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Community crime and safety: An investigation of gender differences in the daily stress process

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Abstract

Few studies have investigated the associations between community crime rates and affective well-being, and how that relationship may differ according to gender. Using data from the National Study of Daily Experiences and the Uniform Crime Reporting Program, the current study examined gender differences between daily affective experiences, crime rates, and perceptions of neighborhood safety. Although feeling unsafe in one's neighborhood was related to worse affective well-being (i.e., higher negative affect/lower positive affect) and larger affective responses to daily stressors, crime rates were not. Women's negative affect was more strongly tied to daily stressors, whereas men's was more strongly tied to lower perceived neighborhood safety. Findings reveal the importance of understanding factors, such as gender, that impact safety concerns beyond that from crime. They also suggest that increasing visibility within communities might dissuade perpetrators and enhance residents' feelings of safety.

KEYWORDS

daily stressors, gender differences, negative affect, perceived neighborhood safety, positive affect, property crime, violent crime

1 | INTRODUCTION

Community crime is associated with adverse health outcomes among residents (Won et al., 2016). A long-standing argument for this link—even among those not directly victimized—is that threatening environments elicit withdrawal among residents (Ross & Mirowsky, 2001). Some have argued this withdrawal is particularly characteristic of women who report more fear of crime than do men, likely due to their higher probability of sexual assault or domestic violence relative to men (Connell, 2014; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021; Meyer & Post, 2006). Others have posited that perceiving one's immediate surroundings as unsafe is chronically stressful (Robinette et al., 2021), and chronic stress can exacerbate the negative effects of daily stressors (Serido et al., 2004). For example, researchers have recently shown that perceiving one's immediate surroundings as unsafe may exacerbate stressors such as an argument with a loved one regarding affective distress (Robinette et al., 2021). Indeed, a sizable literature documents associations between community features and health (Fullin et al., 2023), and researchers have recognized the chronic health toll related to heightened stressor reactivity (Piazza et al., 2013). Combined, the synergistic effect of community threat and individual-level stressors on well-being is informative for at least one primary reason: it highlights a pathway by which community features may relate to health.

Questions remain, however, regarding which features of people's immediate surroundings elicit the most safety concerns. Equally as elusive is the greatest source of malaise: residents observing or learning about crimes that have occurred in one's community, which is considered an objective, measurable source of information, or residents' perceptions of safety in their immediate surroundings. The latter of these phenomenon is known to be related to characteristics of the individual that may have little to do with actual probability of community victimization (Greve et al., 2017). For example, women report such concerns more readily than men (Snedker, 2010). Several feminist theories articulate the reasons for this gender difference is fear and include a process through which gender inequalities in power, prestige, and socioeconomics increase women's vulnerability to crime or violence (Connell, 2014; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021; Meyer & Post, 2006). Others have additionally noted the frequency with which women are exposed to violence at home and general "harassment and intimidation," both of which may rarely be reported to officials, as further explanation for the gender differences in reports of safety concerns (Cops & Pleysier, 2011). Empirical investigation using daily, person, and contextual data may shed light on pathways linking community features to disease, and differential vulnerabilities between men and women. Examining the relative contribution of violent and property crime and perceived neighborhood safety and gender differences therein may highlight disparate strategies for intervention.

2 | CRIME, FEAR OF CRIME, AND HEALTH

Researchers have postulated the multifaceted ways in which residing in an area where crime occurs may relate to the well-being of those indirectly involved, those who observe crime, or those who are simply aware of crime in their communities (Lorenc et al., 2012). This work reveals that an individuals' perceptions of their own risk of victimization, the degree of emotions they experience as a function of crime in the area, and the rate of crime and antisocial behavior in the area are each associated with well-being (Lorenc et al., 2012). Regarding victimization, the probability varies for men and women as well as the type of crime under consideration, with women more likely experiencing sexual or domestic abuse, but men more likely experiencing violent crimes of a less imitate nature (Cops & Pleysier, 2011; Meyer & Post, 2006). Taken together, the strength of associations between community crime and well-being depends on residents' characteristics and features of the community. One possible mechanism explaining relationships between crime and well-being is heightened negative emotions.

For greater context, it is useful to consider the stress process model described forty years ago (Pearlin et al., 1981). Tenets of the stress process model include an observation that lasting strains (e.g., unemployment) gradually deplete personal resources such as adaptive coping reserves with which individuals resolve or endure

stressors. This stress process may ensue differently for men and women, as a plethora of studies document differences between men and women in neural, affective, behavioral, endocrine, and cardiovascular responses to stressors (Bale & Epperson, 2015). The initial stress process model (Pearlin et al., 1981) has been expanded to include environmental features that further shape the degree of emotional response to stressors (Aneshensel, 2009; Browning et al., 2012). Tests of the "neighborhood" stress process model have illustrated that perceived neighborhood social resources (i.e., social cohesion; Robinette et al., 2013) attenuate, and subjective neighborhood safety concerns exacerbate the daily stressor-negative affect association (Robinette et al., 2021). Additionally, gender differences have been noted such that women report more concerns with safety in their communities than do men, and these concerns may be uniquely tied to features that insinuate deterioration of physical and social processes within those residential spaces (Snedker, 2010). The current study predicts that greater objective crime and more neighborhood safety concerns will differentiate people's affective responses to daily stressors, and that women may be more reactive to both daily stressors and neighborhood safety concerns than men.

2.1 | Community features and stressor reactivity

Previous studies have shown that area-based economic disadvantage was indirectly related to psychological distress through residents' greater negative emotionality (Segrin et al., 2021). In another investigation, adolescents residing in areas with greater economic disadvantage had heighted cortisol responses to a laboratory stressor compared to their more economically advantaged peers (Hackman et al., 2012), indicating greater reactivity to minor stressors. Another study compared adolescent participants' neural responses to human faces varying in negative emotional expressions (Suarez et al., 2022). Participants residing in areas with more economic disadvantage responded to negative faces with greater activation of the amygdala, an area of the brain responsible for processing emotional information.

Few studies have examined associations between objective measures of crime and affective responses to daily stressors. This paucity of research limits our understanding for how crime relates to residents' health through stress processes and is remarkable given known links between area-based socioeconomic status (SES) and local crime (Almeida et al., 2024; Chamberlain & Hipp, 2015; Smyth et al., 2018; Won et al., 2016). A recent study demonstrated that children living in poor or crime-ridden areas have greater circulating levels of c-reactive protein, and this elevated inflammation could be a pathway linking crime to health (Broyles et al., 2012). Others observed that, in areas with recent increases in burglary rates, there are increases in male residents' levels of c-reactive protein (Browning et al., 2012). Another laboratory study reported that people living in poor areas reported more fear of crime, but fear was not directly associated with cortisol reactivity to the laboratory stressor (Barrington et al., 2014). A separate study found that, at least among children, violent crime was associated with poorer recovery from a laboratory stressor as measured by levels of the stress hormone, cortisol (Theall et al., 2017). Another study showed that people who perceive their neighborhoods as unsafe report heightened negative affect in response to daily stressors such as arguments (Robinette et al., 2021). Although these findings support tenets of the "neighborhood" stress process model (Aneshensel, 2009), others have called for more work to disentangle residents' safety concerns from objective crime rates (Lorenc et al., 2012).

2.2 | Gender, community features, and stressor reactivity

Women not only perceive their risk of being victimized by crime as greater, but also report more fear of crime than do men (Cops & Pleysier, 2011; Lagrange & Ferraro, 1989). Some argue that women are more likely than men to read signs of physical disorder (e.g., vacant buildings, poor lighting), social disorder (e.g., vandalism, public substance

use), and serious crime in their areas as cues for potential victimization (Snedker, 2010). And, research suggests that women are more likely than men to suffer from stress-related physiological health problems when they perceive their residential areas as unsafe (Robinette & Beam, 2018).

Gender differences in susceptibility to community features may moderate individuals' stress responses. Often, women exhibit heightened affective responses, and men display greater physiological responses to stressors (Ordaz & Luna, 2012). A recent review reported that women, more than men, respond to stress with increased hyperarousal (Bangasser et al., 2018). One possibility is that women are more vigilant to their environmental circumstances. One study suggested that lower SES individuals have worse physical health, that this socioeconomic-health association is partially explained via heighted stressor reactivity, and this pathway is stronger among women than men (Jiang et al., 2023). These findings align with theories suggesting that gender inequality in SES increases women's vulnerability to violence and fear of crime (Meyer & Post, 2006). Coupled with research indicating that perceived neighborhood safety concerns are more strongly linked to physiological well-being among women than men (Robinette & Beam, 2018), it is important to further investigate objective and subjective sources of community threat in relation to the stress process for men and women.

2.3 | The present study

The goals of the present study were threefold. First, we aim to replicate a published association between perceived neighborhood safety and affective responses to daily stressors using a more recent wave of data (Robinette et al., 2021). Second, we investigate a novel question regarding whether rates of violent and property crime exacerbate affective responses to daily stressors. Finally, we investigate whether these sources of community threat differentially relate to men and women's affective experiences. This final aim directly relates to recent calls for more attention to the ways in which fear of crime—both its causes and consequences—may differ for men and women (Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021). The Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) survey allows for such an investigation, given the rich daily data characterizing stressors and affective experiences and the wide array of contextual indicators that members of our research team have linked to participant records. Although neither MIDUS stressor and affect data nor Uniform Crime Reporting data used in the present study are new, the novelty in the current analysis is the linkage of these sources of information which enables an investigation of the daily stress process in participants' environmental context. In fact, the current data are uniquely positioned to test theories related to gender differences in vulnerability to different types of crime (Meyer & Post, 2006).

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 | Participants and procedure

The MIDUS survey examines psychological, social, cognitive, and physical health of US midlife adults. The 1995 wave was conducted among individuals 25–75 years of age. Most participants were recruited via random digit dialing procedures, with the remainder representing siblings of the random sample and specific city oversamples. In 2005, data collection was repeated and supplemented with an 8-day diary study, the National Study of Daily Experiences (NSDE) among a subset of participants. NSDE examined participants' reports of minor daily stressors (e.g., an argument with a loved one) and daily affective experiences. Each evening over an 8-day period, NSDE staff made telephone calls to participants to conduct interviews asking participants about stressors that may have occurred and participants' levels of positive and negative affect since the time of the last call. Finally, both MIDUS and NSDE were repeated in 2014 (Ryff & Almeida, 2017–2019). The latest wave of NSDE data were linked via county identifiers to data from the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR), a program in which local crime data is

collected from law enforcement agencies across the US, and data from the American Community Survey (ACS) which collects sociodemographic data from US households. The ACS releases county-level sociodemographic data using 5-year estimates, and the 2009–2013 estimate was used in the current analyses. These data linkages were completed via an approved data use agreement between the MIDUS Administrative Core and the first author. The first author sent crime and sociodemographic data for all US counties to the MIDUS Administrative Core, members of which then linked county-level crime and sociodemographic data to MIDUS participant records. The final data set returned to the first author included MIDUS health and county-level crime and sociodemographic data with all geographic identifiers removed. The final analytic sample (n = 1034) had complete data on all analytic variables so that direct comparisons could be made between objective and subjective community features in relation to daily stress outcomes.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | County crime rates

Law enforcement agencies across the US voluntarily submit crime statistics in their jurisdictions to the UCR which are aggregated to the county level each year (United States Department of Justice, 2013). These crime data along with five-digit, county-level federal information processing system (FIPS-based) geographic identifiers are made publicly available. Violent (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and property (burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson) crimes in 2013 were summed to create separate crime composites. These composite variables were adjusted for total county population, with the final proportion multiplied by 100,000 for interpretation (i.e., crimes per 100,000 county residents). Final county-level violent and property crime rates were linked to MIDUS/NSDE participant records using the five-digit, county-level FIPS-based geographic identifiers.

3.2.2 | Perceived neighborhood safety

Two questions asked participants the degree to which they, "feel safe being out alone in my neighborhood during the daytime (at night)." Participants used a scale from 1 "a lot" to 4 "not at all." These items were reverse-scored and averaged so that higher scores reflected greater safety concerns (Keyes, 1998). Given that most participants reported little neighborhood safety concern, a dichotomized variable was created in which participants were coded as 0 (60%) if they felt safe (including only those with a score of "1" on the continuous scale) or 1 (40%) if they did not feel safe (including the remainder of the participants with scores greater than "1" on the continuous scale) (α = 0.54).

3.2.3 | Daily stressors

On each interview day, participants reported whether they experienced any of seven stressors: "Did you have an argument or disagreement with anyone since (this time/we spoke) yesterday?" "Did anything happen that you could have argued about but you decided to let pass to avoid a disagreement?" "Did anything happen at work or school (other than what you already mentioned) that most people would consider stressful?" "Did anything happen at home (other than what you already mentioned) that most people would consider stressful?" "Many people experience discrimination on the basis of such things as race, sex, or age. Did anything like this happen to you since (this time/we spoke) yesterday?" "Did anything happen to a close friend or relative (other than what you've already

mentioned) that turned out to be stressful for you?" And, "Did anything else happen to you since (this time/we spoke) yesterday that people would consider stressful?" Participants answered either "yes" or "no" to these items (Almeida, Wethington & Kessler, 2002).

Total stressors were added each day, for each participant, by the NSDE team. We used these daily totals to create a new variable that sums these stressors across all eight diary days to generate the total stressors reported over the diary period. This total stressor variable was included in analytic models to adjust for known cumulative, chronic interactions with daily acute stressors (Serido et al., 2004). NSDE researchers provide an additional dichotomous variable that indicates days during which no stressors were reported (coded 0) and days when one or more stressors were reported (coded 1). This dichotomous variable was used among the primary predictor variables in relation to daily affect, and in interaction with crime and perceived neighborhood safety.

3.2.4 | Negative affect

Participants answered 14 questions about negative affect they experienced. The stem question, "How much of the time today did you feel…" was used to ask about feelings such as "restless or fidgety," "nervous," "worthless," "hopeless," and "lonely." Response options ranged from 0 "none of the time" to 4 "all of the time." Items were averaged so that higher values reflected higher negative affect (Almeida & Kessler, 1998; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Watson et al., 1988). Following methods outlined by Scott et al. (2020) for calculating reliability with daily diary designs, and consistent with previous research using the NSDE, within- and between-person reliabilities for negative affect were $\alpha = 0.77$ and $\alpha = 0.97$, respectively.

3.2.5 | Positive affect

Thirteen questions asked participants about positive affect. Participants reported "How much of the time today did you feel…" using emotions such as "in good spirits," "cheerful," and "extremely happy." Response options ranged from 0 "none of the time" to 4 "all of the time" and were averaged so that higher values reflected higher positive affect (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Watson et al., 1988). Within- and between-person reliabilities for positive affect were $\alpha = 0.86$ and $\alpha = 0.99$, respectively (Scott et al., 2020).

3.2.6 | Covariates

Individual- and county-level covariates known to be associated with well-being, neighborhood features, or both were included in statistical models. Age was coded in years. Gender, which was coded as male (1) or female (2) as no other categories were available in MIDUS, was used. Although education with 12 levels from no school through doctorate/medical degree was available, an education variable was constructed that collapsed these categories into five levels, including 0 = some high school (levels 1–3), 1 = high school graduate or GED (levels 4–5), 2 = some college (levels 6–8), 3 = 4-year degree (level 9), and 4 = some graduate school or higher (levels 10 and above).

The 2009–2013 ACS 5-year estimate was linked to NSDE data (Manson et al., 2023). A measure representing county-level SES was constructed by calculating proportions of female-headed households with children, people with income below the federal poverty threshold, and people who are unemployed. These three proportions were standardized and averaged. County SES was included to investigate whether crime related to daily affect above associations with area-based socioeconomic disadvantage (Segrin et al., 2021).

3.3 | Statistical analyses

All statistical analyses were conducted using SAS 9.4. The sample was described by requesting means and standard deviations for continuous variables and proportions for categorical variables. The data were prepared in a person-period file in which up to a maximum of eight observations (Level 1) were nested within participants' unique identifier (Level 2). Because siblings were recruited to MIDUS, participants can be further nested within families (Level 3). PROC MIXED was used to model within- and between-person variance in daily negative and positive affect. In a separate set of models, between-family variance was considered in a three-level model to determine the degree of family-level dependency on model results (see note to the results tables). Three sets of models were conducted to predict negative and positive affect by violent crime rates, property crime rates, and perceived neighborhood safety. The sample with complete data (n = 1034) was represented in the three sets of models so that comparisons could be made across the three crime and safety-related predictor variables. Model 1 included the neighborhood feature (level 2) and dichotomous stressor variable (level 1) main effects, and Model 2 added the interaction between the two. These models adjusted for participant age, gender, educational degree, total stressors, and county-level SES. To further compare the hypothesized associations between negative and positive affect and perceived neighborhood safety and objective crime rates, a final set of models was conducted with perceived neighborhood safety, violent crime, and property crime entered simultaneously.

Model 3 was conducted to evaluate potential gender differences in the hypothesized interplay between multiple sources of neighborhood threat and daily stressors in relation to positive and negative affect. To this aim, interaction terms between gender and (1) daily stressors and (2) three sources of neighborhood threat (perceived neighborhood safety, violent crime, and property crime) were added to the models predicting positive and negative affect.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Participant description

A description of the sample can be found in Table 1. On a scale from 1 to 4, average negative affect was somewhat low, and average positive affect was fairly high. Participants generally reported feeling safe in their neighborhoods. Violent crimes were reported less often, at an average rate of 327 crimes for every 100,000 people in the county, than property crimes, which were reported at an average rate of 2599 per 100,000 people. There were only slightly more women than men in this sample (average age 63 years).

4.2 | Perceived neighborhood safety: Main effects, interactions, and gender differences

Table 2 displays results of within- and between-person models using perceived neighborhood safety as a predictor. Results of Model 1 suggest that participants who perceived their neighborhoods as unsafe reported significantly higher negative and lower positive affect compared to those who perceived their neighborhoods as safe. Significantly higher negative affect lower positive affect was reported on days when at least one stressor was reported compared to days when no stressors were reported. In Model 2, the interaction was significant for negative affect and suggested that the association between daily stressors and negative affect was even stronger among those living in neighborhoods perceived to be unsafe. This interaction was not significant when considering positive affect as an outcome (see Figure 1, Panels a and d). When all possible interactions between the daily stressor variable and covariates were added to the model, the interaction between perceived neighborhood safety and daily stressors remained (est. = −0.02, p = 0.0479).

TABLE 1 Description of the US National Study of daily experiences analytic sample (2013).

	Mean (*SE*)	Range
Negative affect	0.25 (0.31)	0 to 2.71
Positive affect	2.70 (0.68)	0.08 to 4
Perceived neighborhood safety	1.31 (0.52)	1 to 4
Violent crime rate	327.29 (21.08)	0 to 1409.30
Property crime rate	2599.33 (1164.52)	0 to 6551.83
Days with at least one stressor[a]	38.78%	
Age	62.63 (10.32)	43 to 90
Women	56.17%	
Education		
Some high school	2.52%	
High school graduate, GED	19.45%	
Some college	31.04%	
4-year degree	24.14%	
Some graduate school	22.85%	
Total stressors	39.63 (79.82)	0 to 694
County socioeconomic status	−0.13 (0.77)	−1.92 to 3.98

[a]Compared to days when no stressors were reported.

In Model 3 the interaction terms between gender and (1) daily stressors and (2) perceived neighborhood safety were added. Results of these models yielded several findings. First, the significant interaction between daily stressors and perceived neighborhood safety remained for negative affect, such that people who reported more safety concerns exhibited greater increases in negative affect on days in which at least one stressor was reported. Second, women exhibited greater stressor-related increases in negative affect, and decreases in positive affect than did men (see Figure 1, Panels b and e). And third, the associations between perceiving one's neighborhood as unsafe and reporting higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect were stronger among men than women (see Figure 1, Panels c and f). We note that these three interactions were significantly associated with negative and positive affect when evaluated individually and simultaneously (with the exception that the interaction between perceived neighborhood safety and daily stressors was never significantly related to positive affect), so only the models with these three interactions entered simultaneously are reported in Table 2. We investigated three-way interactions between gender, perceived neighborhood safety, and daily stressors in relation to negative and positive affect, but these interactions were not statistically significant (negative affect: coef. = −0.02, $p = 0.2617$; positive affect: coef. = −0.03, $p = 0.4307$).

4.3 | County-level violent and property crime: Main effects, interactions, and gender differences

The next set of models investigated novel questions relating to potential interactions between daily stressors and county-level violent or property crime rates in relation to affective experiences. Results of these models can be

TABLE 2 Multi-level models predicting negative and positive affect by perceived neighborhood safety (est. [*SE*]), $n = 1034$.

	Negative affect			Positive affect		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.27 (0.04)	0.25 (0.04)	0.30 (0.04)	2.34 (0.14)	2.35 (0.14)	2.20 (0.15)
Days with 1+ stressor[a]	0.13*** (0.00)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.02)	−0.11*** (0.01)	−0.08** (0.03)	−0.12*** (0.03)
Neighborhood safety[b]	0.06*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)	−0.25*** (0.04)	−0.26*** (0.04)	−0.16** (0.05)
Stressor × Safety		−0.03** (0.01)	−0.02* (0.01)		0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Gender	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.13*** (0.03)	−0.00 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.39*** (0.12)
Gender × Stressor			0.02* (0.01)			−0.07*** (0.02)
Gender × Safety			0.09*** (0.02)			−0.29** (0.08)
Age	−0.00** (0.00)	−0.00** (0.00)	−0.00** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Education[c]						
Some high school	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.21 (0.13)	0.21 (0.13)	0.24 (0.13)
High school grad	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.15* (0.06)	0.15** (0.06)	0.16** (0.06)
Some college	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.02)	0.10 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	0.11 (0.06)
4-year degree	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)
Average stressors	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
County socioeconomic status	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)

Note: Results were unchanged in a three-level model accounting for potential family-level variance, thus results of the two-level models are shown in the table as the aims of the current study were to examine between-person differences in variance.

[a]Compared to nonstressor days.

[b]Compared to participants who do not feel safe in their neighborhoods.

[c]Compared to some graduate school or a graduate degree.

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

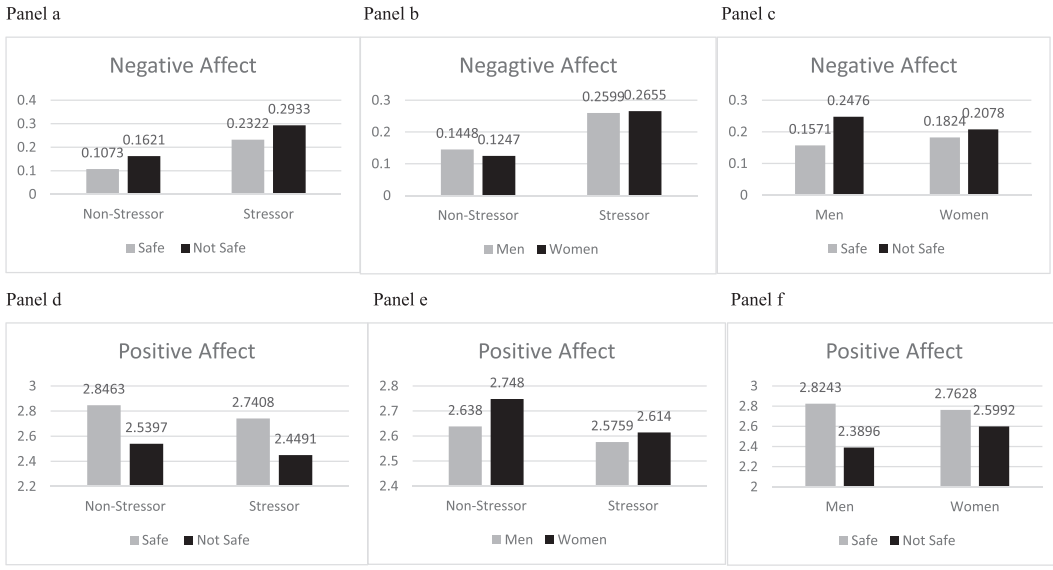

FIGURE 1 Interactions between perceived neighborhood safety and stressors (Panels a and d), gender and stressors (Panels b and e), and gender and perceived neighborhood safety (Panels c and f) for negative affect (top row) and positive affect (bottom row).

found in Tables 3 and 4. Models 1 and 2 revealed that neither violent nor property crime significantly predicted negative or positive affect or interacted with daily stressors to predict negative or positive affect.

To examine potential gender differences in the hypothesized interplay among violent and property crime and daily stressors, a third model was conducted that included gender × stressor and gender × crime interactions (see Tables 3 and 4). Neither violent nor property crime exacerbated the associations between daily stressors and affect. Women responded with greater increases in negative, and greater decreases in positive affect in response to daily stressors than did men. Finally, as a novel test regarding potential gender differences, Model 3 showed that there were no significant differences between men and women regarding associations between violent or property crime and negative or positive affect. The patterns of results across these interactions were the same regardless of independent or simultaneous investigation, so only the model with three simultaneous interactions is shown in Tables 3 and 4. In addition, none of the three-way interactions were significant (violent crime × stressors × gender and negative affect: coef. = 0.00, $p = 0.1916$; property crime × stressors × gender and negative affect: coef. = 0.00, $p = 0.1855$; violent crime × stressors × gender and positive affect: coef. = −0.00, $p = 0.2052$; property crime × stressors × gender and positive affect: coef. = −0.00, $p = 0.2751$).

4.4 | Examining unique contributions amongst sources of neighborhood threat

A final set of models were examined to investigate negative and positive affect in relation to perceived neighborhood safety, violent crime, and property crime when included in the same model. The first set of models examined negative affect. Participants reported significantly higher negative affect if they felt less safe in their neighborhoods (est. = 0.06, $p < 0.0001$), but neither violent crime rates (est. = −0.00, $p = 0.79$) nor property crime rates (est. = 0.00, $p = 0.75$) significantly predicted negative affect. Perceived neighborhood safety significantly exacerbated daily stressors when predicting negative affect (est. = −0.03, $p = 0.006$), but neither violent crime (est. = −0.00, $p = 0.37$) nor property crime (est. = 0.00, $p = 0.70$) significantly interacted with daily stressors.

TABLE 3 Multi-level models predicting negative and positive affect by county-level violent crime rate (est. [SE]), $n = 1034$.

	Negative affect			Positive affect		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.33 (0.04)	0.33 (0.04)	0.33 (0.10)	2.05 (0.14)	2.04 (0.14)	2.05 (0.14)
Days with 1+ stressor[a]	0.13*** (0.00)	0.12*** (0.01)	0.13*** (0.10)	−0.11*** (0.01)	−0.11*** (0.02)	−0.13*** (0.02)
Violent crime rate[b]	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Stressor × Violent crime		−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)		−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.08)
Gender × Stressor			0.03** (0.01)			−0.07*** (0.02)
Gender × Violent crime			−0.00 (0.00)			0.00 (0.00)
Age	−0.00** (0.00)	−0.00* (0.00)	−0.00** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Education[c]						
Some high school	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.18 (0.13)	0.18 (0.13)	0.18 (0.13)
High school grad	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.10 (0.06)	0.10 (0.06)	0.10 (0.060
Some college	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.09 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)
4-year degree	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)
Average stressors	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
County socioeconomic status	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)

Note: Results were unchanged in a three-level model accounting for potential family-level variance, thus results of the two-level models are shown in the table as the aims of the current study were to examine between-person differences in variance.

[a]Compared to nonstressor days.

[b]Compared to participants who do not feel safe in their neighborhoods.

[c]Compared to some graduate school or a graduate degree.

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

TABLE 4 Multi-level models predicting negative and positive affect by county-level property crime rate (est. [SE]), $n = 1034$.

	Negative affect			Positive affect		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.33 (0.04)	0.32 (0.04)	0.32 (0.04)	2.07 (0.15)	2.07 (0.15)	2.03 (0.15)
Days with 1+ stressor[a]	0.13*** (0.00)	0.12*** (0.01)	0.13*** (0.01)	−0.11*** (0.01)	−0.11*** (0.03)	−0.13*** (0.03)
Property crime rate[b]	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Stressor × Property crime		−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)		−0.00 (0.00)	0.000 (0.00)
Gender	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.16 (0.10)
Gender × Stressor			0.03** (0.01)			−0.07*** (0.02)
Gender × Property crime			−0.00 (0.00)			−0.00 (0.00)
Age	−0.00** (0.00)	−0.00** (0.00)	−0.00** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Education[c]						
Some high school	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.17 (0.13)	0.17 (0.13)	0.17 (0.13)
High school grad	−0.00 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.10 (0.06)	0.10 (0.06)	0.10 (0.06)
Some college	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.09 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)
4-year degree	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Average stressors	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
County socioeconomic status	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)

Note: Results were unchanged in a three-level model accounting for potential family-level variance, thus results of the two-level models are shown in the table as the aims of the current study were to examine between-person differences in variance.

[a]Compared to nonstressor days.

[b]Compared to participants who do not feel safe in their neighborhoods.

[c]Compared to some graduate school or a graduate degree.

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

The second set of models examined positive affect. People who felt less safe in their neighborhoods reported significantly lower positive affect (est. = −0.25, $p < 0.0001$), but neither violent crime rates (est. = 0.00, $p = 0.49$) nor property crime rates (est. = −0.00, $p = 0.83$) were significantly related to positive affect. Daily stressors did not significantly interact with perceived neighborhood safety (est. = 0.02, $p = 0.32$), violent crime rates (est. = 0.00, $p = 0.99$), or property crime rates (est. = −0.00, $p = 0.82$) in association with positive affect.

5 | DISCUSSION

The work presented in this report was motivated by several lines of inquiry. First, individuals who exhibit heightened reactivity to the stressors that occur in their daily lives have worse health than those who exhibit less reactivity (Piazza et al., 2013); and, women generally exhibit greater reactivity to such stressors compared to men (Bale & Epperson, 2015). Second, individuals who perceive their neighborhoods as unsafe generally have worse health than their counterparts without such concerns (Robinette & Beam, 2018); and, women are more likely than men to report that their neighborhoods are unsafe (Snedker, 2010). Perceiving one's neighborhood as unsafe, in turn, exacerbates the association between daily stressors and negative affect (Robinette et al., 2021). Yet, a notable gap in these lines of inquiry exists regarding potential differences between men and women in the associations among perceived neighborhood safety, daily stressors, and self-reported affective experiences.

Similar to previous work (e.g., Robinette et al., 2021), the results of the current study revealed that perceiving one's neighborhood as unsafe exacerbated daily stress responses in relation to negative, albeit not positive, affect among men and women. The unique contributions of the current analyses, however, were the inclusion of violent and property crime in people's local area, and the examination of gender differences in the neighborhood × stressor associations. Results of the current study suggest objective crime rates are not associated with daily affective processes. These null findings are of relevance both to those seeking psychological care for management of distress originating from their neighborhood environment, and to those seeking to target neighborhood-level interventions.

Although women were more reactive to daily stressors than men, a finding that is consistent with others' research (Bale & Epperson, 2015), men who perceived their neighborhoods as unsafe experienced greater affective distress than did women. This novel finding may be interpreted to mean that, although women are relatively more vigilant to threats in one's social network, men may be more vigilant to threats in the broader social environment. This finding is consistent with some feminist perspectives, namely that women are more likely than men to be the victims of sexual or domestic violence, yet men are more likely to be the victims of nonintimate violence (Meyer & Post, 2006). Finally, the three-way interactions between gender, neighborhood safety concerns, and daily stressors on affect were null, indicating that despite several gender differences in the above components, the effect size for the exacerbating effect of neighborhood safety concerns on the daily stressor-affect association does not differ significantly by gender.

5.1 | Crime: Epidemiology and prevention

Crime is prevalent in the US, and its prevalence is greater in some geographic areas than others (Kondo, Andreyeva, South, MacDonald & Branas, 2018). Area-based characteristics that influence local crime rates include poverty, unemployment, and lack of “acquaintanceships,” or informal relationships among residents (Donnermeyer, 2015). Visible signs of physical deterioration in the neighborhood, such as vacant buildings and vandalism, may also insinuate a potential for crime, while parks and street lighting are associated with reduced crime (Kondo et al., 2018). Some recent research demonstrates that “cleaning” (e.g., removing dirt and trash) and “greening” (e.g., adding vegetation) in people's immediate surroundings minimizes gender differences in perceived safety (Jiang et al., 2017).

Targeting individual criminal behavior may be a less fruitful endeavor when the goal is local crime rate reduction, and a more efficient means for such crime reduction may be modification of the environments in which crime occurs (for a review see Mair & Mair, 2003). Classic writing on this topic argues that modifying aspects of the neighborhood in ways that minimize the number of "suitable targets" and maximize the number of "capable guardians" may reduce opportunities for "motivated offenders" to commit various forms of crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Such neighborhood modification may include features of the physical environment that provide opportunities for witness surveillance or increase the required effort for criminal actions (e.g., street lighting, continuous sidewalks, separation between public and private spaces, and repair of vandalized or decaying aspects of the built environment) and interactions and cohesion among residents (e.g., green space; Kondo et al., 2018; Mair & Mair, 2003).

Local law enforcement presence and surveillance often do little to curb crime rates (Donnermeyer, 2015), and some policies aimed at crime reduction either fail to minimize crime, or increase some crime (Kovandzic et al., 2004). The current narrative does not suggest that such crime policies should not be legislated, but rather that additional steps, which are informed by unique neighborhood features, need to be considered. Physical neighborhood characteristics are more proximal to residents when compared to higher-order legislation, and their modification may result in greater local control of crime and reduced fear of crime.

5.2 | Fear of crime

The current argument suggests that *some* residents' health may relate less to what is happening in their neighborhoods (i.e., crime) and more to how they *feel* about their neighborhoods (Warr, 2000). There is no denying the real cost of crime in terms of life, health, and economics, particularly for those directly involved (Kondo et al., 2018). But, fear of crime, even in the absence of direct involvement, is associated with adverse psychological, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Lorenc et al., 2012; Warr, 2000). In the present study, neighborhood safety concerns related to higher negative affect, lower positive affect, and greater negative affect reactivity to stressors while the same was not observed for objective crime rates. Also, and contrary to our expectation, men experienced more affective distress related to perceiving their neighborhoods as unsafe than did women. This finding is nevertheless supported by literature documenting the source of violence that differs between men and women, with men more likely to be the victims of community violence (Meyer & Post, 2006). Finally, the interaction between perceived neighborhood safety and daily stressors was still significantly associated with negative affect even after including interactions between daily stressors and both types of crime (est. = −0.03, $p = 0.0064$). A distinction has been made that "fear is not a perception of the environment… but a reaction to the perceived environment" (Warr, 2000, p. 453). How someone *feels* about their neighborhood arguably has direct associations with well-being (Lorenc et al., 2012). The current study supports this argument by showing that perceptions of safety are more closely associated with daily affective well-being than are violent and property crime rates.

Even with low objective crime rates, a neighborhood may still appear unsafe due to the physical environment. Previous research has shown this to be particularly true for women (Snedker, 2010). Strategies that adapt physical neighborhood features in ways that increase visibility in public spaces might reduce victimization and alleviate safety concerns. Visibility may dissuade perpetrators while also reducing individuals' perception of their own victimization. Our argument is that finding ways for residents to feel safer in their neighborhoods may decrease the prevalence of health problems via an attenuation of individuals' stressor reactivity (Charles et al., 2013; Piazza et al., 2013). We do not suggest that residents should disregard dangerous situations or tolerate actual crime, but rather that research is needed to identify neighborhood features that relate to, or attenuate perceived threat or vigilance. Moreover, it is possible that residents are aware of crimes that occurred but are unreported. For example, 63% of sexual assaults go unreported (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2023). Certain situations that may not qualify as criminal activity, could nevertheless be questionable and impact an individual's safety perception

(Mair & Mair, 2003 p. 214). Thus, in addition to improving the physical environment, future research should examine the factors that contribute to one's perception of neighborhood safety.

5.3 | Why negative and not positive affect?

Results of the current study showed heightened negative affect in response to daily stressors among those reporting less neighborhood safety. However, a similar pattern was not detected for positive affect. One reason for this could have been differences in the types of emotions and daily stressors assessed. Negative affect was constructed with emotions such as "nervous," "afraid," and "jittery," which reflect what one may feel in situations deemed as unsafe. The daily stressors assessed in the current study include items asking about arguments with loved ones or stressors among members of one's social network. Social threats from the surrounding area may elicit more feelings of being nervous or afraid, particularly when one has recently experienced a threat to their social network, social relationship, or social support. In contrast, the positive emotions assessed in the current study included adjectives such as "satisfied," "enthusiastic," or "confident." These adjectives may reflect a person's sense of self and were not significantly related to an interaction between daily stressors and perceptions of neighborhood safety.

One caveat is that there was a significant association between neighborhood safety concerns and lower levels of positive affect, particularly for men. This unexpected finding may be explained by two synergizing phenomena. First, men are more likely than women to become the *actual* victims of neighborhood crime (Lagrange & Ferraro, 1989). This first point suggests that men may suffer lower positive affect in neighborhoods perceived as unsafe due to their perception of victimization. Second, gender roles relating to labor division and responsibilities may modulate responses to stressors that men and women experience (Davis et al., 2011). This second point suggests that feeling unsafe in one's neighborhood may be more related to a decline in sense of self (i.e., via reduced satisfaction, enthusiasm, and confidence) among men than women.

6 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our analyses have many strengths, including the use of a national sample of US midlife adults, the use of both objective and subjective measures of neighborhood safety, rich daily diary data that adds to the ecological validity to the self-reported daily stress process, and an investigation of gender differences. Nonetheless, some limitations are worth mentioning. First, although ours was among the first investigations using a national sample of midlife US adults to investigate affective experiences in relation to multiple subjective and objective sources of threat, the paucity of work in this area restricts our ability to make direct comparisons between our findings and those of others. Second, the current study linked crime rate data to participants' data, but we lacked information to determine the degree to which individuals are explicitly aware of the crime events in their local areas. Relatedly, the present study used county-level crime data to test research hypotheses. US counties vary in their geographic area, and county-level crime may not be at a sufficiently granular level to optimally evaluate associations with well-being. Moreover, crime data are voluntarily submitted by local law agencies to the UCR, and as such, there may be geographic variability in the reliability of some crime statistics. Third, MIDUS, does not adequately represent the US population of midlife adults given the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the sample. Several lines of work demonstrate racial/ethnic disparities in health and neighborhoods (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Douglas et al., 2020; Groos et al., 2018; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Steve et al., 2016; Williams & Mohammed, Leavell, et al., 2010; Williams & Sternthal, 2010), and recent research points to racial/ethnic differences in relationships between neighborhood features and perceived neighborhood safety (Velasquez et al., 2022). Similarly, participants in the current study reported feeling relatively safe in their environments and overall crime rates were low. If the

study were replicated in areas with higher crime rates, or geography was an intentional and featured part of the design and sampling scheme, results may differ. Moreover, although the most recent wave of MIDUS and NSDE data available were used for the present analysis, those data were nevertheless collected in 2014. Tests of the present research questions are needed when more recent waves of MIDUS and NSDE data become available to determine the degree of persistence of our findings. Finally, MIDUS does not collect information from participants that would allow for a more nuanced assessment of gender identities, so although our findings shed new light on gender differences regarding perceptions of neighborhood safety (and no such differences regarding objective crime rates) more research is needed to determine how our results would differ among male, female, transgender, gender neutral, nonbinary, genderqueer, or other combination of these, as these identities and variability in expressions of femininity may differentially shape the development of fear of crime (Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021).

7 | CONCLUSION

Our hope is that these preliminary findings will encourage further investigation into the interplay between sources of community threat and the daily stress process. More work is needed with racially, ethnically, gender diverse samples of US individuals, with a wider age range, and a more extensive source of criminal activity (i.e., interpersonal or domestic violence, mass shootings). Such endeavors are important from a practical perspective. Both repeated and chronic activation of the human regulatory systems which are meant to assist people with adapting to threats in their environments lead to gradual wear-and-tear on those systems (McEwen, 2006). Repeated activation, which may be the case with responses to daily stressors, and chronic activation, which may be the case with perceiving one's immediate surroundings as unsafe, may thus pave the way to illness. More research is needed to (1) incorporate indices of physiological dysregulation in the models tested herein, and to (2) determine the degree to which these pathways present in similar or different ways for men and women, and those with a variety of gender identities.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Midlife in the United States (MIDUS). Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from https://midus.colectica.org/Account/Login?returnUrl=%2F with the permission of MIDUS.

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PEER REVIEW

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