

# Evaluation of social disorganization theory



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## **Abstract**

Communities around the country as well as around the world struggle with delinquency and crime. In an effort to control crime it has become evident a means to understand how crime and delinquency in particular begin. If we take the premise that people (with the odd anomaly withstanding) are primarily good, delinquency and crime must be taught . or created. In an effort to explain this dilemma several theories have been developed. Some of the theories include Labeling Theory, Strain Theory, Cultural Deviance, Trajectory, Life Choice, and Social Disorganization to name a few. Social Disorganization Theory is perhaps one of the most interesting theories on creation of delinquency because this theory looks at the community at large and examines external factors on communities and the effect they have on creating delinquency and crime.

Keywords: Social Disorganization, informal social control, communities, collective efficacy

### What is Social Disorganization Theory

There are many theories that attempt to explain or help define the cause or causes of delinquency such as Strain Theory, Social Learning Theory, Life-Course Theory, Trajectory Theory just to name a few. We have read and discussed many of the theories in depth. Out of all the theories covered in class one of the more interesting theories is the Social Disorganization Theory. Social Disorganization is defined as the inability of a community to exert social control which allows youths the freedom to engage in illegal behavior (Siegel & Walsh 2017).

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It was early in the twentieth century the theory of social disorganization first came about. Sociologist by the name of Henry McKay, and Clifford Shaw noticed that delinquency rates seemed higher in areas they termed transitional neighborhoods. A transitional neighborhood is one that has changed or is in the process of changing from an affluent area to an area of decay. In these areas we see commercial and industrial areas mixed with residential areas. In these environments teenagers began grouping together as a form of defense, survival and just plain friendship and acceptance. Eventually these groups formed into gangs. As the gangs developed the gang leaders would recruit younger members, and begin passing on the delinquent traditions and ensure the gangs survival from generation to generation. This is also known as cultural transmission (Siegel & Walsh 2017).

Socioeconomic conditions that are prime for social disorganization to occur are: Long term seemingly unending poverty which undermine the foundation of any society - school, family, neighborhoods, and peers without a good foundation these basic influences on youth become ineffective.

The ability of the community to assert social control (influence human behavior) is damaged by poverty. When the community becomes "socially disorganized" anti-social behavior is more prevalent, youth are free to engage in gang activity, violate laws and develop delinquent behavior. A sense of hopelessness and general mistrust of conventional society develop. More and more youth are exposed to violence and other anti-social acts. Youths growing up in these types of devastated areas are at higher risk of gang involvement as well as other deviant acts.

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According to the social disorganization theory a healthy, thriving community is able to control itself in order to meet common goals such as education, family and youth thrive. However areas that become disorganized are incapable of this type of control because they are devastated by economic failure and suffer deterioration. Shaw and McKay claim that areas which suffer extended poverty and long term unemployment also experience social disorganization, such as inner cities (Siegel and Walsh 2017).

### Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory

The groundbreaking social disorganization theory needed to be tested. To do this a community-level theory that expanded on Shaw and McKay's model is formulated and tested. The results confirm Shaw and McKay's original hypothesis. Communities which suffer from low economic status, family disruption, high residential mobility all led to social disorganization which, lead to higher crime and delinquency rates. But during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries population growth in the urban areas began to slow, especially in some of the northeastern and many Midwest cities because of a decline in industrialization and increase in suburbanization.

This shift in population growth seemed to break the connection between rapid social change and the disorganization theory and seemed to be the end of this approach in attempting to explain the cause of delinquency. However a researcher William Julius Wilson wrote *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) where he explained the increase in social change created by the evolving U. S. economy, especially in the inner cities, with his explanation he helped to create a new foundation which helped visualize the consequences

of this rapid social change. The study shifted from rapid growth to a study on rapid decline. Since the 1970s, increasing efforts have been made to evolve the language needed to describe the process in which communities are dealing with crime. Today, the social disorganization theory is a central concept in understanding the community distribution of delinquency and crime and is one of the more respected causes of crime theories (Bellair 2017)

### Contemporary Social Disorganization Theory

In the 1960s, the loss of industry and manufacturing began to have devastating effects on inner-city communities that were primarily dependent on manufacturing for much of the community's employment. With an increase in violent crime in the 1970s and early 1980s we began to see what was coined as "white flight" from the inner cities (Liska and Bellair, 1995). With civil rights improving, especially in housing discrimination for African Americans there was an increase in white middle-class families moving out of the inner-city communities. The result of the combination of high unemployment and rapid departure along with other social changes created a new idea of the "high crime" inner city community.

With the Shaw and McKay's model (1969) high crime rate and delinquency were simply viewed as an unfortunate and somewhat temporary consequence of rapid social change. As income increased through factory work families could expect to move away from the "zone of transition" (central business district with outer rings of middle-class residence, which consist of slum housing which is being displaced by expansion of the central

business district) into better areas with less crime. As described in Wilson's (1987) research the high crime communities were characterized by extreme disadvantages. As white residents that had the resources to leave did so, they left behind a large African American population that was essentially isolated from the mainstream of society in both social and economic standing. This new population was also much less hopeful of any neighborhood mobility than communities were earlier in the twentieth century.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's social disorganization theory reemerged as a prime theory for looking at crime and delinquency. The increased interest was brought on by several scholarly contributions by researchers such as Kornhauser's (1978) *social source of delinquency*, Reiss and Tonry's (1986) *Communities and Crime*, as well as several articles published by Bursik (1988; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993) and Sampson (2012; Byrne and Sampson, 1986; Sampson and Groves, 1989). For the research to continue it would become clear that the verbiage used would clarify the definition of social disorganization and defines social disorganization from the causes and the consequences of disorganization (Bellair, 2017)

As Freudenburger (1986, p. 11) writes, " people who know one another often work out interpersonal agreements for achieving desired goals".

What this means is if people in a community know each other they are more likely to work together to accomplish common goals such as lower crime and delinquency, and better schools to name a few. But the opposite is also true, people who do not get to know each other in the community are much less

likely to participate or even be able to take part in such actions. Some of the informal controls that are created by communities that know, and are friendly with each other are supervised community and social activities, as well as the socialization of youth in developing conventional values.

### Community Networks and Crime

Lower crime is consistently associated with a high interaction between neighbors in the community. More importantly research shows that interaction between local residents in the community and private as well as public organizations have an effect on crime, both decrease or increase depending on the level of cooperation. It is in fact imperative in fact that communities broker relationships private and governmental agencies in order to facilitate better resources and more concrete efforts to control crime (Velez et al., 2012, p. 1026). Velez et al.'s (2012) research depicts a strong correlation to the effect of home loans to violent crime and also calls into some well-known home lending practices that often disadvantaged African American communities (also see Ramey and Shrider, 2014; Velez, 2001).

However research showing higher crime rate in communities that have strong networks along as well as strong attachments between communities and private and governmental agencies has raised questions about this systematic approach of the social disorganization theory (Bursik and Grismick, 1993).

Some of the research that examined the correlation between social networks, delinquency and crime sometime shows a positive relationship or no relationship at all (Mazerolle et al., 2010). Community networks are more

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of an informal means of social control and crime in complex ways; more research will be needed to clarify the process (Rountree and Warner' 1999).

To account for the positive effect of community and social networks on crime, two prominent views have emerged. The first one is Wilson's (1996) view that economic changes along with historic discrimination/segregation which focused disadvantages in inner-city communities. After a period of economic decline and migration out of the inner-city "white flight", these communities are made up of mostly stable populations with limited connections to the labor market, little or no interactions with any mainstream sources of influence, along with limited economic and residential mobility. According to Wilson, these types of communities have social integration but are hindered by institutional weakness as well as weak informal social control. It is then reasonable to believe that communities with strong network ties may not create the types of outcomes on crime control we would expect to see with the systemic approach.

Wilson argues that the most vulnerable communities are the ones where "not only are the children at risk due to a lack of informal social controls, but also communities where neighbors habits and social interactions with each other tend to be less conducive to promoting any kind of positive social change.

Browning and his colleagues (2004; also see Pattillo-McCoy, 1999) discuss the "negotiated coexistence" model based on the idea of social interaction creates networks of mutual goals in community residences (Rose and Clear, 1998).



These mutual goals may compel neighborhoods to take part in conventional, informal social control. For example, individuals who take part in crime are many times connected to conventional residents in complex ways and social networks

Browning et al.'s (2004) analysis shows that when collective efficacy is controlled the community is positively associated with victimization.

### Communities Controlling Behavior (Collective Efficacy)

New research has been done that redefines and evolves social disorganization theory by using in-depth data collection methods. Collective efficacy can be described in two classifications: first social cohesion within the community (i. e., trust, friendship, and cooperation) along with the community's willingness to act in the best interest of the common good (Sampson 1997). Second is the ability to convert the social ties within the community to achieve collective goals, like crime and delinquent control or general public order. A central idea that community expectations of informal control with in inner-city communities may exist without strong family ties as long as the community is cohesive or individuals in the community trust each other and have similar goals and values.

The new research used data collected from 343 Chicago communities, which demonstrates the more collective efficacy the lower crime and just the opposite is true, the less collective efficacy the higher the crime rate in the community. Another key factor in collective efficacy and crime is the degree of employment and economic disadvantage along with residential stability.

Research has been conducted not only in the United States but worldwide. This research tends to confirm that the correlation between collective efficacy and crime is as relevant in Stockholm as it is in Chicago. In fact research is underway in Los Angeles, Bogota, Brisbane, and England to name a few.

## Conclusion

Social disorganization is not a byproduct of crime and delinquency, but rather a main cause of crime. Every city in every state as well as around the world can fall prey to social disorganization. When factories and other well-paying jobs leave an area such as inner cities creating poverty, hopelessness the door is open for disorganization in the community to take hold. Combine this with the departure from the inner city by those who have the means to leave, collective efficacy begins to weaken. When communities begin to lose their collective efficacy a breakdown of core common values begin to take place, youth are often left unsupervised increasing the delinquency and in many cases crime rate. Unsupervised youth fall victim to gangs in an effort to find acceptance, and protection.

There are many theories that attempt to explain the causes of delinquency and crime, most of the theories actually work hand in hand compounding the dilemma. In order to make any headway in eliminating delinquency and crime especially in the inner city, community and government leaders need to address the causes of social disorganization.

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