

Examining the
understanding social
disorganization
theory criminology
essay



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Social Disorganization means the disruption or breakdown of the structure of social relations and values resulting in the loss of social controls over individual and group behavior, the development of social isolation and conflict, and a sense of estrangement or alienation from the mainstream of one's culture; the condition or state of anomie (dictionary). Social Disorganization Theory is a theory that is less than one hundred years old. The founders of this theory are Shaw and McKay. Social disorganization theory was developed in the early 1900's in Chicago, Illinois, based upon the fact that the founders of this theory had been researching juvenile court records for more than one decade (Pratt, Gau, and Franklin 43). The theory suggested that there were high rates of crime in certain neighborhoods; particularly rather poor neighborhoods. Once Shaw and Kay discovered these findings, they figured that crime was no longer based on the individual alone, but more so the structure of the neighborhood and what the neighborhood consisted of socially; neighbor's level of interaction with one another, along with their ability to regulate the youth of their community (Pratt, Gau, and Franklin 44).

There are several factors that can help determine social disorganization within a community. A few of these factors include: low socioeconomic status, high rates of residential mobility, increased diversity within the community and single-parent households (Pratt et al. 44, Barton et al. 247, and Kingston et al. 54). However, one of the main factors frequently used to determine social disorganization is residential mobility. Residential mobility is the frequent

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change of residence, either in the same city or town, or between cities, states or communities (dictionary). Residential mobility has the ability to socially disorganize any community. Neighbors' packing up and moving more frequently than not, puts a strain on the ability for people to bond with one another and form a friendship with other residents who also reside in their community. Another factor that is often used to determine social disorganization is the socioeconomic status of a particular neighborhood. Poor neighborhoods with low income usually contain single-parent residencies. Single-parent households with young children living in them, have a hard time controlling the youth of their households, let alone the youth of their communities. Lack of discipline to the youth and improper social skills with their peers causes them to get involved in certain activities that are not only harmful to the community but harmful to themselves as well. According to the authors of the article ' A Test of Social Disorganization Theory in High-Risk Urban Neighborhoods', " Structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods that lack the resources to effectively monitor children (such as: summer camps, music lessons, sports training, home computers, and special tutoring) and provide few sanctions for inappropriate behavior are likely to have a higher number of delinquent peer groups available to youth...Poorly monitored youth are more likely to socialize with deviant peers and to engage in misconduct" (Kingston et al. 58-59).

As stated before, social disorganization occurs mainly in poor neighborhoods with high residential mobility & lack of socializing between the neighbors throughout the community. These factors allow the crime in these communities to grow exponentially. Social exclusion and isolation from one

another has a negative effect on the community because it creates a gateway for crime to occur. With no one from the community willing to step up and organize groups like 'The Neighborhood Watch' or etc., it creates opportunities for crime to occur at any given time throughout the community. With no control over the youth living in the community, crime tends

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to rise. With lack of control over the youth, gangs have a high risk of developing. When gangs develop, there are a number of negative things that can occur. Some of the negative activities that can stem from gangs are burglaries, vandalism, drug-dealing, and violence, just to name a few (Mares, 41). The number of gangs began to rapidly increase in America during the 20th century. Without warning, gangs began showing up and developing in suburban, rural and urban communities (Mares, 41). This could have been prevented somehow if there had been more unity

within the communities and if neighbors had been more willing to socialize with one another while agreeing to keep an eye out for any suspicious behavior with their community. However, it is safe to say that gang violence and homicides has the ability to destroy neighborhoods and put fear into people while causing isolation throughout the community (Mares, 42). So, if people within a community are afraid of the area that they are living in, it makes it harder for them to call the police and report a crime; and if they do report a crime, the chances of them cooperating with the police and stepping up as a public witness is not high, because they may feel threatened by the

local gang members of the community, as well as scared for their lives.

When this occurs, crime increases within the community because local gang members feel as if they're invincible and as if they can get away with any crime they commit, no matter how large or small the crime may be (Mares 43).

Social Disorganization started off as a theory fit for urban, rural and suburban neighborhoods. However, throughout the years, social disorganization has progressed from slum neighborhoods to college campuses. With the Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University shootings, campus crime seems pretty evident in these areas (Barton et al. 245).

According to the authors of the article ' Social disorganization theory and the college campus', four-year college universities reported " 44 murders, 2, 491 forcible rapes, 1, 386 robberies, 2, 130 aggravated assaults, 25, 978 burglaries, and 3, 410 motor vehicle thefts" back in 2007 in the United States

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(Barton et al. 245). Residential mobility is an obvious factor of social disorganization on college campuses because most colleges do not require their student to live on campus. Students living in nearby towns tend to commute back and forth to school everyday. There's also the case where students get to pick a new room during the room reservation process towards the end of every academic school year. The percentage of students remaining in the same dorm room year after year is not very high. All of these factors regarding residential mobility on college campuses

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make it very hard for neighboring students in the dormitories to form a lasting bond with one another, since students usually get a new neighbor at the beginning of every academic school year once they move back onto campus.

Then you have the college students who decide to pledge for a Greek organization on campus. These organizations take up the majority of a student's time. Those students who live on campus but are dedicated to a Greek organization are hardly ever in their dorm rooms, thus, making it that much easier for crimes, such as burglaries, to occur on the college campus, particularly in the dormitories. Despite the positive things that Greek organizations do for the community, crime is very much capable of happening at their events, particularly their parties.

Certain crimes such as under-age drinking, illegal drug use and vandalism are, very much so, capable of happening at a Greek organization's college party (Barton et al. 248). However, according to authors of the article ' Social disorganization theory and the college campus', " Stronger community organizations provide more opportunities for positive social interaction, improve formal social control by increasing the chances that neighbors will observe neighborhood activity and intervene when they see potential problems, and thereby decrease the chance of crime occurring" (Barton et al. 248).

The dynamics of a community determine whether or not there will be social disorganization. Of course openness and communication within the community enhances the

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chances of gaining more control over the youth residing in nearby homes of their neighbors, including the homes of their own (if they have any). Coming together and unifying to form protection groups such as 'The Neighborhood Watch', will give people within the community a feeling of safety and protection. So, if someone from 'The Neighborhood Watch' witnesses a crime taking place with their community, they may feel more confident and safe about calling the police to report it, since they will have the support of the 'The Neighborhood Watch' within the community to fall back on.

Aside from unity and proper communication amongst the residents of a community, the quality of the schools' within the community have a strong ability to decrease social disorganization. Schools within a community that are not overcrowded or lacking basic needs such as teaching supplies and up-to-date text books, makes the students who are attending that particular institution more guaranteed to gain a quality education (Kingston et al. 58). This will give them more of an interest in pursuing a higher education, such as college, which will give them motivation to focus more on school by getting good grades and becoming more involved with extracurricular activities, instead of getting into trouble out in the streets of their community.

According to the text book Key Ideas in Criminology and Criminal Justice, the authors conclude at the end of chapter four that " levels of social disorganization may affect informal control and criminal opportunity

mechanism, which, in turn, directly influence neighborhood crime rates”

(Pratt et al. 50).

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