

Why living in an area with more businesses and denser housing might help keep you safer on the street



Recent decades have seen two important trends in America's cities: a return of young professionals to previously neglected urban cores, and a dramatic decline in violent crime. In new research, which explores these patterns, [Tate Twinam](#) examines the link between crime and the density of land use in Chicago. He finds that in residential areas that also contain shops and other businesses, the denser the housing, the lower the rate of robberies and street assaults.

Most US cities have experienced a dramatic decline in violent crime over the [past three decades](#). Coinciding with this trend is the rise of the “back-to-the-city” movement, where affluent, well-educated (and largely white) young professionals who would have moved to the suburbs in the past have instead [flocked back](#) to dense city centers, reversing decades of urban disinvestment. This surge of population growth in cities has spurred substantial new high-density residential development, much of which incorporates commercial activity as well. This trend towards mixed-use development aims to create walkable neighborhoods that promote urban vibrancy and reduce dependence on cars. In new research, I find that in combination with more dense housing, these mixed-use neighborhoods often experience lower crime rates compared to those that are less dense.

Despite these generally favorable trends towards more livable neighborhoods, public safety remains a critical concern among city dwellers, particularly those concentrated in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods and in cities where violence has remained common despite broader declines in crime. In Chicago, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation/New York Times survey found that residents strongly believe that crime is the single biggest problem facing the city; residents surveyed claimed that the typical young person was at [least as likely](#) to be a victim of violent crime as they were to graduate from college. This is despite the fact that the city already spends [over \\$1.5 billion](#) a year on policing.

Many urban planners and city policymakers have turned to development as a potential tool to promote neighborhood safety. Writing in the 1960s, Jane Jacobs [advanced](#) the idea that denser, mixed-use neighborhoods may promote public safety by generating “eyes upon the street.” The idea is that high levels of pedestrian traffic, along with business owners invested in the community, would generate a rich fabric of social interactions that would enforce norms of civil behavior (both formally and informally). Higher residential density supports more local businesses, and more walkable neighborhoods with a greater diversity of businesses generate more foot traffic. The resulting consistent presence of many potential “guardians” may reduce the incidence of common street crimes like robbery and assault. While this argument is persuasive, it is also possible that greater density promotes social isolation and less familiarity with neighbors. Commercial areas can become prime targets for robbery, and particular businesses like bars and liquor stores may generate more street crime, especially at night. If these effects dominate, then high-density, mixed-use areas may experience more crime than lower-density residential areas.

To answer the question of how different patterns of development influence crime, I analyzed the location of street crimes such as robbery, battery, and assault across the city of Chicago between 2008 and 2013 and examined how land use affected residents’ exposure to crime. Isolating the impact of different land uses on street crime is challenging. While commercial activity may increase crime, it could also be the case that high levels of street crime deter businesses from locating in a neighborhood. Greater density may reduce crime, but it may also be associated with more expensive luxury high-rise development, which is more likely to occur in higher-income (and lower crime) neighborhoods. To measure the direct relationship between different development patterns and street crime, I account for a wide range of neighborhood demographic factors (like poverty, unemployment, and race) that may affect crime. I also exploit the fact that recent trends in crime and gentrification did not drive much commercial and residential development in Chicago, compared to the longevity of the city’s land use regulations. In fact, the city’s original 1923 zoning code predicts much of Chicago’s development today, making it an excellent proxy for contemporary land use. This approach allows me to isolate the causal impact of commercial activity, residential density, and neighborhood walkability on patterns of street crime.



Photo by [Max Bender](#) on [Unsplash](#)

While cities are often described as having overall high or low crime rates, in any given city crime is generally distributed very unevenly. Figure 1 shows the intensity of street robbery across Chicago neighborhoods. Many neighborhoods are nearly devoid of robbery, while some experience areas of very high and very low rates of robbery. In the northwest corner of the city, Norwood Park experiences little crime. Closer to the southeast, the Englewood neighborhood has a high rate of robbery. The commercial/residential district of the Near North Side (above downtown) has an intermediate level of robbery. The high-crime red node farther north along Lake Michigan centers on Boystown, which is well known as a nightlife and entertainment district. My analysis seeks to determine the extent to which this variation in crime both within and across neighborhoods can be explained by different development patterns.

Figure 1

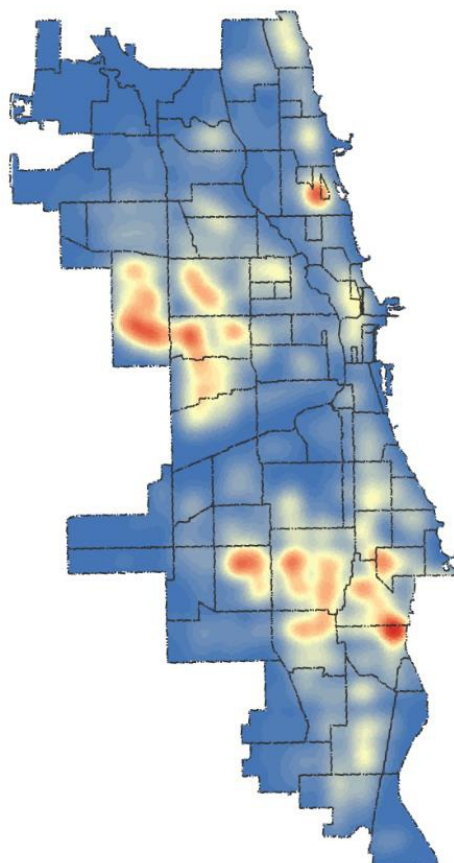
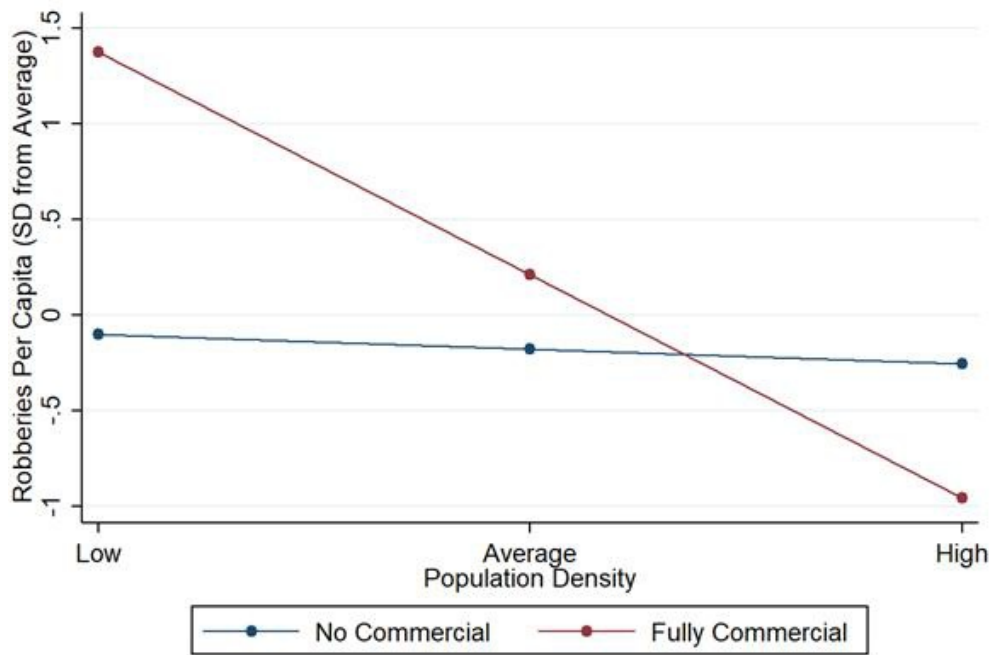


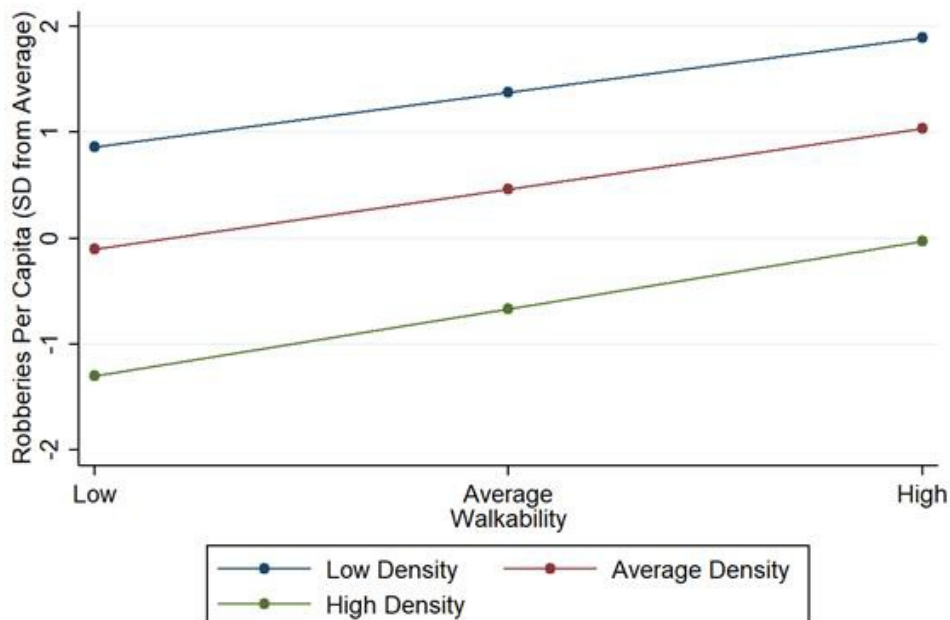
Figure 2 shows street-level robbery rates and population density for both commercial and non-commercial streets. My analysis suggests that, in areas without commercial activity, population density is only weakly related to crime rates. However, commercial areas in low-density neighborhoods experience much higher crime rates than similar residential streets. Importantly, the positive impact of businesses on crime decays as density increases and eventually becomes negative – commercial areas in dense neighborhoods have substantially lower crime rates than similar residential streets. Very similar results hold for crimes like battery and assault.

Figure 2 – Robbery, density and commercial activity



Turning to neighborhood walkability, Figure 3 relates robbery rates to the walkability of a neighborhood at low, average, or high levels of residential density. The figure shows that commercial streets in more walkable neighborhoods generally see higher levels of street crime. This may be because greater levels of pedestrian traffic generate more opportunities for crimes like robbery and assault. However, as before, the impact of walkability on crime is strongly contingent on residential density. Moving from a highly walkable, low-density area to a similar high-density area results in a substantial reduction in robbery rates. The pattern for street assault and battery is virtually identical.

Figure 3 – Street robbery and walkability



Taken together, these results suggest that Jane Jacobs may have been right – while areas that attract pedestrians may also attract criminal behavior, the higher level of neighborhood activity associated with greater density and commercial activity may actually deter criminal behavior. As cities struggle to meet the challenges of providing safe, affordable, and desirable neighborhoods, it is worth keeping in mind the results of this study and many others, which suggest that rules promoting density allow more people to live safer, more productive, and greener lives in America's cities.

- This article is based on the paper "[Danger zone: Land use and the geography of neighborhood crime](#)" published in the *Journal of Urban Economics*.

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