

Civic engagement imperative for reduction of violence and improved public health

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In a set of papers just published in two leading scholarly journals, LSU sociology professor Matthew Lee reports that both violent crime and all-cause mortality rates are on average substantially lower in communities with a vibrant civic climate.

Lee, currently a provost fellow in LSU's Office of Research and Economic Development, has been a central purveyor of the civic community paradigm over the last 10 years, and these studies extend the research program begun under his 2003 National Science Foundation CAREER award. In this paradigm, a robust civic climate is typically indexed as a dense matrix of non-economic institutions like churches and civic associations, a spirit of [civic engagement](#) through mechanisms like voting and an ethic of entrepreneurial business activity.

"People typically associate social problems like violence or poor public health almost exclusively with economic conditions like poverty," said Lee. "But these studies and others we have conducted highlight additional pieces of the puzzle that must be put together for us to fully understand the nature of community social problems."

The first paper, "Civic Community, Population Change and [Violent Crime](#) in Rural Communities" was published in the February 2010 issue of the Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, ranked by the Institute for Scientific Information as the second highest impact criminology journal in the world. In this paper, Lee and his co-author Shaun Thomas of the University of Arkansas - Little Rock, report that

rural communities that were more civically robust had lower average violent crime rates and experienced less change in violent crime during the 1980 - 2000 period. Conversely, high rates of population growth weakened this effect because rapid growth is a socially disorganizing force. In this study, an index of civic robustness was constructed from county-level measures of churches per capita, voter turnout, faith-based civic engagement, self employment, the presence of small manufacturing firms and family farms and residential stability.

"The Protective Effect of Civic Communities Against All-Cause Mortality" was recently advance published online in the most highly-cited social science journal in the world, *Social Science and Medicine*. Focusing on county level rates of all-cause mortality, this study demonstrated the importance of the civic structure of communities for the general public health as indexed by death rates.

Using methods and measures similar to those implemented in the paper on crime rates, this study reports that county levels of all-cause mortality are substantially lower in places where the civic climate in terms of institutional infrastructure, civic engagement and small scale business activity are more widespread. Lee argues that this is because communities with a strong civic climate are more capable of providing social supports to people and are better able to secure health related infrastructure in the form of hospitals and clinics, as well as doctors and other medical personnel.

"In essence, both papers underscore the need for people to feel involved in a community setting," said Lee. "When people are disconnected or disenfranchised, the potential for violence escalates, and the rate of dying from myriad causes goes up as well."

Provided by Louisiana State University

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