Research Note: Daniel Lomba

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Crime in the United States is not just an unfortunate, and many times tragic, fact of life, it is also the source of scholarly research. Bridgewater is fortunate to have a faculty member who is on the cutting edge of crime research. Professor Daniel Lomba of the Economics Department is currently finishing his dissertation at Northeastern University. Professor Lomba’s main research focus is crime spillover, which is the tendency of criminals to relocate to other areas when they face changes in the crime market in their home area.

Professor Lomba is using a combination of uniform crime reporting statistics from the FBI, U.S. census data and revenue figures from Massachusetts and the New England states that border Massachusetts (including New York) to determine the pattern of crime spillover. Lomba is bringing his economic approach to crime spillover in order to examine whether criminals who function in urban environments move out to suburban and rural areas if they encounter adverse conditions in their base of operations. Preliminary findings point to criminal behavior that is largely associated with familiar surroundings, i.e. it is unlikely that criminals will move from an urban to a suburban or rural base in order to conduct their illegal activities. The market changes that Lomba finds associated with spillover are factors such as increased police presence, neighborhood watches or decreased economic viability in a community.

Professor Lomba is finding that crime spillover must be understood in a spatial context using urban economic theory. For example, if a densely populated urban center lies next to a sparsely populated town or region, it is not correct to conclude that crime spillover will occur. Although there may be isolated instances of crime spilling over from one area to the other, criminals make rational choices about the target of their crime. Criminals are literally “fish out of water” when they move to unfamiliar settings.

Lomba’s research has major implications, particularly in connection with changes such as commuter rail expansion (as is the case in southeastern Massachusetts). There is an element of fear among those who see the arrival of the train as setting off a wave of crime spillover into towns that have never been affected by urban-based crime. Lomba’s research discounts these fears as not supported by the data.

Once his dissertation is completed Professor Lomba hopes to expand his research on crime by analyzing police conduct and the incidence of crime with tools developed in the expanding field of information economics. It is Lomba’s contention that police misconduct may fuel the fires of illegality as citizens tell themselves that if the police are acting improperly, why should they obey the law. Lomba is convinced that a new social compact between police and civilians must be developed if law and order are to prevail in our society.

The link between crime and economic theory is often not stressed in current research, but Lomba has begun playing a leading role in showing the market characteristics of crime and the economic behavior of criminals. Professor Daniel Lomba, who has already been recognized as one of the leading minority scholars by the American Economic Association, is blazing the research trail on a topic that is of growing importance to all of us.