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A Qualitative Study of High Substance Abuse Neighborhood in a Rural College Town

Conrad Vajnar

Fort Hays State University, clvajnar@mail.fhsu.edu

Ziwei Qi

Fort Hays State University, z_qi5@fhsu.edu

Morgan Steele

Fort Hays State University, mjsteele2@fhsu.edu

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Abstract

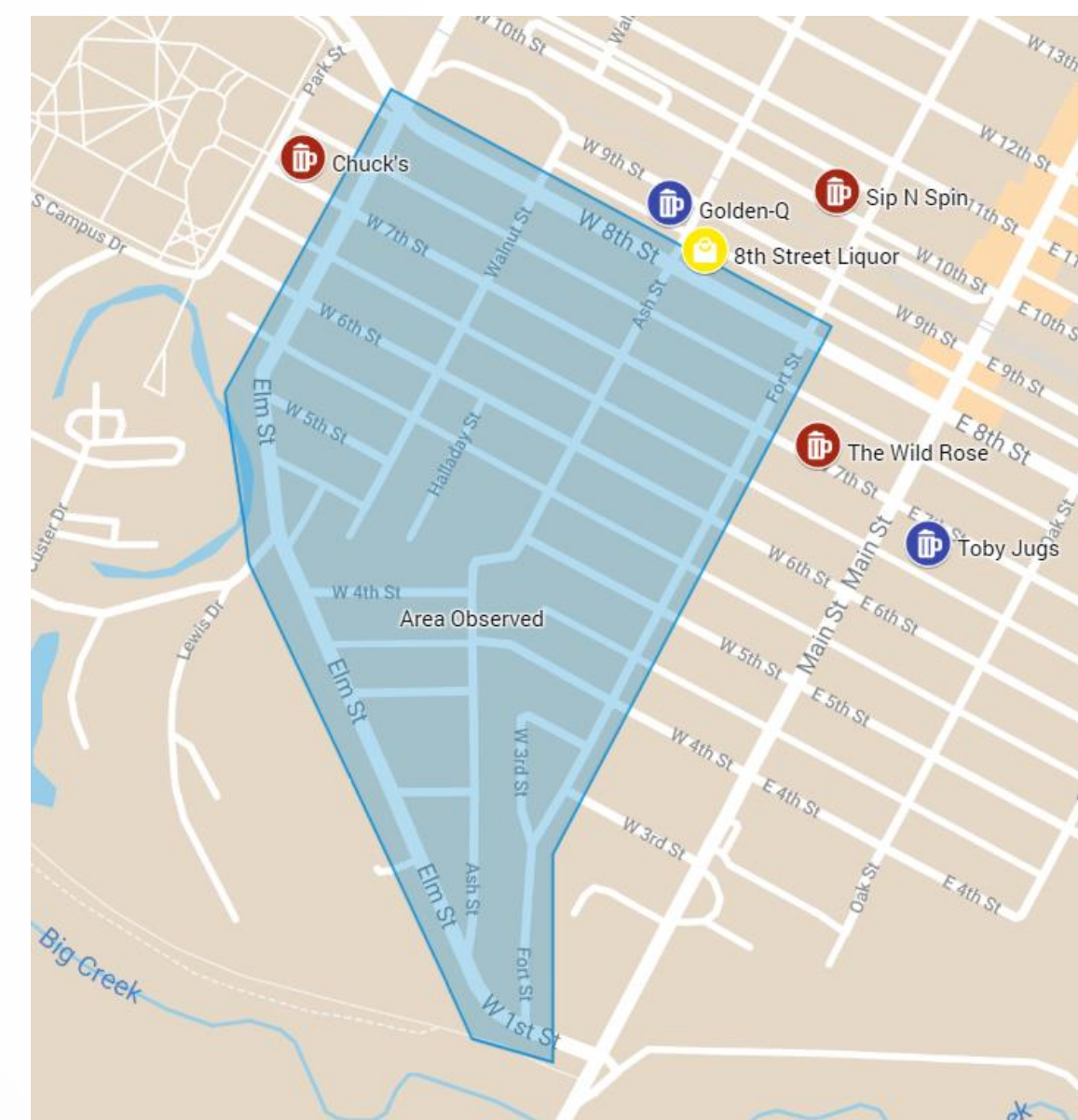
Criminal opportunity and its relation to crime has been the focus of criminological research over the past several decades; other studies have shown that substance abuse also influences crime. However, limited attention has been paid to how substance abuse increases criminal opportunity especially in rural communities and among college populations. Drawing on theoretical discussion, the researcher conducted a qualitative study by examining the behavioral characteristics of substance abuse amongst college-aged students in Hays, Kansas, a rural college town in Northwest Kansas. Hays has a neighborhood close to the Fort Hays State University (FHSU) campus that is highly populated with college students and yields the highest crime rates. This area is perceived by the public as having frequent incidents of substance abuse responsible for crime. The student population in this area was studied to determine behaviors indicative of substance abuse and how criminal opportunity relates to these behaviors. Systematic qualitative observations were used to collect data for this study.

Literature Review

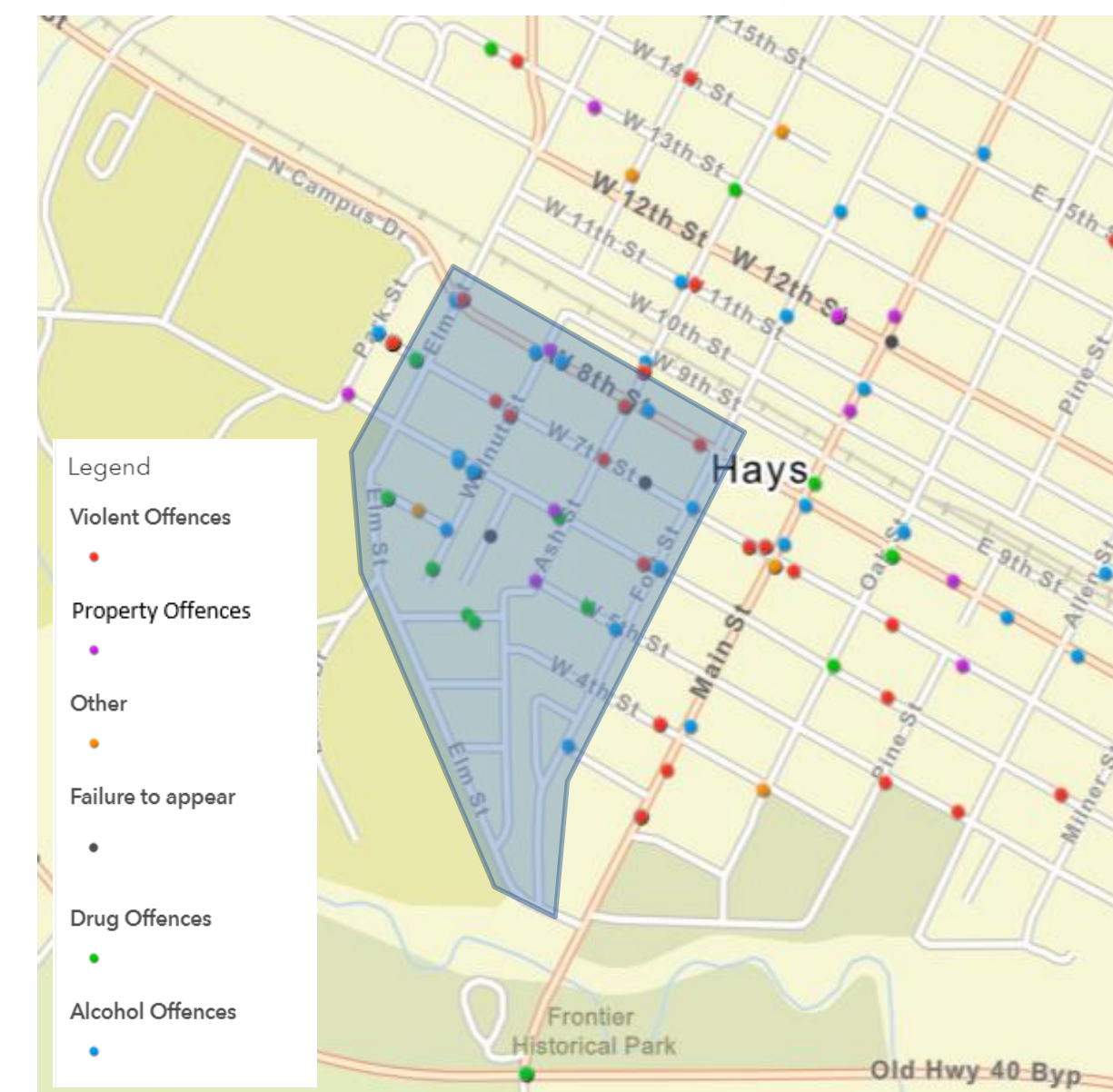
- Many criminology theories have agreed that for crime to exist there not only needs to be criminality (the willingness to commit crime), but also opportunity to commit the crime (Wilcox, Gialopsos, & Land, 2012)
1. Routine activities theory states that the presence of three factors (a motivated offender, a suitable target, and lack of guardianship) increase the likelihood of criminal opportunity. (Cohen & Felson 1979)
2. Offender search theory states that, in addition to the elements of routine activities, the opportunity for crime occurs where offenders' and victims' movements intersect. (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993)
• Substance abuse also influences crime, as it has been found to positively and significantly relate to property, violent, and total crime rates (Gyimah-Brempong, 2001)
• College students engaged in substance abuse activity are more likely to commit or be a victim of a crime (Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994)
• Studies have shown that college students feel that engaging in activities involving drugs and drinking are not a problem and have been found to not seek help when engaged in such activities. (Wechsler et al., 1994; Eastman, 2002; Caldeira, Kasperski, Sharma, Vincent, O'Grady, Wish, & Arria, 2009)

Method

- Observations took place in a neighborhood adjacent to FHSU, dominated primarily by rentals lived in by college students.
• This area was observed to determine the relationship between substance abuse activity and criminal opportunity and the times and places of criminal opportunity.
• Observations took place primarily in the area bordered by Elm St, Fort St, and W 8th St. The areas surrounding the main area were also observed. The observations took place by sitting at certain spots, patrolling through, and following trends of movement throughout the area.
• Observations occurred during the months September through November of 2019, primarily from 4pm-3am on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Total time spent observing was approximately 25 hours.



Area Observed and Locations of Bars and Liquor Stores - Google Maps



Mapped Crime Data of Hays, KS; Hays Police Department; May 2018 - August 2018

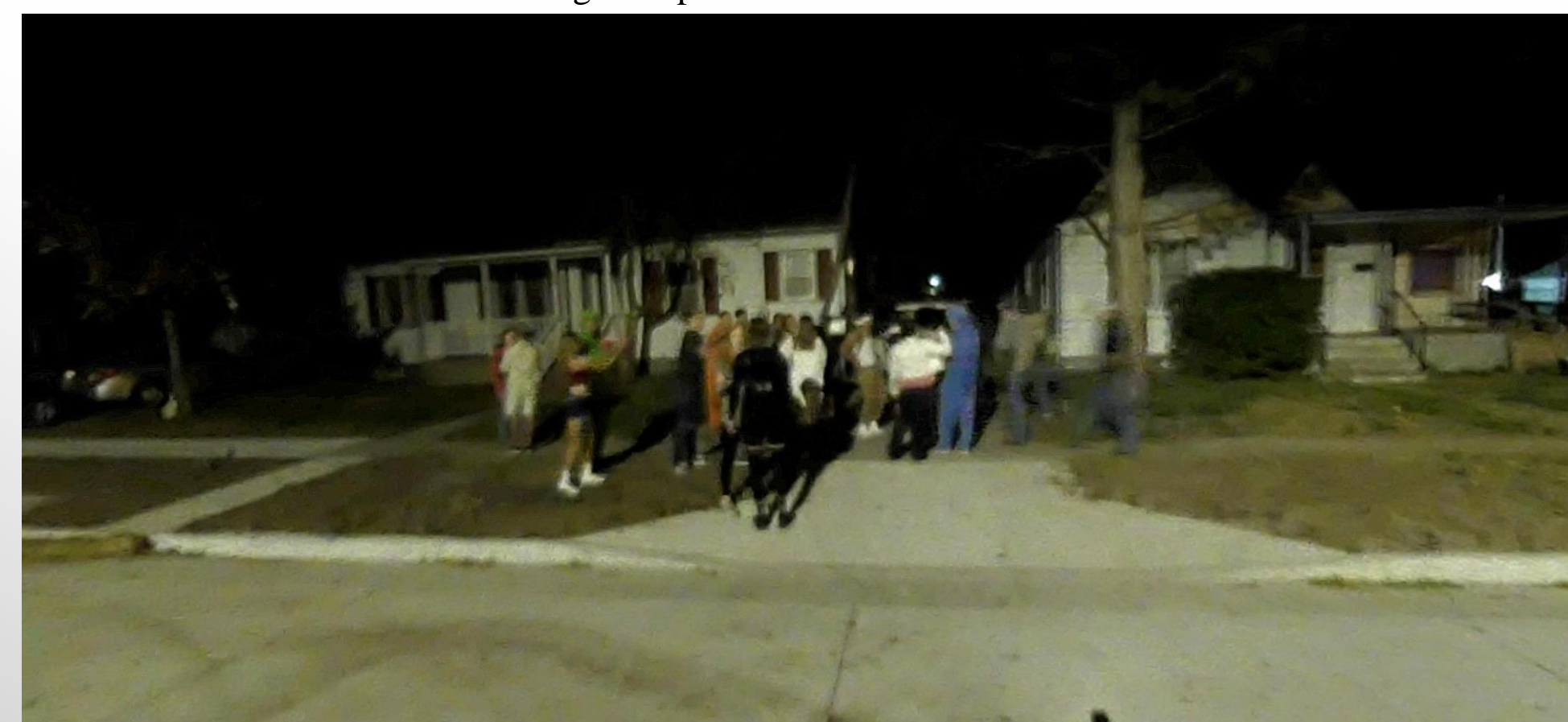


Image of Substance Activity; Taken with 360° Camera at the 100 Block Ash St. on 10/26/2019

Results

Results found a similar pattern of substance abuse activity occurred certain nights in the college neighborhood, which influenced the likelihood of criminal opportunity. Certain times yielded increased opportunity for both criminality and victimization as the number of motivated offenders and suitable targets increased. The highest periods for criminal opportunity include:

- 9:30pm-1am –Large parties began to form in the area, primarily on private property. Opportunities for criminality and victimization increased as large groups of intoxicated individuals gather in one area with limited guardianship.
• 11:30pm-1:30am – Large movement of people on the street travelling between private parties and bars. Criminality increased as people migrating demonstrated intense signs of intoxication and were more likely to engage in property crimes. Victimization was lower as most people moved in groups during this time.
• 12:30-2am – Period of time prior to bars closing, extremely intoxicated people would leave the bars alone. Very high opportunity for victimization.

Criminal opportunity seemed to decrease where guardianship improved (bouncers at the bar, police patrolling streets). This guardianship was limited to only public spaces. In addition to this, the college culture seemed to resist the inclusion of any guardianship in their activities.

Discussion

Implications:

Criminal opportunity follows the pattern of substance abuse activity in the college area. By tracking the activity, you can discover where and when criminal opportunity exists. Getting guardianship to these locations has the possibility to decrease crime.

In addition to this, guardianship can also be increased by working with the college culture. This can be done by trying to take a more helpful and social approach of police to the college community or by creating additional ways of notifying where guardianship is needed.

Limitations of Study:

Crime data was only available in limited amounts, additional data could further reinforce these findings. Only one college location (Hays, KS) was observed, future studies can focus on other college neighborhoods in other college towns. Finally, all observations were done by a single observer each night and only a limited amount of activity could be monitored at once.