papers are important in that they demonstrate the myriad ways academics can continue to contribute to debates and policies that foster safer communities in ways that ultimately tackle social problems where people work, live and play.

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