Race, Neighborhood Danger, and Coping Strategies Among Female Probationers and Parolees

Jennifer E. Cobbina¹, Merry Morash¹, Deborah A. Kashy², and Sandi W. Smith³

Abstract
Research suggests that individuals on probation and parole typically reside in impoverished neighborhoods affected by multiple forms of socioeconomic disadvantage. These neighborhoods are often extremely segregated, resulting in the concentration of deleterious effects, including crime, on communities of color, especially African Americans. We build on previous research by examining how Black and White female offenders negotiate neighborhood crime in distressed communities. Using a mixed-methods approach, our findings suggest that perceptions of neighborhood safety, crime, and strategies to avoid offending are different for Black and White women and related to neighborhood context. We propose that future research should investigate long-term outcomes of the use of particular strategies to address neighborhood crime.

Keywords
female offender, race, neighborhood disadvantage, probation, parole

Research reveals that individuals on probation and parole typically reside in impoverished neighborhoods that are affected by multiple forms of socioeconomic disadvantage, including unemployment, poverty, and crime (Dodge & Progrebin, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Pew Center on the States, 2009; Richie, 2001). These neighborhoods

¹ School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA
² Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA
³ Department of Communication, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jennifer E. Cobbina, School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University, 655 Auditorium Road, 560 Baker Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA.
Email: cobbina@msu.edu
are often extremely segregated and have high levels of crime, resulting in the concentration of deleterious effects on communities of color, especially African American offenders. Disorganized neighborhoods may increase female offenders’ likelihood of recidivating by placing them in close proximity to criminogenic peers and opportunities for returning to illicit behavior. Some research suggests that females, particularly African Americans, even resort to defensive violent actions to reduce their risk of victimization in disorganized communities (Brunson & Stewart, 2006; Jones, 2004; Ness, 2004). Furthermore, forging prosocial ties is important to avoiding recidivism (Sampson & Laub, 1993); yet, disorganized neighborhoods may be less than ideal settings for forming such ties.

Despite evidence that social disorganization promotes criminality, important gaps remain in our understanding of female offenders supervised in disorganized communities. First, despite considerable evidence of the concentration of minorities in disadvantaged communities, it is not clear whether, within the population of offenders, Black women tend to live in different types of neighborhoods than White women and whether Black and White offenders perceive their neighborhoods as differentially affected by crime. If nationwide racial differences in neighborhood context are reproduced within probation and parole populations, Black women may face unique challenges in avoiding recidivism. Alternatively, poverty and other disadvantages shared by female offenders may result in women experiencing similar challenges of negative community conditions regardless of their race. Second, little is known about women’s strategies for managing in disorganized communities while trying to successfully complete probation or parole supervision. This gap in knowledge grows out of a common failure to recognize individuals as not only influenced by their environment but also as actively trying to negotiate that environment so as to achieve their personal objectives (Morash, 2006). Third, surprisingly little is known about whether women’s perceptions of levels of neighborhood crime and safety or objective measures of social disorganization are related to their choice of strategies to manage in areas where crime is prevalent. In particular, it is important to determine whether strategies that women use to succeed despite negative community contexts facilitate or impede their access to networks that support avoiding recidivism. Responsive to the gaps in knowledge, our goal is to describe how female offenders understand and negotiate neighborhood crime, explore whether community context varies by women offenders’ racial group, and investigate how community context is related to women’s choice of strategies for avoiding criminal involvement. More generally, this study fills gaps in research by examining the neglected intersection of race, crime, and neighborhood context.

Two bodies of literature are relevant to our research. First, the scholarly literature has established the connection of disorganized community context to individual-level offending and recidivism. Second, research on residential segregation and concentrated disadvantage in minority communities serves as a basis for expecting Black offenders to experience especially negative neighborhood conditions. Thus, these bodies of literature are briefly reviewed next.
Literature Review

Neighborhood Crime and Recidivism

Evidence demonstrates that neighborhood context influences recidivism. Many female offenders who are supervised in the community are spatially proximate to criminally involved individuals in their former social network (Holtfreter, Reisig, & Morash, 2004). For example, Miller (1986) found that female street offending was primarily affected by neighborhood-based family relations. Moreover, as Miller found, social ties with criminal actors often intersected with women’s ties to family members and conventional actors, further shaping women’s decisions to either renew their involvement in crime or forge a conventional lifestyle.

For both adults and adolescents, there is considerable evidence that involvement with community-based criminal peer networks promotes reoffending (Hagan, 1993; Mennis & Harris, 2011; Visher & Travis, 2003). More specifically, adults released from prison are most likely to be reincarcerated if they lived in areas where other offenders recidivate at a high rate (Stahler et al., 2013). Differential association and differential reinforcement theory (Akers, 1985, 1996) emphasize that association with deviant peers promotes illegal behavior and then provides opportunity to learn how to obtain rewards and avoid negative consequences. This explanation provides a theoretical rationale for expecting that interaction and learning from deviant peers, who may be concentrated in certain communities, promote illegal behavior through social learning.

Residential Segregation and Concentrated Disadvantage in Black Neighborhoods

Considerable research has shown that Blacks are most likely to be concentrated in areas of extreme disadvantage and thus in areas with criminal activity. Despite increased racial and ethnic diversity, U.S. neighborhoods continue to be racially segregated, and African Americans live in areas with the most concentrated disadvantage (Wilson, 1996). The 2010 U.S. Census reveals that the average African American who lived in a metropolitan area resided in neighborhoods that were only 35% White and as much as 45% Black, while Whites lived in neighborhoods that were 75% White and only 8% Black (Logan & Stults, 2011). The most commonly used measure of Black–White segregation shows that in 2000, an average of 65% of metropolitan Blacks (or Whites) would have to move to a different neighborhood to achieve an even residential distribution (Logan, Stults, & Farley, 2004).

On the national level, the overall Black–White residential segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas has declined gradually over time from a high of 79% in 1970 to 59% in 2010 (Logan & Stults, 2011). However, continued segregation remains at the census tract level (Massey, Rothwell, & Domina, 2009), and much of the decline in racial segregation has occurred in metropolitan areas where few Blacks reside (Massey & Gross, 1991; Krivo & Kaufman, 1999). Large urban African American communities remain highly segregated, and they face extreme racial isolation (Massey & Fischer, 2010). Additionally, nonmetropolitan areas are increasingly segregated.
(Farrigan & Parker, 2012). In fact, Massey and Denton (1988) assert that African Americans often face conditions of hypersegregation in that they are more likely to experience unevenness (Blacks overrepresented or underrepresented in neighborhoods), isolation (Blacks rarely share neighborhoods with Whites), clustering (Blacks form one large enclave), concentration (Blacks are concentrated within a small, geographically compact area), and centralization (Blacks are settled in and around the urban center or along its periphery). Racial segregation has important consequences, as communities provide neighborhood residents with access (or lack of access) to a broad range of social and institutional resources. For instance, quality housing and schools, government services, political representation, and organizations, such as businesses, are generally connected to one’s neighborhood location. Yet, African Americans tend to be situated in communities where they experience fewer and weaker connections to political and economic actors as well as higher levels of racial isolation, social dislocation, unemployment, inequality, and discrimination than areas inhabited primarily by Whites (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1996). These structural characteristics result in concentrated disadvantage, making it difficult for residents to form strong social bonds around common values, and thereby weakening residents’ capacity for social control and leading to increased levels of crime (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

Consistent with patterns of residential segregation, many female offenders, especially African American women, reside in economically distressed and disorganized neighborhoods with limited social, political, and economic resources (Owen & Bloom, 1995; Richie, 2001). In examining the challenges incarcerated women face upon release from prison, Richie (2001) found that Black women concentrated in disenfranchised communities lack access to programs and services to address their underlying problems. As a result, women of color often feel marginalized within the context of an economically distressed community because of “structural racism, economic exploitation, [and] political disenfranchisement” (Richie, 2012, p. 18), which makes successful integration within the community difficult. Given their needs, female offenders’ vulnerability to neighborhood concentrated disadvantage, including the opportunity and incentive it creates for illegal behavior, is enhanced, which may explain in part the reason for high recidivism rates (see review of studies of recidivism by Stahler et al., 2013, p. 691).

What is absent from much research on women offenders is consideration of how race is organized and experienced in disadvantaged urban and nonmetropolitan communities. In particular, we know little about how race shapes perceptions of neighborhood crime. In addition, it is unclear whether the strategies women use to negotiate neighborhood dangers are tied to community context. This study brings the literature on neighborhood contexts, residential segregation, and women’s patterns of responding to negative community contexts together.

**Current Study**

The literature on social disorganization, neighborhood crime, and recidivism, as well as on racially based residential segregation that tends to locate Blacks in disadvantaged areas raises a number of questions about women offenders supervised in the community.
1. Is being African American related to women offenders’ perceptions of neighborhood safety, perceptions of illegal neighborhood activity, and objective indicators of social disorganization?

2. What strategies do women probationers and parolees use to avoid offending in neighborhoods viewed as unsafe or as having criminal activity?

3. Are neighborhood safety and crime indicators related to women’s choice of strategies for avoiding offending in negative neighborhood contexts?

Answering these research questions fills several gaps in the literature. For a large, contemporary sample of 402 women on probation and parole, the present study examines whether residential segregation and related restriction of Blacks to areas of concentrated disadvantage is apparent within a correctional population. It also recognizes women’s self-directed efforts to cope with neighborhood crime, and it explores their strategies and views of strategy effectiveness. Finally, the study shows whether the perceived prevalence of neighborhood illegal activities and objective measures of social disorganization are related to women’s choices of strategies for avoiding recidivism.

**Method**

**Study Design**

The current study utilizes a three part mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2008), including: (1) the quantitative documentation of racial difference in perceived and objective measures of neighborhood conditions, (2) the qualitative inductive method for identifying women’s strategies for successful completion of community supervision in neighborhoods with perceived criminal activity, and (3) a mixed-method approach that links women’s strategies that were identified inductively from the qualitative data to quantitative measures of perceived crime and objective indicators of neighborhood social disorganization.

During one in-depth, face-to-face interview, interviewers collected both quantitative and qualitative data from women on probation and parole. Quantitative data were used to examine the associations among race, perceived neighborhood criminal activity, census data on social disorganization, and perceptions of neighborhood safety. In-depth interviewing provided a method for understanding the social world of neighborhood risks from the point of view of the research participants. These qualitative data were examined and coded to reflect women’s primary strategies for avoiding recidivism while they lived in neighborhoods they perceived as having criminal activity. As a final step in the analysis, quantitative data were generated from the coded qualitative data, and the relationships between women’s strategies and neighborhood context indicators were examined.

**Sample**

Data for this investigation come from a broader study of 402 drug-involved female offenders’ interactions with their probation and parole agents. Interviews took place...
in Michigan between November 2011 and November 2012. The interviews were vol-
untary and respondents were paid US$30 for their participation and were promised
strict confidentiality.1

Michigan has a centralized statewide system of probation and parole for felony
offenders and specialized caseloads for women. The sample of 402 women felons was
obtained by first recruiting 73 probation and parole agents whose caseload numbers
approximated the proportions of women supervised in each of the 16 counties within a
1½-hr drive from the research office. These counties include 68.5% of the 2011 state
population, all major population centers (e.g., Detroit and Grand Rapids), and a mix of
rural and suburban areas. Parole agents were oversampled in relation to probation
agents to increase parolees to 25% of the sample.

Women were recruited to participate in the project using three methods. Interviewers
spent periods in the probation and parole office buildings, and if women agreed to hear
about the study from a researcher, agents introduced them to an interviewer to hear
about the project. Alternatively, if women gave their agents permission to share contact
information so a researcher could call them about the study, then agents provided phone
contact information, and the research staff called women to arrange a time to explain
and invite participation in the study. Third, agents displayed and handed out flyers about
the study so women could make contact with researchers without any conversation with
agents. Approximately equal proportions of women were recruited into the study using
each method. If women agreed to participate in the study, interviews took place at
probation and parole offices, respondents’ homes, or in public venues, such as coffee
shops, fast food restaurants, or a public library.

Quantitative Data

Data collection began with one-on-one structured interviews with trained inter-
viewers who entered quantitative responses into a computerized database. Respon-
dents were asked about the location and characteristics of their neighborhoods.
Then, residential location was used to link census tract data to each study partici-
pant. We used four indicators of social disorganization (economic disadvantage,
affluence, residential stability, and immigrant concentration) to reflect census tract
contextual variables known to be related to crime rates. Following Sampson,
Raudenbush, and Earls (1997), an indicator of concentrated disadvantage was based
on percentage of families in poverty, receiving public assistance, unemployed,
female-headed with children, and African American ($\alpha = .93$ from a reliability test
for all Michigan census tracts). Indicators of the absence of disorganization reflected
concentrated affluence (based on percentage of adults with incomes US$75,000
and over, with a college education, and percentage of the civilian labor force in
professional/managerial jobs; $\alpha = .86$); residential stability (based on percentage
of residents 5 and older who lived in the same house 5 years ago and percentage
of owner-occupied homes, $\alpha = .84$); and concentrated immigration (based on per-
centage of Latino and foreign born residents, $\alpha = .51$). The census tract variables
are based on standardized scores.
For the current residence, interviewers also obtained yes/no responses to the question, “Is your neighborhood safe?” Additional yes/no responses were obtained for the seven questions: Are there drugs in the neighborhood? Are there gangs in the neighborhood? Have you heard gunshots in the neighborhood? Are there break-ins in the neighborhood? Is there violence in the neighborhood? Have you been a victim of a crime in the neighborhood? Do police come into the neighborhood a lot? The responses to these seven questions were combined to create a scale (α = .81) that indicated women’s perception of illegal activity in the neighborhood.

Qualitative Data

If women reported that their neighborhoods were unsafe, that there were “a lot of police,” that they had been victimized in their neighborhoods, or that any crime occurred in their neighborhoods (e.g., drug activity), they were asked open-ended follow-up questions. Women were first asked to describe their strategies to avoid trouble with the law and any drug activity in the neighborhood. Then they were asked whether they felt the strategies were effective.

Audio recordings of this portion of the interview were transcribed, formatted, and read into Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis. All coding schemes described below were generated for this study. Categories were created using a constant comparative methodology that involves developing and reworking categories as the data are read and coded instead of having categories prepared beforehand (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, transcripts were examined to identify reoccurring concepts, phrases, and themes (Field & Morse, 1985). Then, the first two authors met and compared, discussed, and refined the categories (Holsti, 1969).

Once the categories were agreed upon, the first and second authors returned to the data and coded 40 transcripts for the themes reflecting different strategies in order to establish coding reliability and to assess any discrepancies between coders. The remaining transcripts were coded independently once adequate reliability was established and all discrepancies were resolved. Acceptable levels of reliability (Cohen, 1960) and successful unitization (Guetzkow, 1950) were obtained for the strategies women use to avoid offending (κ = .964; μ = .07).

Of the 402 women, 107 gave no indication of neighborhood crime. Of the remaining 295 women, 13.2% (39) of the data were missing due to audio file corruption, interviewer failure to ask follow-up questions, or nonresponse. The qualitative analysis to identify types of strategies was based on the valid responses to questions about each type of strategy; that is, 256 women explained how they avoided offending despite crime in their neighborhoods.

Study Setting

Racial Segregation in Michigan

According to the American Community Survey and the 2010 U.S. Census, Michigan is currently the third most segregated state for Black–White segregation (Darden, Rahbar,
Fully, 80% of metropolitan Blacks would have to move to a different neighborhood to alleviate residential segregation in Michigan. Of the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan areas, the Detroit, Warren, and Livonia region is the second most residentially segregated. Grand Rapids/Wyoming is the 21st most segregated. All of these areas were included in the study area. Based on study participants’ self-reports of where they lived, approximately 26% were concentrated in Detroit. The rest of the respondents were scattered through various cities and towns with no more than 5% in any one area. Since a large proportion of the study sample is living in a highly segregated part of the United States, the study area provided an appropriate setting to examine the connections of race to living in disorganized and high-crime areas.

Results

Description of the Sample

The sample of 402 felony offenders includes primarily young women on probation (Table 1), though nearly one quarter of women were on parole. They ranged in age from 18 to 60, but half of them were 32 years old or younger, and another quarter of them were between 33 and 41. Study participants were racially/ethnically diverse, with just under half Caucasian/not Hispanic, about one third Black/not Hispanic, and a smaller proportion identifying as multiracial, Hispanic, and other racial and ethnic groups.

A fairly small proportion of women were married (12.9%), and over half were dating. About half had dependent children, and single parents constituted approximately one third of the sample.

In terms of economic standing, over half of the women reported being unemployed but able to work, and fewer than one in five reported being employed full-time. The remaining women said they either held part-time employment or were unable to work because of child care responsibilities. As a result, the vast majority (85.2%) of women reported annual incomes below US$10,000.

Criminal histories varied considerably. Some women were first arrested as pre-teens, and others in their 50s, but the mean age was early 20s. The number of prior misdemeanors ranged from 0 to 38 with an average of 3. All women had a current felony conviction, 20.6% had one or two prior felony convictions, and 23.9% had three or more prior felony convictions.

Quantitative Analysis of Data on Perceptions of Neighborhood Crime, Objective Measures of Social Disorganization, and Race

As found in much of the research on parolees and probationers (e.g., Lynch & Sabol, 2001), many study participants were exposed to multiple types of neighborhood risk. Of the seven indicators of neighborhood crime (drug activity, break-ins, gun shots, violence, gang activity, one’s own victimization, and high police presence), just 26.7% (107) of women reported no indicators, 16.2% (65) one indicator, 16.5%
Due to high residential segregation of Black individuals in Michigan (Darden & Kamel, 2000), we expected racial differences in self-reported neighborhood crime and census indicators of disorganization. To confirm this expectation, our analysis tested whether these variables differed depending on the woman’s racial group membership (Black, multiracial, or White). In this analysis, women who self-identified as Black-Hispanic were grouped with Black women and White-Hispanic women were grouped with White women. As can be seen in Table 2, Black women reported more types of criminal activity in their neighborhoods than did White women. A similar difference occurred for the objective measures of neighborhood context: Black women lived in census tracts with higher disadvantage and lower affluence, stability, and immigration than did White women. Thus, we conclude with some confidence that Black and

(66) two indicators, 10.0% (40) three indicators, and 30.6% (123) four or more indicators.6

Table 1. Descriptive Information on the Study Sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>402</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation/parole status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parole</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation and parole</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/not Hispanic</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/not Hispanic</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/Hispanic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under 18</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parenting</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed but able to work</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time or unable to work because of children</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below US$10,000</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above US$10,000</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal history variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at first conviction</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number misdemeanor convictions</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number felony convictions (omitting current)</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SD = standard deviation. Percentages are computed for the overall sample size of 402.
White women in our sample did experience different levels of social disorganization and crime in their neighborhoods, with Black women more often restricted to areas of high social disorganization where crime is most prevalent.

Qualitative Analysis of Strategies to Avoid Offending

Qualitative data were used to determine the various strategies women used to avoid reoffending while living in disorganized communities where crime is prevalent. Of the 402 women, 295 (73.4%) described their neighborhoods as unsafe or having some illegal activity. Because women who said their neighborhoods had no crime were not asked how they managed in high-crime neighborhoods, we focus on the 295 women who perceive their neighborhoods as having crime. Of the 295, 256 (86.8%) had usable data. Table 3 displays the strategies and the proportion of women who used the different types of strategies to avoid offending. Below we provide in-depth descriptions of the eight most common strategies. The top eight strategies, listed from the most to the least used, include avoiding criminal people, staying home, avoiding everyone, being with prosocial people, staying busy with legal routines, avoiding drugs, thinking about one’s actions, and avoiding criminal activity.7

Avoiding criminal people. The most common strategy used was to avoid criminal people, as nearly one in five of the 256 women reported using this approach. For instance, to avoid future offending, Respondent 377 reported, “I don’t go around people that’s doing...doing wrong. Using [drugs] and [in] gang activity and all of that. I just don’t go around shit.” According to her, this strategy has been effective because “my problem was always going around, is going around those people. I’m not dealing with those type of people anymore so my life has changed a lot.” Likewise, Respondent

Table 2. Comparison of Means for Indicators of Neighborhood Context by Racial Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th># Types perceived crime</th>
<th>Concentrated disadvantage</th>
<th>Concentrated affluence</th>
<th>Residential stability</th>
<th>Concentrated immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>M 2.91^a</td>
<td>7.42^a</td>
<td>-2.36^a</td>
<td>-.95^a</td>
<td>-.39^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD (2.17)</td>
<td>(4.36)</td>
<td>(1.76)</td>
<td>(1.31)</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>M 2.43^a, b</td>
<td>4.50^b</td>
<td>-2.04^a</td>
<td>-.85^a</td>
<td>-.03^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD (2.00)</td>
<td>(4.72)</td>
<td>(2.18)</td>
<td>(1.50)</td>
<td>(.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>M 1.80^b</td>
<td>.60^c</td>
<td>-.80^b</td>
<td>-.31^b</td>
<td>-.04^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD (1.85)</td>
<td>(3.95)</td>
<td>(2.12)</td>
<td>(1.54)</td>
<td>(.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 13.35^c</td>
<td>110.13^c</td>
<td>26.86^c</td>
<td>8.49^c</td>
<td>7.17^c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(df) (2,388)</td>
<td>(2,377)</td>
<td>(2,377)</td>
<td>(2,377)</td>
<td>(2,377)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in the same column that do not share the same superscript are significantly different according to a post hoc Tukey at \( \alpha = .05 \). N for Black was 147 or 148, for White 191 or 199, and for multiracial 43 or 41. Six women were missing data on race, and six were other races that were not considered in the analysis. * indicates statistically significance for the overall ANOVA at \( p < .01 \).
1220 stated, “I don’t hang out with people with drugs no more.” When asked why this strategy was effective, she responded, “if I ain’t doing nothing illegal, I don’t have to worry about getting arrested.” She concluded that this strategy was working ‘‘cause I ain’t got in trouble.”

For some women, avoiding criminal people entailed staying away from family members. Respondent 1013 explains:

I don’t socialize with them. Like, you know, my family smokes pot. Like a lot of my aunts do, I don’t—when I know they’re doing it, I don’t go nowhere near. Like if I see something going on, I’m instantly leaving because I don’t want to be a part of it.

Similarly, Respondent 668 stated that “if I go around the same people in my family that taught me the things that I know when I was younger, I will continue to be locked up. When I’m locked up, I don’t hear from them. I don’t even get visits. So I don’t want to live like that anymore.” Thus, for some, avoiding subsequent offending came at a great cost, as it not only included evading old criminal peers but criminal family members as well.

**Staying home.** Another common strategy that 14% of women used to avoid offending was to stay at home. To begin with, some women indicated that they simply avoided being outside in their neighborhoods. Respondent 1013 said that to avoid getting in trouble with the law, she would “stay away from it, [and] stay home. I’m a hermit. I stay at home, play videogames.” Likewise, Respondent 107 reported “[I] used to be a street-person . . . [but] I’m a house-body person now.” She reported, “I listen to the radio, I like a DVD or look at the TV and sit there and eat all day. That’s what I

---

**Table 3.** Percentage and Number of Women in Neighborhoods With Crime Who Use Each of Several Strategies to Avoid Involvement in Crime and Drugs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid criminal people</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay at home</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid everyone</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be with prosocial people</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay busy with legal routines</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid drugs</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about actions</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid criminal activity</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid criminal places or certain places at certain times</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid criminal situations</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 256. Some women used multiple strategies. The “other” category of strategies was used by 4 or fewer women and included such approaches as coping with feelings, obtaining mental health treatment, and looking “tough.”
do.” Many women acknowledged that they were hermits and spent much of their time indoors, which they filled by watching TV, playing video games, eating, and sleeping.

It was common for women to stay inside with family members and relatives to keep them company. For example, Respondent 1329 explained:

[I] just stay away from all of that; I stay to myself. I just be at home, stay to myself... I use like the Internet, I play the game with my little brothers and sisters. Basically, just do whatever I can around the house, and then I go to my Grandma’s house, to stay away from stuff sometimes.

Nearly all were emphatic that such strategies were effective. Asked if staying home was working for her, Respondent 1329 asserted, “I don’t think it works, I actually know it works, because it’s working. It’s working because, if you don’t put yourself in a bad situation, you know, you don’t get in a bad situation, unless you just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Yeah, I just stay at my Grandma’s.” And Respondent 808 stated that staying home is effective “because it keeps me out of harm’s way.” Here, we see that many women reported staying within the confines of their own homes because that is where they felt safest from being drawn into “trouble.”

Avoid everyone. Also, just over 10% of women reported avoiding everyone as a way to avoid subsequent offending. This strategy was not restricted to avoiding individuals who engage in crime but included avoiding all people. Asked what strategies she used to avoid getting in trouble with the law, Respondent 558 replied, “just stay to myself.” She asserted that this strategy was effective “because I don’t like to be around a whole lot of people anyway.” And Respondent 803 stated that she stays “away from people, just in general.” To her, such an approach worked because “it’s just easier that way for me.”

The perception that other individuals were untrustworthy was a prevalent theme among women who avoided everyone. For example, Respondent 121 said “I just don’t talk to anybody, I don’t go anywhere, I don’t do nothing.” She went on to explain “[I] stay away from people period, because you never can trust anybody, I don’t give a shit if they say, ‘Oh, yes you can, yes you can’.” Since some women believed that they would be susceptible to getting involved in illicit activity if they interacted with others, many chose to exclude everyone out of their lives except close family members. Asked how she stays out of trouble in her neighborhood, Respondent 1200 explained:

[B]asically I stay to myself. And me and my son, we just live an excluded life . . . . . . It’s working perfect. He don’t hang out, he don’t want company, he don’t have company, he don’t like communicating. So it’s pretty cool. We don’t have that in and out, people running in and out your home. We don’t have that. And looking at your stuff and seeing what you got, we don’t have that. So I think it’s safe.
A number of women talked about keeping to themselves, not interacting with anybody but family members, and just trying to mind their business. Such a strategy was perceived to be effective in avoiding subsequent offending.

**Be with prosocials.** In addition to avoiding everyone, 10% of women who lived in neighborhoods with some illegal behavior reported making attempts to be with prosocial people in order to avoid future offending. Being with prosocials entailed associating with people who don’t use drugs, alcohol, or break the law. Respondent 1155 stated, “I only associate with people that I know, you know, that are not engaged in anything they shouldn’t be.” And Respondent 118 discussed the importance of being with positive people:

> Respondent: I hang out with totally different people now so I’m usually with someone who is safe. If I am going to be in like—the south side for me is kind of like a dangerous area, I guess you would call it but I still go there, you know. It’s just I’m normally with somebody who’s safer.

> Interviewer: When you say “safer” like somebody that can like protect or somebody that’s like “No, don’t”? 

> Respondent: Yeah, somebody who doesn’t use. I’m like, yeah.

> Interviewer: Okay, someone whose like “No, this is a bad idea, we should go.”

> Respondent: Right, right.

While changing social networks was perceived as necessary by women to avoid getting into trouble, this, at times, is quite difficult to do. Although Respondent 1168 reported that “I changed the people I hung around with,” which has proven to be effective, she also admitted, “It wasn’t that easy because, you know, it’s hard to find new friends . . . . when you’re [not] using, you want to find people who [are] not using and it’s hard to find that kind of people because [of] the atmosphere they’re in.” Despite the difficulty in finding new friends, Respondent 1168 managed to sever ties with old criminogenic peers and replace these relationships with connections to prosocial others.

Many women also reported getting help through actions such as going to groups, being with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) friends, and associating with people who care. Respondent 1209 said the strategy she used to avoid offending was to “go to AA and do positive things with my family. You know, I stay around my family a lot . . . [I] just keep with positive influences, go to my AA meetings, and things like that.” She perceived this as an effective strategy because “it keeps me busy . . . keeps me positive, you know, so I don’t feel lonely and depressed ever.” Similarly, Respondent 511 stated, “I go to meetings, I go to AA. I attend AA, I talk to my sponsor or I talk to another fellow alcoholic [who is maintaining sobriety].” She perceived this strategy to be effective because it enables her to “move forward.” Overall, in an attempt to avoid subsequent offending, many replaced their old criminal social worlds with a conventional, law-abiding world.
Busy with legal routines. Another common strategy that 9% of women used to avoid future offending was to fill their day with conventional activity. Many women describe their day as full of legitimate activities that kept them busy. Explaining how she avoids getting in trouble, Respondent 206 remarked “[by] keeping myself busy. Working, spending time with my kids, being a better mother than I was awhile ago. So that keeps me focused and not thinking about that.” Asked if this strategy was effective, she responded “I guess so . . . I’m not in jail right now. You know, I’m not in any big trouble so I guess it’s working for now.” Similarly, Respondent 1001 said, “I work and I don’t even have time to hang around those people. I work and I have my daughter, doctor’s appointments every week, probation all the time.” For many, their demanding schedule inhibited their involvement with crime. Respondent 1211 explained:

I’m too busy to even think of anything . . . I don’t have time to, you know, I get invited to go out with friends or to go out to dinner, go do this, I just—my time is with her [my daughter]. She’s 14, so we spend a lot of time together and her sports and stuff, I don’t have time to really go out and associate.

While it was common for women to list a number of routines they filled their day, some mentioned that their day was filled with one activity, which still took up much of the day. For instance, Respondent 510 explained how she managed to avoid trouble: “I’ve [got] like two jobs; I work like 80 hours a week.” She further noted why this strategy worked for her: “I don’t have time. If somebody call up my phone, I’m at work. I don’t have to worry about nothing else, our conversation get cut short.” Respondent 640 agreed stating, “I just go to work. I work all day so I don’t have time to think about anything else.” According to her, this was a good strategy to avoid subsequent offending because “the more time I have on my hands the more time I have for drugs and I just choose not to do it anyways. I just, I keep busy. I keep pushing forward and my job is everything. So I have to work.” Not surprisingly, employment proved to be beneficial for the women in our sample. Consistent with prior studies (Uggen, Wakefield, & Western, 2005), finding and maintaining employment facilitated positive adjustments to female probationers and parolees, which can indeed reduce the likelihood that people will engage in crime. Overall, it was common for women to fill their days working, going to and from appointments, going to school, taking care of their children, and seeing their probation and parole agents.

Avoiding drugs. Another strategy female probationers and parolees employed to avoid future offending was to stay away from illicit drugs. For example, Respondent 201 said that to avoid getting into trouble she “just don’t buy any drugs . . . [and] just don’t hang out with the people who do drugs.” And Respondent 620 stated that “I’ve noticed what works for my life is if I just . . . if I stay off the dope, I stay out of trouble.” She concluded that this strategy is “working for me so far [in staying out of trouble].” Likewise, Respondent 615, who at one point acknowledged having a US$200 per day drug habit, said that avoiding drug use was a vital strategy for her
because “[t]hat’s the only time that I can think of that I’ve committed a crime. I’ve been under the influence so I’ve never done any [crimes] sober that I can remember.” For her, staying clean “eliminates 99% of my problems.” Women were well aware that the use of drugs would facilitate their path to recidivism, as it proved to be their downfall in the past. Findings are consistent with past research showing that substance abuse plays an important role in explaining women’s involvement in crime and is an especially strong predictor of recidivism (Dowden & Blanchette, 2002).

In relation to avoiding drugs, sobriety from alcohol was also reported as necessary for women to avoid subsequent offending. Respondent 1175 stated that “any trouble I’ve ever gotten into, it’s when [I’m] drinking.” Thus, “not drinking” was a mechanism she used to avoid trouble. Similarly, Respondent 660 asserted “Well, I definitely don’t drink anymore. That’s priority.” And Respondent 636 said avoiding alcohol was critical to avoiding subsequent offending “because that’s what gets me started [to getting into trouble].” Overall, remaining sober was perceived as vital for women in the sample to avoid recidivating in the future.

**Thinking about actions.** Moreover, 7% of women reported that thinking about their actions was a strategy they used to avoid subsequent offending. Many women discussed going through a deliberate thought process to avoid the risk of getting into trouble and going to prison. Respondent 1160 simply stated that “I have a made up mind to stay out of trouble.” And Respondent 619 said that “thinking about my past” was helpful because “I never want to be in that situation again.” Likewise, Respondent 639 stated that in addition to being with prosocials, it’s important for her to remember that “there are consequences behind choices. Instead of making rash decisions, think where it can take you to.” Assessing the ramifications of one’s actions was vital for women staying out of trouble. As Respondent 1012 put it:

[B]efore I had no idea of consequences. I knew I could go to jail, I knew potentially I could go to prison for something but I didn’t know how bad any of that was. I didn’t know what . . . was waiting for me if I did any of that. Now I do though and so I’m like, “Yeah, I like having two pillows and staying under my blanket as long as I want!”

For many women who had been incarcerated in the past, the very reminder of doing time in prison was enough to motivate them to avoid getting into any trouble. Respondent 146 recalled:

I have flashbacks of jail that aren’t nice, like I don’t want to be in that cell. I don’t want to be in that cell, I don’t want to be in that cell. It plays in your mind over and over again, just being away from your kids and the food, the people, the smells, the—they put me in a cell with a girl who had MRSA [Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus] and she was like 350 pounds, so she stunk from having—I was like, fresh air! And that was like horrible, like I never wanna experience that again.
Additionally, some women described how thinking of the consequences of criminal activity was necessary because their actions not only impacted themselves but their children. For example, Respondent 1219 stated that “I just focus on what I’m doing.” Asked how she became so focused, she responded “it’s not that it’s me in particular; it’s just something that I have to do. Because it’s just not me, I have my daughter also.” Respondent 669 explained how thinking about her decisions impacted her and her family for the better:

After I got the treatment and focused on what I really wanted to do and what I didn’t want to do because my kid—my daughter, at first, was the only one I had. Everything was for her. And I know they say do it for yourself, but she was that extra boost because it definitely was for me first because I was miserable. But having her and my kids just keep me so grounded. I don’t know, because I don’t want to disappoint them whatsoever. I just don’t want to be one day without my son or my daughter . . . . It’s not about doing the jail time; it’s just being away from my home, my family, my security. I’m very content, so I don’t want to . . . I don’t have any intentions or miss being out there. I don’t even miss going to clubs, dancing, doing any of that. I don’t miss none of it. I’m just so happy with building another life, like my family, having my kids around me. I love it.

Findings are consistent with existing theoretical research, suggesting that attachment to children has strong positive effects for women (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Daly, 1998; Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996) and childbearing serves as a motivating factor for change (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Graham & Bowling, 1996). Overall, thinking about the consequences of one’s action and what is really important was a strategy that some women used to avoid future offending in the context of living in neighborhoods with criminal activity.

Avoiding criminal activity. Finally, nearly 7% of women in our sample stressed that the way to avoid reoffending was simply to avoid all forms of illicit activities. When asked what she did to avoid getting in trouble with the law, Respondent 1225 responded “I guess obey the law, be a law-abiding citizen,” which she asserts is working perfectly for her. Similarly, Respondent 1214 stated, “I just don’t engage in it so I don’t have nothing to do with it.” Likewise, Respondent 1301 said that in an attempt to avoid getting into trouble “I just don’t do nothing wrong . . . I don’t do no crimes.” She asserted that such strategies were effective because “I have no contact with any of that stuff. And if I did I would be getting back in trouble. So just avoid it and you’re okay.” And Respondent 607 replied that the strategy she used was simply “staying away from the law [crime].” Not surprisingly, women were well aware that in order to avoid getting into trouble, criminal involvement would have to cease. Most were emphatic that such a strategy was effective because they were no longer coming into contact with the police, getting in trouble, and cycling in and out of jail.
Mixed-Methods Analysis of Subjective and Objective Measures of Neighborhood Context in Relation to Strategies to Avoid Offending

The choice of which of the above-described strategies to use for avoiding criminal activity may differ by women’s perceptions of neighborhood crime and/or different aspects of objective measures of neighborhood context. To better understand women’s choice of strategies for avoiding criminal involvement, we consider whether community context is associated with their efforts to avoid offending. Women may view some strategies as less effective or feasible in the more disorganized neighborhoods where crime is common.

Tables 4 and 5 present tests of mean or percentage differences for perceptual and objective indicators of neighborhood context that were significantly related to one or more strategies that women used. There are several suggestive findings.

The strategy of avoiding everyone is least used in neighborhoods perceived as safe (Table 4) and in neighborhoods with relatively high concentrated affluence and residential stability, as indicated by census data (Table 5). Avoiding everyone is most common in neighborhoods with multiple perceived indicators of illegal activity and in areas of concentrated disadvantage as indicated by census data. In other words, women who see their neighborhoods as safe tend to avoid criminal people, but they do not tend to report avoiding everyone. It may be that in areas where women feel safe, they perceive it is more feasible to selectively avoid criminal people. Finally, the strategy of spending time with others who are prosocial to avoid breaking the law is negatively related to the census indicator of disadvantaged community, negatively related to perceptions of neighborhood crime, and positively related to the census indicator of community affluence. It may be that unlike in disadvantaged neighborhoods and neighborhoods with more crime, there are more conventional, prosocial individuals in affluent neighborhoods. Overall, women who lived in neighborhoods that were well-off used the less restraining and isolating strategies, while women who

Table 4. Neighborhood Characteristics (Categorical Variables) With Significant Relationships to Strategies for Avoiding Involvement in Criminal Activity and Drugs for Women With Some Indicator of Neighborhood Crime.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of neighborhood</th>
<th>Safe</th>
<th>Unsafe</th>
<th>χ²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoid criminal people</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses strategy</td>
<td>21.8 (38)</td>
<td>9.7 (7)</td>
<td>5.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not use</td>
<td>78.2 (136)</td>
<td>90.3 (65)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoid everyone</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses strategy</td>
<td>6.9 (12)</td>
<td>15.3 (11)</td>
<td>4.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not use</td>
<td>93.1 (162)</td>
<td>84.7 (61)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 256.
*p ≤ .05.
lived in economically distressed neighborhoods were more likely to resort to rather restrictive strategies that limited their ability to fully participate in public life.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

By examining the perceptions and strategies of female probationers and parolees as they navigate in negative neighborhood contexts, the current study goes beyond prior research showing the concentration of offenders supervised in the community in such areas. First, for a relatively large sample of women on probation and parole, we determined that racial residential segregation in the general U.S. population is mirrored in a female correctional population, with Black probationers and parolees more often reporting their neighborhoods as unsafe and the sites of multiple types of criminal activity, and more likely to live in areas that, according to census tract indicators, have high social disorganization. Second, recognizing women’s agency, we described women’s strategies for successfully completing their community supervision while residing in neighborhoods perceived as unsafe or as having criminal activity that might contribute to their own criminality. Finally, we explored previously uncharted territory by investigating the connection of neighborhood context to women’s choice of strategies for avoiding breaking the law.

Several studies have examined the intersection of race, neighborhoods, and crime (Krivo, Peterson, & Karafin, 2006; Peterson & Krivo, 2009), but few studies consider whether and how race, potentially through its connection to neighborhood conditions, shapes strategies to avoid recidivism. Simultaneous consideration of the residential

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**Table 5. Neighborhood Characteristics (Continuous Variables) With Significant Relationships to Strategies for Avoiding Involvement in Criminal Activity and Drugs for Women With Some Indicator of Neighborhood Crime.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th># Types perceived crimes</th>
<th>Concentrated disadvantage</th>
<th>Concentrated affluence</th>
<th>Residential stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 256)</td>
<td>(n = 252)</td>
<td>(n = 252)</td>
<td>(n = 252)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid everyone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.037</td>
<td>7.310</td>
<td>-2.585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategy</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>(1.786)</td>
<td>(4.804)</td>
<td>(1.718)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not use</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.105</td>
<td>3.992</td>
<td>-1.569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>(1.726)</td>
<td>(5.221)</td>
<td>(2.169)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t</td>
<td>2.64***</td>
<td>3.039***</td>
<td>-2.203*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be with prosocals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.539</td>
<td>2.947</td>
<td>-.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategy</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>(1.631)</td>
<td>(6.148)</td>
<td>(2.547)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not use</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.278</td>
<td>4.479</td>
<td>-1.808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>(1.754)</td>
<td>(5.147)</td>
<td>(2.072)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t</td>
<td>-2.053*</td>
<td>-1.408</td>
<td>2.506*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 256. SD = standard deviation; M = mean.

*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01.
location of women in negative community contexts and documentation of a connection between neighborhood contexts and strategies used to avoid reoffending leads us to conclude that community context most limits the choices of Black women. Race and ecological context appear to work together to shape women’s perceptions of neighborhood crime and their selection of strategies to avoid offending.

The finding that African American women are especially likely to live in disadvantaged areas is consistent with prior research on nonoffender samples that demonstrates that Blacks more often live in economically stressed neighborhoods (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1996), and Whites more often live where they feel safe and perceive little or no crime (Krivo et al., 2006). Future research is needed to determine how and why some women offenders manage to live in less disorganized communities and to document the specific reasons for which they remain in disadvantaged communities. Such research should identify methods and points of intervention, barriers, and resource needs to enable more women to avoid negative community environments.

In previous studies, a consideration of the strategies offenders use to avoid offending in neighborhoods with criminal activity is absent. This lack of attention to crime avoidance strategies is problematic, since so many women in the criminal justice system live in socially disorganized areas that have high levels of crime (Miller, 1986; Richie, 2001), and they may lack effective strategies, or use strategies that limit their capacity to develop strong social networks of law-abiding individuals. Indeed, the four strategies that women most often used involved either staying away from people (i.e., avoid criminal people, stay at home, and avoid everyone) or being with prosocial people. Thus, these strategies are highly relevant to the degree to which women participate in social networks at all and prosocial networks in particular. Social networks have emerged as central to understanding crime and recidivism. Social ties to prosocial individuals provide a disincentive to commit crime in a number of ways. Strong, positive network ties are a source of valuable social support and social capital, making it possible to accomplish goals that in their absence could not be achieved (Coleman, 1988). Additionally, prosocial ties may change one’s daily routines, reducing interaction with deviant peers and opportunities to engage in crime (Warr, 1998). Notably, engaging in time-consuming legal routines and avoiding opportunities for crime are additional strategies that women described for “staying out of trouble” in high-crime areas. Finally, support from prosocial relationships and institutions can contribute to a shift in identity and reduce the likelihood of recidivism (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Roy, 2007). Overall, there is considerable research evidence that shows increases in prosocial networks and decreases in criminal networks promote low recidivism (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996; Jason, Davis, & Ferrari, 2007; MacKenzie & De Li, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2007) and probation and parole rules compliance (Skeem et al., 2009).

Consistent with research on women in another geographic location (Cobbina, Miller, & Brunson, 2008), the strategy of avoiding everyone was more commonly utilized by young African American women residing in neighborhoods that they
perceived to be unsafe and in areas of economic disadvantage. It is especially problematic that women try to avoid the negative influences of disadvantaged neighborhoods by isolating themselves, sometimes even from family members. Research on nonoffender samples shows that women and African Americans have limited networks. In the general population, compared to men’s networks, women’s networks are smaller (Campbell & Rosenfeld, 1985), comprised of more kin (Marsden, 1987), and encompass fewer ties to non-kin (Marsden, 1987; Moore, 1990), suggesting that women are less able to use networks as instrumental resources in finding jobs and enhancing their careers. Also in the general population, compared to Whites, African Americans have smaller networks and networks that contain a lower proportion of kin (Marsden, 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006), and they have less frequent contact with personal ties (Pugliesi & Shook, 1998). The strategies of avoiding everyone and staying at home further decrease networks that are already inadequate. Moreover, Black women in our sample who avoid even their relatives who break the law forgo a central source of support that has been important to African American families, whose members typically rely on each other, in part, as an adaptation to racial and class oppression (Collins, 2000; Stack, 1974). Thus, women residing in more disadvantaged neighborhoods, who are disproportionately Black women, may have unique challenges as they attempt to navigate their communities.

Certainly, some White women on probation and parole contend with negative community conditions. However, the magnifying effects of race on hardship in women offenders’ lives is part of a broader picture, in which Black women have been disproportionately affected by growing rates of women on probation, in prison, and on parole (Hartney & Vuong, 2009; Mauer, 2013; Pew Center on the States, 2009). For example, relevant to concerns about prosocial networks that our study raised, because of disproportionate rates of incarceration, serving time in jail and prison act as another influence on reducing social networks, which disproportionately affects Black women. Both because of the network shrinking effect and the nature of community, most female offenders who return from prison to economically distressed neighborhoods have small homogeneous networks that result in their marginalization (Richie, 2001).

Besides supporting women’s choice of network-reducing strategies for “staying out of trouble” in disorganized high-crime areas, the places where Black women typically reside (Darden & Kamel, 2000; Massey & Eggers, 1990) carry a number of other negative consequences. First, structural conditions, characterized by joblessness, persistent poverty, and family disruption, may contribute to African Americans traveling in isolated, small social circles that prevent them from developing strong social networks (Reisig, Holtfreter, & Morash, 2002). Based on our findings, their strategies for avoiding illegal behavior may intensify this pattern. Second, for both women released from prison and those living in the community, disorganized neighborhoods that are highly segregated due to poverty and racism often create a revolving door back into the justice system. Women offenders residing in communities where they are socially isolated, economically disadvantaged, and lack resources face incredible difficulties in staying clean, sober, and crime-free. While the concerns of high levels of imprisonment and community supervision transcend race, both racial and
economic disparities have most plagued African American women in the criminal justice system. Some scholars argue that the new penology operates as a racial caste system, excluding a substantial number of African Americans from economic opportunity, political involvement, and social integration into mainstream society (Alexander, 2010). Building on this idea, the return of offenders to low-resource, high-crime communities extends their exclusion from self-sufficiency and opportunity.

In correctional practice, it would be especially useful to identify women most prone to using strategies that, in the long run, may not support a prosocial lifestyle, because they inhibit involvement in valuable networks. Case managers, probation and parole agents, and prerelease and community program staff should provide women with information on housing open to racial minorities and in safe areas; and then should provide special advocacy and placement assistance so that women can live in such areas. On a larger scale, it is important to reinvest in low-income communities and provide programs, services, and resources that would be useful in helping women who live in high-crime neighborhoods develop accessible networks. Finally, discriminatory housing policies and other barriers to living in positive community environments need to be confronted.

Because prior research provided no basis for knowing what sorts of strategies women would use, or what outcomes would occur, the present study is exploratory. Findings point to the need for additional research of this type, not only on women’s use of their strategies and their perception of effectiveness but of their enmeshment in social locations. A necessary step for future research is to more broadly account for women’s decision to employ some strategies, but not other approaches. Specifically, longitudinal follow-up study is needed to examine whether women change strategies over time and to consider whether the length of time a person lives in a particular neighborhood affects changes in the use of strategies. Along these lines, future research should also link long-term outcomes to the use of particular strategies, especially in the context of high-crime areas.

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Notes
1. We obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the U.S. National Institutes of Health, which provided additional protection against information being subpoenaed.
2. 5% of respondents resided in the city of Jackson and 4.6% lived in Lansing.
3. This group includes individuals who reported more than one race and/or ethnicity.
4. This includes one Pacific Islander and four Native Americans. Eight women did not identify their racial group memberships.

5. Fourteen women reported not knowing whether they lived in an unsafe neighborhood.

6. One respondent had missing data.

7. These strategies were used by at least 5% of the women in the sample.

References


**Author Biographies**

Jennifer E. Cobbina is an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. Her research interests focus on gender and prisoner reentry, desistance, and recidivism.
Merry Morash is a professor at the School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University. Her research focuses on gender and crime, specifically on women and girls in the justice system and domestic violence in immigrant communities.

Deborah A. Kashy is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Michigan State University. Her research interests are in models of interdependence, techniques for analyzing nonindependent data from dyads and groups and multilevel modeling for overtime and group data.

Sandi W. Smith is a professor in the Department of Communication and director of the Health and Risk Communication Center at Michigan State University. Her research interests are in interpersonal, health, and applied communication.