This research focuses on public involvement in state-sponsored collective action against crime. The source for this involvement is neighborhood “beat meetings” that until recently were held in almost all of the city’s 280 police beats, almost every month.¹ The meetings were held as part of the city’s community policing program, which began in 1993 and grew to become a city-wide program in 1995. The program was designed to focus police and city services on the city’s 279, and to involve the public in promoting community safety (Skogan, 2006).

Since 1995, 65,000 to 70,000 participants attended about 3,100 meetings each year. By the end of 2009 there had been just under one million participants in the program since its inception. Attendance is quite prevalent: for example, in a city-wide survey conducted in 2003, 16 percent of adult Chicagoans said they had attended at least one beat meeting in the previous year.

This research examines participation in the program, and focuses on potential inequalities attendance at beat meetings. The meetings provide Chicago’s principal mechanism for grass-roots consultation between police and neighborhood residents concerning neighborhood problems, and for mobilizing public support and involvement in collective crime prevention efforts. Participation rates vary greatly from place to place, and this could influence the ability of police to focus on problems that concern residents, and perhaps their effectiveness.

When they began, I anticipated that there would be a strong ‘establishment bias’ in turnout and representation. There has been a great deal of research on government programs that rely on voluntary participation by the public, and these studies typically find that the opportunities for involvement they create typically advantage better-off Americans and those who may need the program the least. Among the things I expected to find was that participation in beat meetings would be more common among:

- better educated and informed people
- households with more social capital
- households already well connected to public agencies and institutions
- better-off; home owners; racial majorities; and long-term residents
- neighborhoods that are already well organized and politically connected
- neighborhoods where residents do not fear each other
- individuals and neighborhood already favorable toward the police
- neighborhoods where residents do not fear retaliation for associating with police

¹ The city's fiscal crises recently led to a cut-back in the frequency of beat meetings.
Patterns of participation in other forms of civil involvement aimed at gaining political representation and responding to neighborhood problems guided these expectations. Figure 2 plots the relationship between concentrated poverty in each of the city’s police beats and measures of the extent of those activities. From surveys I had conducted in Chicago I was able to characterize the potential extent of community mobilization in each area, from responses to questions about how likely neighborhood residents would be to protest the closing of the local police station because of budget cuts, and to organize to keep any new public housing being built in their community. As Figure 2 illustrates, the potential for community mobilization was far lower in the city’s poorest areas. Similarly, the potential effectiveness of informal social control varied greatly with concentrated neighborhood poverty. This was measured by survey responses to questions about the likelihood of neighbors intervening to stop children from spray-painting graffiti on a local building, to break up a fight in which someone was being beaten or threatened, and if a teenager was harassing an elderly person. Informal social control is one aspect of collective efficacy, as concept developed by Sampson et al. (1997) that joins responses to informal control questions with survey items probing the extent of neighborhood cohesion. The latter ask about “people getting along,” sharing the same values, trusting one another and being “a close-knit neighborhood.” Figure 2 presents Sampson’s own survey data, aggregated to Chicago police beats, to illustrate that collective efficacy is a bit lower in the best-off areas, highest in middle-income places, and plummets in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Finally, Figure 2 presents the distribution of another important way of getting things done in Chicago, supporting the incumbent mayor at election time. These data were aggregated from the city’s thousands of small election precincts to match police areas. As it illustrates, Chicagoans living the city’s poorest areas were least likely to be part of the mayor’s political coalition.

It is very striking, therefore, that the opportunities for participation created by Chicago’s community policing program did not reflect this pattern. As illustrated in Figure 2, attendance rates instead rose with concentrated poverty, and were the highest by far in the poorest communities.

This Project

This project examines the individual and neighborhood-level factors associated with involvement in beat meetings, to better understand how this distinctive pattern of involvement emerged. It is based on sample surveys of Chicago residents. The surveys covered many topics,
including awareness and attendance at beat meetings. They were large enough to represent the
city’s major white, black and Hispanic communities, and the police beat in which each
respondent lived was determined by questions included in the surveys. Here I merge the 2001
and 2003 surveys, for a ‘N’ of 5,626 respondents.

Figure 3 depicts my
working model of participation.
The first key factor is simple
awareness of the opportunities to
participate created by beat
meetings. Because they were
new, as well as being a key
component of the city’s
community policing initiative,
Chicago launched an aggressive
and expensive program to market
community policing to the
general public. The most
important reason for this was of
course political. The city was
investing a great deal in this new
program, and the mayor wanted
to reap the benefits of its popularity. The program’s marketing slogans included "Get with the
beat" and "Safe neighborhoods are everybody's business." By 2001, the surveys indicated that
just over 60 percent of adults were aware that beat meetings were being held in their
neighborhood.

In Figure 3, the explanatory variables related to awareness of the program are divided into
individual and neighborhood factors. The hypothesized individual factors include age, home
ownership, length of residence and actively networking with neighbors regarding community
affairs. The list importantly includes being an English speaker, a demographic factor that is
shifting rapidly in Chicago in light of the explosive growth of its Hispanic community.

Figure 3 also identifies neighborhood factors that could be related to awareness of beat
meetings. These include organizational density and community cohesion, both features of
neighborhood life that could speed the spread of awareness through the community.

However, the same surveys that found that 6-in-10 of Chicagoans knew about beat
meetings also revealed that most of them did not attend. Only about one-quarter of those who
were aware of the meeting recalled attending one during the previous year, or about 15 percent of
all adults.

Figure 3 also lists factors hypothesized to explain who among the aware actually
attended. Among the individual factors are features of people’s lives that facilitate attending
evening meetings; these include having no children living at home and being retired from
working. The over-representation of older residents is an immediately observable fact at many beat meetings. I also anticipate that residents with concrete economic stakes in the fate of their community – principally home owners – will be more likely to actually turn out at the meetings. Finally, because the meetings are billed as facilitating resolving neighborhood problems, I anticipate that people who are more concerned about those problems will be more likely to turn out.

Neighborhood factors should also influence actual turnout. In Figure 3, their effect is depicted in two ways. The most interesting is the hypothesis that they will effect the slope of the relationship between awareness and involvement. That is, awareness will “translate” into involvement more directly in response to neighborhood conditions. The most obvious of these factors should be neighborhood crime. It should be no surprise that crime – and especially violent crime – is highest in the poorest areas of the city where beat meeting attendance rates were “unexpectedly” high. Figure 4 depicts the relationship between crime rates and meeting attendance rates. Crime is measured both by reports filed by the police in response to public reports and (in the case of drugs) the rate at which residents of each beat call the city’s emergency communication center to register a complaint. Even though the relationships illustrated in Figure 4 are generally non-linear, with attendance accelerating with increasing levels of neighborhood violence, simply the linear correlations between attendance and violent crime are quite strong.

To-Do List

One of the remaining tasks in this project is to better develop the list of factors influencing awareness of beat meetings. Most studies of electoral participation assume that people are aware of their opportunities to participate, which are available to everyone. On the other hand, studies of voluntary involvement in informal community activities have to cope with the reality that opportunities for that kind of involvement are very differentially distributed, many people will not know about them where they do exist, and where they do not exist people cannot get involved even if they appear motivated to do so (Skogan, 1988). Like elections, Chicago’s community policing program provided a ‘level playing field’ in which opportunities to participate were created in each of the city’s neighborhoods, but like participation in voluntary associations, no one would know about them without a vigorous marketing effort that successfully reaches individual neighborhood residents.
I also need to better understand the role of neighborhood factors in the model. In Figure 3 I sketched direct effects of neighborhood factors on awareness and involvement; these would take the form of random intercepts for each beat that are influenced by neighborhood factors. However, the proposition that awareness is related to actual involvement differently in different communities calls for a random slopes analysis of the factors that facilitate or retard the “translation” of awareness into involvement. I have been exploring these issues using MPlus.

Citations

