Modern Day Vigilantism

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Abstract

Vigilantism is a social phenomenon where ordinary citizens break social norms by enforcing justice on their own without the help of law enforcement. This review focuses on examining the current state of research on vigilantism and places where more research should be done. The majority of research on the topic has been focused on areas on countries experiencing or recovering from major social or physical conflict, like South Africa and Northern Ireland. However, some new research is slowly being introduced on changes to the concept of vigilantism, exploring new frontiers like cybervigilantism. In order to learn about what is known on the topic, a broad spectrum of articles from places like ProQuest and Google Scholar have been acquired and examined. Each article has been considered by itself and for the impact it has on the field as a whole. The results of this review indicate that there is not a huge amount of research done on the subject, and the majority of information on vigilantism is qualitative and not quantitative in nature. Some holes exist in coverage of the topic, with a lack of quantitative studies, minimal work on cybervigilantism, and no exploration of the culture of prison vigilantism. It is important that more research be done on this field because as the times change, instead of going away it seems that vigilantism changes as well. Innocent people are often wrongfully targeted or caught in the crossfire of vigilantes. Understanding why vigilantism occurs can help protect those who would be wrongfully targeted, repair mistrust between law enforcement and citizens, and perhaps provide an interesting look at human motives and views of justice.

Introduction

In most countries, the ability to enforce laws and punish those who break them is a right that is monopolized by the state. It creates police forces and court systems to accomplish these goals. However, sometimes citizens will act on their own to deliver justice or punishment when they feel it has not been served. This act is known as vigilantism. There has been much examination into vigilantism of the past, from the Western frontier to lynchings during the civil rights movement. However, this is a new age with new challenges. While physical vigilantism has become increasingly rare in first world countries, it is most certainly not gone (Haas et. Al, p. 224, 2012). While forceful vigilantism occurs in struggling states, new types of action, such as cyber vigilantism, have sprung up. Vigilantism occurs when the vigilante feels that the state has failed to enforce the law or is not meeting the needs of certain groups of people (Kucera and Mares, p. 171, 2013). This is especially true in areas of conflict, with much research focusing on areas like Northern Ireland or post apartheid South Africa. Conditions of conflict can make it very hard for the state to fulfill its duties, and it often becomes the responsibility of the people. As a method of informal social control, vigilantism can be effective due to its quickness and cheapness, but has many downsides, including the often mistaken targeting of the innocent. This literature review will look at some of the existing research in the field and what it can help us understand as well as gaps that could be explored.

Methods

This review focuses on the analysis of a variety of articles and studies relation to vigilantism. The majority of articles are from the past 10 years, with the main exception being the Johnston article. However, it provided such a thorough overview of what vigilantism is and some of its many forms that it became a necessary inclusion. The main method was to read through each article and see what it could tell me about this social phenomenon. In addition, links were drawn between articles to see how the findings related to each other. I have consolidated what I have learned to display the current findings on vigilantism. This includes some locations where the phenomenon is still prevalent as well as its changing nature in the modern world with the advent of new technologies.

Findings of Vigilantism Research

Concept of Vigilantism

These studies and articles provide many important insights regarding the phenomenon of vigilantism in the modern world. Johnston's piece in the British Journal of Criminology attempts to define vigilantism so that future research projects have a comprehensive definition from which they can work. Johnston comes to the conclusion that vigilantism is "a social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force - or threatened force - by autonomous citizens. It arises as a reaction to the transgression of institutionalized norms by individuals or groups—or to their potential or imputed transgression. Such acts are focused upon crime control and/ or social control and aim to offer assurances (or 'guarantees') of security both to participants and to other members of a given established order" (p.232, 1996). He breaks this definition down even further by using case studies to show that vigilantism has six key elements: (i) planning, premeditation and organization, (ii) private voluntary agency, (iii) autonomous citizenship, (iv) the use or threatened use of force, (v) reaction to crime and social deviance, (vi) personal and collective security. It is these six elements, Johnston establishes, that make up a vigilante act.

The next article also examines the act itself, and how it comes to be. This is discussed most thoroughly in the work of Kucera and Mares (2013). They examined the occurrence in states undergoing a change from a non-democratic government to a democratic one. Those that best met this criterion were Bolivia, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Russian Federation and the Czech Republic. By using "case studies of various cultural environments" in these countries, Kucera and Mares were able to identify five universal vigilante strategies (p. 73, 2013). The first strategy is organized civic prevention initiatives. This involves the creation of citizen guards and patrols, documented in places like Nigeria where young man take on the role of "night guards" (Kucera and Mares, p.174, 2013). The next strategy documented is organized civic initiatives of prevention and response. Described in the case of Yekaterinburg, Russia, where groups of citizens patrolled the streets assaulting drug dealers and incarcerating addicts in rehab, this strategy creates preventative groups but also responds to crimes committed (Kucera and Mares, p.176, 2013). The third vigilante strategy is spontaneous mob actions, like lynching. They site multiple instances of armed groups in Mexico attacking corrupt policemen (Kucera and Mares, p.178, 2013). Popular justice is another strategy centered on informal people's courts, citing the Ochi-Ogado method in Nigeria, where culprits are identified, named publicly and shamed by a

group of chiefs (Kucera and Mares, p. 179, 2013). The final mob action is outsourcing to informal security agencies. One of the cases cited is the development of informal security by Russia's organized crime syndicates after the change in government (Kucera and Mares, p.181, 2013).

Support for Vigilantism

An article that directly correlates to the findings of the former is Martin's article on vigilantism in South Africa (2012). Martin used case studies and interviews with residents from Zandspruit Informal Settlement, a shantytown. 43 interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to learn about and gauge the subject's attitude and thoughts on vigilante justice. The nation, still struggling to overcome its past linked to apartheid, has had its poor fall by the wayside. There is a general lack of policing in disadvantaged areas, and so the poor must take justice into their own hands if they want to see it done. The results from the interviews found that most poor residents believe they are living without any protection under the law. There is a major lack of confidence in the abilities of the police. Many of the respondents approved of or engaged in vigilantism because relying on the police was just too slow. Martin cites six of the interviews that state that delayed police response, or the belief that the response would be slow, was a motivator behind some vigilante acts or raises sympathy for those acts among others (p. 229, 2012). There is also the belief among interviewees that the police implicitly condone their retributive acts by turning a blind eye or not thoroughly investigating occurrences. From the information gathered, vigilantism in South Africa is as much an outcry against an ineffective state system as it is against crime.

A similar study by Tankebe done on vigilantism in Ghana found that in addition to trust in police, age and education also played a role in the engaging in or support of vigilante acts (2009). Through the use of census data and questionnaires on a random sampling of 374 individuals from households in Accra, Ghana, Tankebe isolated police trustworthiness, police performance and procedural justice, and education level as the main factors in determining support for vigilante acts (p. 260-261, 2009). Police effectiveness was portrayed as less important in this study, and police attempts to combat corruption within the organization or trustworthiness were better predictors. The study found that for age, older people were more likely to support vigilantism. For education, those with less education were more likely to support vigilantism than those with higher levels of education. (Tankebe, 2009).

The study by Haas, Keijser, and Bruinsma on public support of vigilantism found that police responsiveness and level of violence of the act were also key factors in determining if people supported vigilantism (2013). Subjects were presented with a scenario in which someone shoplifts from a store, and the storeowner sees them in the street some time later. The level of police responsiveness and violence used by the vigilante against the culprit were the two dependent variables of the study. The researchers manipulated these factors to gauge opinions by the public towards vigilantes. If the police were more responsive or a retaliatory act too violent, people were much less likely to support the vigilante's actions than if the reverse was true for the given scenario. On a 5 point scale, average support for vigilantism ranked at M=2.73, signifying that most respondents did not approve of the storeowner's actions (Haas et al., p. 232, 2012). In

addition, 74% of respondents were understanding of the vigilante's behavior, and less than 12% felt pity for the shoplifter (Haas et al., p. 232, 2012).

New Development in Vigilantism

Wehmhoener researched cyber vigilantism by focusing on message board responses in the cyber bullying and subsequent suicide case of Megan Meier (2010). He found that out of the 249 posts sampled, 40% called for some kind of action to be taken against those who engaged in the cyber bullying of Meier. Of those posts that called for action, 90% approved of using vigilante justice to address the wrongs they felt had been done in the case. Wehmhoener found that the nature of social networking allowed groups of people to rally around a social infraction and seek justice for its occurrence, with their calls to action being bolstered by the anonymity provided by the Internet (p. 39, 2010.).

An Opposing View

Considine wrote an article with a different take from the others listed here, which explores some possible benefits of vigilantism in the wake of a "Good Samaritan" law passed in the UK offering immunity to people who attempt to prevent crime and/or anti-social behavior (p. 92, 2011). Cosidine sees the emergence of laws such as this as the incorporation of the public into law enforcement. With the continuing trend of budget cuts for law enforcement agencies, laws encouraging small scale vigilantism have the benefit of being cheap as well as promoting civic responsibility (Considine, p. 94, 2011).

Discussion and Conclusion

These studies and articles bring up a number of interesting points on certain aspects of vigilantism. One of the main ideas covered in all of the articles is the role that the police and the state play in causing vigilantism. In most of the cases studied here, vigilantism arises out of a perception by people that the state is not effectively using its monopoly on force to enforce the law. This can be the result of corruption or race or a variety of other reasons, but in the end, a group of people is not receiving the protection or justice from the police that they feel they deserve. So to deliver justice, the people must act as their own police force. One way to combat dangerous vigilantism would be for many states to receive an overhaul and redirection of their police force towards fairness and equality. If the state can at the very least show that it is attempting to help its citizens and eliminate corruption, this can go a long way towards cutting down on support for acts of vigilantism (Tankebe, p. 258, 2009).

Another thing brought up by these articles and studies is that while it is understandable of people to try and bring about justice on their own, it is dangerous, extreme, and oftentimes fails to bring the right person to justice. Martin found that a major concern about vigilantism in South Africa was the discovery that innocent people had been killed by mobs who thought that they had committed a crime. Haas et al. also notes that the more violence used in a vigilante act, the less support it will have from the people (p. 234, 2012). This reveals one of the very serious downsides of vigilantism. The lack of a trial to prove guilt and the ability of a mob to become disproportionately violent in its enforcement of the act can cost innocent people their lives. For this reason, the understanding of vigilantism is important, as it presents a risk not only to petty criminals who don't deserve death for their crimes but to innocents as well. It is the violence and escalation seen in vigilantism that counteracts Cosidine's proposal of vigilantism as a potential

good. There is too much at stake to encourage this behavior on any sort of wide scale. The more that is known about vigilantism, the easier it might become to curb the destruction that follows.

The fact that age and education also play a role in vigilante approval is not surprising. It makes sense that an older person, having been around longer, has seen more injustices pile up at the hands of law enforcement and supports acting outside of their capacity. The same goes for lower education and support for vigilantism, as the less educated one is the less likely one will understand the often complex reasons behind police inefficiency and instead of counting on the system or working to change it, it is just easier to act outside of it. Thanks to Tankebe's findings, it might be easier to target which demographics need to be reassured of the law's support, thereby decreasing support and tolerance for vigilante acts.

The Wehmhoener article explores the opening up of a whole new frontier of cyber-vigilantism. From average users to groups like Anonymous, this new form of vigilantism seeks to publicly shame those who defy social norms by stripping away their anonymity and revealing their transgressions. It is this same anonymity that allows cyber-vigilantes to enact these punishments with a lessened fear of reprisals from the government or otherwise. This type of action seems to be growing more common in first world countries, and will likely continue to develop along with the Internet. It is interesting to note that the percentage of message board users who approved of vigilantism while remaining anonymous seems much higher than those from the Haas et al. study where there identities were known to the researchers. Perhaps people feel more comfortable defying the social norms of enforcement if they do not think they will have to face consequences.

However, there are definitely some gaps in the existing research on vigilantism. The first, and probably most glaring issue is the general lack of quantitative data on the subject. Of all the studies out there, almost every one deals with qualitative data as opposed to quantitative. Focusing more on the quantitative data could reveal trends, patterns, or information that are yet unknown because of the lack of data. In addition, an area of vigilantism that is often heard about in popular culture does not seem to have been focused on, namely prison vigilantism. This is the practice of prisoners treating rapists, sex offenders and terrorists/mass killers badly, even trying to kill them. It is often warned that terrible things happen to child molesters and the like in prison. In addition, criminals like Dzhokhar Tsarnaev must be kept in solitary confinement for his own safety, out of the fear that inmates would try to kill him. The culture of prison vigilantes would be an interesting avenue that could merit future exploration. It could tell researchers much about the relationship between prisoners and ethics. Do most prisoners still have ethical codes on the inside, and if so what are they? It would reveal much about inmate culture to see where certain crimes ranked, what prisoners thought were acceptable punishments for them, etc. There is much that can be learned from existing research on vigilantism. There has been much qualitative research done into what vigilantism is, why it happens, and why people support it. The action and support of it can be traced to unstable environments where there is a perception that law enforcement is not acting effectively. However, there is collateral damage in innocent lives that cannot be ignored. As long as acts of vigilantism occur and sow disorder in communities, this field will be a crucial one for bringing legitimate state order back to areas of conflict. Further research, especially of a quantitative nature, could help cement many of the hypotheses in these articles and move towards repairing trust between the people and law enforcement so that it no one feels they must go outside of the law to secure justice.

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