



The Religious Institutional Base and Violent Crime in Rural Areas

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Summary

In Lee's *The Religious Institutional Base and Violent Crime in Rural Areas* (2006) a theoretical framework based on The Moral Communities Thesis, The Conservative Protestant Thesis, and The Civic Engagement Thesis, is used to formulate five hypotheses for the current study (1) Violent crime rates should be lower where overall rates of religious adherence are higher. (2) Rates of violence should be higher where conservative Protestants are in greater supply. (3) Counties with a larger number of civically engaged religious adherents should be associated with lower rates of violence. (4) Crime rates are expected to be lower where there are more churches per capita. (5) The more religious regions of the U.S. should all have more pronounced benefits from adherence rates and churches per capita, while the Midwest and Northeast should experience a stronger benefit from civically engaged denominations because of their concentration in these regions, and the negative effects of conservative Protestantism should be isolated mainly to the South. Results from the study revealed evidence that supported all 5 of the research questions that Lee sought to investigate further.

Methods

The sample for the current study included 902 counties with at least 2,000 people but less than 25,000 people that averaged a UCR reporting rate of at least 90% between the years 2000 and 2002. The prevalence of violent crime was measured with a violent crime index, calculated using the average of the summed frequencies of homicide, robbery, and aggravated assault for 2000-2002, denominated by the 2000 population size for each county and standardized per 100,000 people. The data for the independent variable was taken from the Religious Congregations and Church Membership in the United States which came from the 2000 Census of Churches that is available through the Glenmary Institute. The interval-level nature of the violent crime rate allowed for ordinary least squares regression analysis to be used as the hypothesis testing analytical tool for the current study. The different models ran in Lee's study analyzed the effect of churches per 1,000 people on the rate of violent crime while controlling for numerous other variables such as the percentage of the county that is under the poverty line and the percentage of household that have kids that are headed by women.

Results

Multivariate regression analyses revealed a negative correlation between adherence rate and the violent crime rate (VCR). Furthermore, it was found that Southern counties displayed a statistically significant positive relationship between conservative Protestantism and the VCR. Additionally, the civically engaged adherents measure was significantly negatively correlated with the VCR. Finally, the main finding showed a statistically significant negative correlation between churches per capita and the VCR. Essentially, this revealed that violent crime rates were lower where there were more churches per capita.

Implications

Results in this study allow for a better understanding of how the religious institutional base in rural counties across different regions of the United States influences the violent crime rate. In addition, it adds to a thin literature base revolving around macro-level relationships between religion and crime and opens the door for further research to be done on the protective effect that religious institutions might have in communities.

For more information, see Lee, M. R. (2006). The religious institutional base and violent crime in rural areas. *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, 45(3), 309-324. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2006.00309.x.