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Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D.
McKay: Social Disorganization Theory

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Originally developed by Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay, two researchers from the University of Chicago, social disorganization is one of the most popular criminological theories today. Unlike most other theories, it is concerned with understanding why crime rates are higher in some communities than others. Thus, it focuses on the macro-level distribution of crime rates across areas, not on why any one individual may be more or less likely to engage in criminal acts than another.

As the name implies, the theory posits that communities can be classified on a continuum of disorganization, from low to high. According to the theory, some communities are highly disorganized and experience more crime compared to other communities that are less disorganized and experience less crime. The key to combating crime, then, is to reduce levels of social disorganization. Just how that can be accomplished is explained shortly but first it is necessary to understand the intellectual history of social disorganization theory and its ascendancy in criminological thought during the 20th century.

Social Disorganization Theory's Intellectual Roots

Often considered the original architects of social disorganization theory, Shaw and McKay were among the first in the United States to investigate the spatial distribution of crime and delinquency across urban areas. Their research built on work done by other Chicago School researchers, in particular Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, whose concentric zone theory examined how critical changes of the time (e.g., industrialization, urbanization, and immigration) affected the nature of social life in Chicago communities. Park and Burgess's theory characterized zones within the city, some marked by disorganizing characteristics and attributes. It was not until years later, however, with the work of Shaw and McKay, that crime became part of the equation.

In their work, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*, Shaw and McKay applied the concentric zone model developed by Park and Burgess to the study of juvenile delinquency. Shaw and McKay's primary interest was to study the relationship

between community and delinquency and determine the extent to which differences in characteristics of local areas paralleled variation in rates of delinquency. They sought to address questions such as, To what extent do variations in rates of delinquency correspond to demonstrable differences in economic, social, and cultural characteristics of local communities? How are delinquency rates affected over time by successive changes in the nativity and nationality composition of the population?

To answer these questions, Shaw and McKay examined the distribution of delinquency in Chicago communities based on juvenile court cases and commitments for three time periods: 1900 to 1906, 1917 to 1923, and 1927 to 1933. One of their key findings was that delinquency was not randomly distributed throughout the city; rather, it tended to cluster in certain areas. Stated alternatively, rates of juvenile delinquency were consistent with an ordered spatial pattern. The highest rates were found in the inner-city areas and declined with distance from the city center. Using maps and other visuals, Shaw and McKay demonstrated that its distribution was closely related to the location of industrial and commercial areas and to the composition of the population in the area (e.g., rates of poverty and families on relief), in line with the concentric zone model. Because they had data over time, Shaw and McKay were also able to demonstrate a consistency in the general processes regarding the distribution of delinquency across neighborhoods. They found that high delinquency communities in Chicago remained high delinquency communities over several decades, regardless of which racial or ethnic group inhabited the area.

A key “social fact” about crime that is central to social disorganization theory can be gleaned from the early Chicago School studies: crime and delinquency co-occur with other social problems in communities, including poverty, dilapidated housing, and residential instability, among others. For the Chicagoans, this implied a connection between broader social and economic conditions of areas and crime. This discovery was important because until then biological determinism, which assumes that all or virtually all human behavior, including criminal behavior, is innate and cannot be changed or altered, had served as the primary explanation for understanding crime. Early Chicago School studies were thus important for pointing out that crime is present in certain areas of the city where there is social, economic, and cultural deprivation. Researchers emphasized that residents in these areas were not biologically abnormal or personally disoriented; rather, they were viewed as responding naturally

to disorganized environmental conditions. The implication of this finding for the field of criminology is clear: just as “kinds of people” explanations are needed to understand crime, “kinds of places” explanations are also needed to account for the ecological concentration of crime and delinquency.

[p. 829 ↓]

In sum, the findings from Shaw and McKay and other Chicago School studies formed the basis of social disorganization theory, a theory chiefly concerned with understanding the relationship between community characteristics and crime.

Theoretical Overview

According to social disorganization theory, some neighborhoods are socially disorganized and have high crime rates while others are less disorganized and have lower crime rates. Social disorganization can be defined as the inability of a community to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls (Bursik, 1988). Thus, socially disorganized communities are ineffective in combating crime, a common value or goal among residents. Alternatively, crime is more successfully prevented in socially organized communities.

Socially organized and disorganized communities are quite different, according to the theory. Characteristics of socially organized communities include (1) solidarity, or an internal consensus on important norms and values (e.g., residents want and value the same things, such as a crime-free community); (2) cohesion, or a strong bond among neighbors (e.g., residents know and like one another); and (3) integration or social ties, with social interaction occurring on a regular basis (e.g., residents spend time with one another) (Kubrin et al., 2008, p. 87). Socially disorganized communities, in contrast, typically lack solidarity, cohesion, and integration among residents.

According to the theory, these characteristics are critical because they help to foster informal social control, a key factor for preventing crime within communities. Informal social control is the scope of collective intervention that the community directs toward local problems, including crime (Kornhauser, 1978). It is the informal, nonofficial actions

taken by residents to combat crime in their communities. Consider, for instance, a group of neighbors who patrol the streets at night to fight crime. Or consider residents who watch each other's homes when a family is on vacation to prevent burglaries. Or consider residents who scold neighborhood youth when they act out of line or cause trouble. These individuals represent the eyes and ears of the community and their presence is often enough to deter others from committing crime.

Solidarity, cohesion, and integration or social ties generate informal social control, which ultimately prevents crime. This is why socially organized communities have lower crime rates than socially disorganized communities—they have greater levels of informal social control.

In recent years, theorists have added another dimension to this explanation. Robert Sampson, Stephen Raudenbush, and Felton Earls argue that social cohesion and networks may be necessary, but not sufficient, for social control and that what is missing is the key factor of purposive action (i.e., how social ties are activated and resources mobilized to enhance social control). For the latter to occur, they argue, residents must be willing to take action and intervene, which depends in large part on conditions of mutual trust and solidarity among neighbors. Sampson et al. therefore propose a new construct—collective efficacy—which captures this linkage of trust and intervention for the common good. They argue high levels of collective efficacy within communities should lead to lower crime rates, similar to the effect of social ties and informal social control. In sum, socially organized communities marked by social integration, cohesion and ties, informal social control, and collective efficacy should have comparatively lower crime rates compared to socially disorganized communities which lack these characteristics. This is often found to be the case in studies of neighborhood crime.

But social disorganization theory does not stop here in its explanation of crime. The theory also specifies the larger structural characteristics of communities that contribute to levels of disorganization, or conversely, organization. Early Chicago School researchers focused on three neighborhood characteristics they believed distinguished disorganized communities: poverty, residential instability, and racial/ethnic heterogeneity. They were able to demonstrate, to some degree, that Chicago communities marked by these characteristics had higher crime rates than those without

such characteristics. They theorized this was primarily due to lower levels of social integration and informal social control, in line with the theory. But they were never able to empirically test this theoretical assertion.

It is important to note that the neighborhood characteristics just described are not direct causes of crime within communities. Rather they indirectly affect crime through their influence on [p. 830 ↓] social integration and informal social control. Thus, high poverty neighborhoods typically have higher crime rates than low poverty neighborhoods not because poverty in and of itself causes crime but because poorer neighborhoods, according to the theory, have fewer ties and less informal social control, leading to higher crime rates. The same can be argued for the other neighborhood characteristics. Along these lines, the neighborhood characteristics of communities are commonly referred to as exogenous sources of social disorganization while solidarity, cohesion, integration, informal social control, and collective efficacy constitute the intervening dimensions of social disorganization.

Over the decades, research on social disorganization theory has taken numerous directions. In one direction, researchers have examined additional structural characteristics of communities theorized to cause disorganization including family disruption (e.g., divorce and single-parent households), education levels (e.g., residents with a high-school diploma), population density (e.g., population per square mile), and population composition (e.g., number of young males). Researchers have also been concerned with empirically testing the full social disorganization model by showing that neighborhood characteristics affect levels of social integration, informal social control, and collective efficacy, which in turn affect crime rates. Progress aside, there have been and continue to be some noteworthy criticisms of Shaw and McKay's early work as well as the theory more generally.

Earlier Critiques

As noted earlier, at the time, the work of Shaw and McKay and other Chicago School researchers had a profound impact on the study of crime. However, interest in the relationship between community characteristics and crime began to recede in the 1950s when the field of criminology moved toward more micro-level or individual theories

of crime causation, including social learning, social control, and labeling theories (Kubrin et al., 2008, p. 90). Concurrent with this shift, several early criticisms of the theory emerged. One key criticism centered on the theory's central concept of social disorganization. Shaw and McKay at times did not clearly differentiate the presumed outcome of social disorganization (i.e., increased rates of crime and delinquency) from disorganization itself. In early writings, the delinquency rate of an area was often both an example of disorganization and something caused by disorganization. As one example, in his study, Calvin Schmid used houses of prostitution and homicides as indices of social disorganization yet disorganization is theorized to cause these very things. Eventually, this problem was resolved when theorists attempted to clarify the unique conceptual status of social disorganization by defining it in terms of the capacity of a neighborhood to regulate itself through formal and informal processes of social control (recall the formal definition of social disorganization discussed earlier).

Another early criticism centered on what some referred to as the theory's inherent biases about lower-class communities and disorganization, biases generated from the relatively homogeneous, middle-class backgrounds of the theorists themselves. Critics questioned: Is it true that physical, economic, and population characteristics are objective indicators of social disorganization, or does the term reflect a value judgment by the theorists about lower-class lifestyle and living conditions? Several theorists believe the latter. For instance, Edwin Sutherland preferred to use the term *differential social organization* because of his belief that “the organization of the delinquent group, which is often very complex, is social disorganization only from an ethical or some other particularistic point of view” (p. 21). According to this line of reasoning, some urban neighborhoods may not be so much disorganized as simply organized around different values and concerns. Although it is impossible to completely remove such biases from social disorganization or any theory for that matter, researchers today are much more aware of this bias and prefer a more nuanced explanation of what generates social disorganization within neighborhoods.

Perhaps the most damaging early criticism had to do with researchers' ability to empirically test the social disorganization model. Although Shaw and McKay collected data on characteristics of areas and delinquency rates for Chicago communities and were able to visually demonstrate a relationship between the two using maps and other visuals, theirs did not constitute a test, in the strict sense, of social disorganization

theory. Nor did future studies for decades to come. The norm for [p. 831 ↓] quite a long time was to use Census data to characterize neighborhoods in terms of poverty, residential mobility, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, and other factors along with official crime data to show the two were related, and then to theorize that this was due to intervening levels of social ties and informal social control. The criticism was that without empirically verifying the true proposed theoretical path—neighborhood characteristics lead to crime indirectly through social ties and informal control—the theory had not been properly tested.

It was not until 1989 that researchers were able to formally test social disorganization theory, including specifying the true nature of the relationships among ecological characteristics of communities, levels of social disorganization, and crime. Robert J. Sampson and W. Byron Groves used data from a large national survey of Great Britain to empirically test the theory. They constructed community-level measures of neighborhoods (specifically, poverty, residential mobility, and racial/ethnic heterogeneity) and the mediating dimensions of social disorganization, and they then determined how both sets of factors influenced neighborhood crime rates. Their findings were largely supportive of social disorganization theory: communities characterized by strong social ties and informal control had lower rates of crime, and, more importantly, these dimensions of social disorganization were found to explain, in large part, the effects of community structural characteristics (e.g., poverty) on crime rates. Apart from Sampson and Groves, today only a handful of studies successfully empirically examine all the theoretical processes laid out by social disorganization theory. Far more research is needed before we are able to confidently understand why some communities produce higher crime rates than others.

A final early criticism relates to the theory's reliance on official data, especially in terms of measuring crime. All but a handful of studies use official data to document crime patterns across neighborhoods when testing social disorganization theory. Even Shaw and McKay relied on official court records to determine the distribution of juvenile court cases and commitments. Yet few scholars have considered the extent to which neighborhoods themselves are a consideration in police and court decisions and there is a significant degree of community-specific bias that may exist within police departments (Bursik, 1988). In other words, some neighborhoods are more likely to be “over-policed” than others. Thus, the assumption that policing practices do not

vary across neighborhoods is unfounded. The question remains: Given variation, how might policing practices influence official data collection? Whatever the answer, it is clear that official rates represent a mixture of differentials in neighborhood behavior patterns, neighborhood propensities to report behavior, and neighborhood-specific police orientations. Thus, a more ideal situation involves collecting alternative indicators of neighborhood crime and delinquency based on self-report or victimization data to be used in conjunction with official records. Such data collection efforts are occurring more and more through the use of large-scale surveys in cities throughout the United States (e.g., the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, the Seattle Neighborhood and Crime Project, and the Neighborhood Project in Denver, Chicago, and Philadelphia).

There are several additional earlier criticisms of social disorganization theory, many of which are detailed in Robert Bursik's classic 1988 piece, "Social Disorganization Theory: Problems and Prospects." A more recent analysis of the theory, highlighting on-going challenges to social disorganization theory, was completed decades later by Charis Kubrin and Ronald Weitzer in "New Directions in Social Disorganization Theory." Below some of the more vexing on-going challenges confronting the theory are described.

On-Going Challenges

Today, disorganization theorists continue to document how community characteristics and crime go hand in hand. The theory is very much alive and kicking. But as with any theory, there remain several challenges confronting social disorganization theory. One of the most critical on-going issues surrounds the definition of what constitutes a neighborhood. The concept "neighborhood" is central to the theory yet researchers have not arrived at a consensus, either conceptually or operationally, on the definition of a neighborhood. This is due, in part, to variability in people's perceptions of neighborhood boundaries. For some residents, their [p. 832 ↓] neighborhood constitutes the street they live on; for others, it constitutes the few blocks surrounding their home; and still for others, it is a much larger section of the city in which they live. This variability is often not captured in social disorganization research due to an overreliance on official data. Because studies use official data as their source, researchers most commonly

operationalize neighborhoods in terms of census tracts—an official designation of the U.S. Census Bureau. Jointly defined by the Census Bureau and local groups, census tracts are small, permanent subdivisions of a county with homogeneous population characteristics, status, and living conditions. Most census tracts in the United States have between 2,500 and 8,000 residents. In the majority of disorganization studies, researchers measure neighborhood characteristics using census tracts as a proxy.

But this may be problematic. Census tract boundaries are invisible to residents, so they represent, in many cases, meaningless, unidentifiable units. It is unlikely that residents, even those who have lived in an area for a long period of time, can identify the particular census tract in which they reside. The point here is that the extent to which researchers believe they are capturing *neighborhood* measures of social disorganization and crime remains unclear. Of course, this problem is minimized with the use of other forms of data. In the rare case when researchers collect their own data through surveys, they are able to more accurately specify the concept of “neighborhood.” In survey questions, researchers often define what constitutes a neighborhood using common, unofficial designations that are more consistent with residents’ perceptions. One example comes from a large-scale survey of Seattle neighborhoods where participants were told the following at the start of the survey: “We would like to start off by asking you some questions about your home and your neighborhood. While people might define their neighborhood in different ways, we would like you to think about it roughly in terms of the area within 3 blocks on any side of your current home. Your block will refer to the area between the cross-streets on either side of your home.” Although this may not constitute the ideal definition of neighborhood for all residents, it is clear this designation is preferred to the census tract. As fewer and fewer studies rely on official data to test the basic assumptions of social disorganization theory, more refined definitions and accurate measurements of the central concept of “neighborhood” will result. No doubt this will increase our understanding of why crime rates are higher in some communities than others.

A second on-going challenge involves testing the true nature of the social disorganization model. As you may recall from the earlier discussion on the work of Shaw and McKay and other Chicago School scholars, social disorganization theory, at its heart, is a dynamic theory. It is dynamic because it is primarily interested in processes of change within communities and their effect on crime rates over time.

Chicago School researchers were keenly interested in the adaptation of social groups to processes of urbanization and changing forms of social organization, which is why they collected data that spanned several decades.

Even today, a key assumption is that neighborhood levels of informal social control and collective efficacy are influenced by changes in neighborhood ecological structures, such as change in the racial composition of the population. Despite this assumption, nearly all studies testing social disorganization do not directly examine processes of change. According to Charis Kubrin and Ronald Weitzer, “The full set of dynamics that may lead to disorganization can only be discerned when long-term processes of urban development are considered, yet the majority of studies that test social disorganization theory are cross-sectional” (p. 387). In other words, most empirical tests of the theory do not use longitudinal data that allow one to directly examine dynamic processes at work. Instead, researchers use cross-sectional data, which provide a snapshot at one point in time, to assess relationships among neighborhood characteristics, social disorganization, and crime. Although informative, these studies are unable to examine the effects of processes such as gentrification and segregation on the distribution of crime and delinquency, issues that go to the heart of the theory. Apart from recognizing the need to collect data that span several years or even decades, Kubrin and Weitzer suggest that researchers develop more sophisticated models for assessing change. They provide one example, the growth-curve model, and illustrate how its use in neighborhood crime studies could benefit social disorganization theory.

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A final on-going challenge relates to what many consider to be social disorganization's narrow focus on intra-neighborhood influences on crime, or those influences that occur exclusively *within* communities. But communities are not islands unto themselves; they are shaped and influenced by the larger urban political and economic context within which they are embedded. According to critics, then, social disorganization theory as traditionally conceptualized is hampered by a restricted view of community that fails to account for the larger political and structural forces that shape communities, including governmental policies at local, state, and federal levels as well as private investment practices within communities. As Kubrin and Weitzer note, political and economic decisions may have direct effects on community crime rates (e.g., when a

halfway house is introduced into a neighborhood and its members commit crime) as well as indirect criminological effects such as by increasing the level of joblessness (through deindustrialization or disinvestment), residential instability (through housing, construction, or demolition policies), and population density (through public housing or zoning policies).

One particularly relevant example of extra-community influences is related to a community's access to capital, particularly home mortgage lending. Redlining and disinvestment by banks, fueled by regulatory initiatives (or lack thereof) may contribute to crime within a community through neighborhood deterioration, forced migration via gentrification, and instability. Alternatively, access to mortgage loan dollars and effective regulation of bank practices (e.g., enforcement of fair lending and community reinvestment requirements) may reduce crime within a neighborhood directly by introducing capital into the community or indirectly by promoting homeownership and reducing residential instability in the long run.

Whatever the precise mechanism at work, at issue for the theory is a general disregard for extra-community forces that shape neighborhood dynamics, with implications for social disorganization and crime. As Sampson asserts, "neglecting the vertical connections (or lack thereof) that residents have to extra-communal resources and sources of power obscures the structural backdrop to community social organization" (p. 102). A more complete social disorganization framework would thus incorporate the role of extra-community institutions and the wider political environment in which local communities are embedded.

Several additional on-going challenges facing the theory, both substantive and methodological, are discussed by Kubrin and Weitzer. No doubt as the theory continues to evolve and transform in the 21st century, new challenges will emerge, even as old ones become resolved. Regardless of old and new challenges, social disorganization theory holds an important place in criminological history and will continue to do so as long as researchers remain interested in understanding why crime rates are higher in some communities than others.

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See also

- [Bursik, Robert J., Jr., and Harold C. Grasmick: Levels of Control](#)
- [Crime Hot Spots](#)
- [Kobrin, Solomon: Neighborhoods and Crime](#)
- [Krivo, Lauren J., and Ruth D. Peterson: Extreme Disadvantage and Crime](#)
- [Sampson, Robert J.: Collective Efficacy Theory](#)
- [Shaw, Clifford R.: The Jack-Roller](#)
- [Spergel, Irving: Neighborhoods and Delinquent Subcultures](#)
- [Stark, Rodney: Deviant Places](#)
- [Systemic Model of Social Disorganization](#)

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