

The university of chicago was witness to the foundation

[Sociology](#)



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In 1892 The University of Chicago was witness to the foundation of the first ever Department of Sociology, at the heart of the department's aims was to conduct empirical research into how the growing population of Chicago itself deriving from various origins were able to create a society and co-exist together in harmony. Chicago provided researchers with unrivalled access to an ideal situation, as the immigration of foreigners into America between 1860 and 1920, gave rise to an unprecedented 200% growth in population figures.

Families and individuals from all over Europe and the South of America joined together to create a melting pot of different backgrounds and cultures, and it is for this reason that the opportunity was ripe and ideal to create an extensive empirical research into Chicago. This urban explosion provided researchers with the information to discover the reasons behind crime and the circumstances which help to create a criminal sub-culture. This opportunity was exploited by criminologists who raided the city in the hope of creating a theory for crime and a way in which to contain it this compiled a huge catalogue of ethnological data.

In this essay it will be necessary to explore the foundations of the Chicago School, its successes and failures and to discuss the impact it has left on the criminological world in order to critically evaluate the contribution made by the Chicago School of Criminology. Before the Chicago School had been recognised throughout the criminological world as a major source or research setting new standards and levels of in depth study, studies had been formulated providing a social commentary for crime and its sources in various towns and cities, primarily in Europe.

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Researchers such as Quetelet, Guerry and Frazier had conducted informed investigations into various slums to demonstrate how lifestyles can form a criminal sub-culture. The Chicago School intended to set new standards of research and methodology in their investigations, in turn, giving new reasons as to how city layouts can affect the crime rate in cities. GC Holland commented (p114 Jones): The crowding together of the working classes in narrow streets, filthy lanes, alleys and yards, is a serious evil and one which has hitherto increased in all manufacturing towns. The poor are not resident in these places by choice but from necessity. " This quote was taken from Holland's book *The Vital Statistics of Sheffield* (1863). It has relevance to the work the Chicago School as Chicago's inner city was ridden with crime and the reasons for its inhabitation seem to connect with the ideas of necessity over desire.

Deprivation and crime were seen to be a reaction against upper and middle class exploitation and repression of workers. Frederick Engels (1845) stated " violence, 'conflictual' crime, as a result of exploitation and a retaliation against 'the bourgeoisie' and their henchmen. " (p114 Jones). Emile Durkheim has been noted as an influential figure in the work of the Chicago School. Durkheim found crime to be the result of social product and believed that the level of social integration had serious ramifications for crime levels and tended to see an increase in crime.

The Cihcago School oc criminology was formed in response to the writings of Emile Durkheim and GM Mead. GM Mead believed that social action result was considered as a response to social conditions, of psychiatry or

statistical evaluation. (p116 Jones) Durkheim's theories manifested themselves in various theories on the physical aspects of crime, Durkheim saw crime as a social phenomena, which could not be explained in relation to an individual's biology/psychology.

Durkheim saw social disorganisation embedded in theories of crime and principally the broken bonds of family and society and due to the low levels of social integration crime levels rose. Durkheim also saw the social life of neighbourhoods as pathological, and crime's were seen as a normal response to an abnormal situation, a merely temporary phenomenon arising out of periods of rapid social change. Darwinian theories of evolution were also interpreted in terms of crime as a reaction to social adaptation. (p89 Tierney).

One of the most prominent researchers at the University was Robert Ezra Park a former news reporter. Park decided to conduct an investigation into the developing life and culture of Chicago, Park ordered his students to go into Chicago and 'tell it like it is' (p116 Jones). These instructions intended students to carry out detailed investigations into the social ecology of the city, looking at; the distribution of areas of work and residence places of public interaction and private retreat, concentrations of illness and health, and finally urban concentrations of conformity or deviance. p 110 Taylor, Walton & Young) Park used his position as a former journalist to amass evidential information on social conditions in the city of Chicago focusing his articles on housing issues and urban decline (Taylor Walton & Young). The Chicago School was spearheaded by two great thinkers deeply interested in

the prevailing and unfolding nature of crime and social interaction in the city of Chicago in the 1920's, one of these thinkers was Park the other was Ernest. W. Burgess.

The studies of the Chicago School were influenced by the positivist theories of the 19th century, theories tended to generally lean towards a sympathetic view of individual characteristics and emphasis on social factors (p 89 Tierney). Scientific research into city life and morals began under scientists Guerry and Quetelet, their theory of social physics heavily influenced the work of British researchers such as Flethcher, Booth and Mayhew. Quetelet and Guerry began to look to the individual for answers as to how crime began, heavily influenced byt Lambroso.

The 1920's and 1930's saw Chicago transform into a social laborotory for these sociologists. The Chicago School was famed for its theory of Chicago as an ecological system, alike that of animals or plants, this theory is taken in some part from the theory created by Emile Durkheim. Robert Park believed that the best way to invest in research was to go into the city and experience first hand what is going on. The social ecology theory sees people as organisms in a web of interdependent relationships between people as they adapt to the surrounding environment.

Chicago was forced to cope with a large influx of outsiders to the society (i. e. foreigners/businesses) and a struggle to blend together in harmony was inevitable and territorial battles for power ensued. The term 'symbiosis' is found regularly in the studies of the Chicago School, Terence Morris (1954) defined it as " the habitual living together of organisms of different species in

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the same habitat. " This is spoken of in the context of society as a living, breathing organism. Along with the theory of social ecology came the 'concentric circle' theory, coined by Ernest Burgess in 1925.

Burgess divided Chicago into five zones, each representing different cultures, values and levels of social integration. At the centre of these five zones was the central business district also known as 'the loop'. This was an area of high commercial importance in which most businesses and offices were situated. The next zone was labelled 'the zone of transition', this area consisted of factories, poorer residencies and the red light district, it was regarded as a highly volatile area lacking in social integration.

Tierney described it as one of " the mosty deprived areas, characterized by transient populations who are unable to put down roots"... and that its inhabitants will, due to this, " found those values and norms most conducive to criminal behaviour" (p 91 Tierney). As the population continued to rise, it was gradually noticed that in the zone of transtition, an are inhabited by deviants, the crime rate increased at a slow, steady, yet continual rate. The Chicago School concluded that it was not in fact the individuals which were the cause of crime, but social conditions which seemed to be conducive to the effects of crime.

The zone of transition served as merely a stop-over zone until its inhabitants wre able to escape to more affluent zones. The next zone is largely regarded as a residential escape from the hardship of the zone of transition, The zone of transition's environment was found to be the principle reason for crime, the " delinquency rate was more a result of economic position and living

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environment than of racial or ethnic characteristics" (p 306 Williams). The relative inability of inhabitants to make decisions was seen as a hindrance to their lifestyles and also had a huge effect on crime rates.

This is seen as a positivist outlook of the Chicago School as individuals were seen as " inert and their behaviour is largely determined by their environment or the level of social disorganisation" (p307 Williams). As inhabitants saw themselves as merely temporary residents and therefore take no personal interests in their surroundings. As criminal values became more and more commonplace the Chicago theorists realised that criminal activity became easier to rationalise and becomes a way of life due to the surrounding circumstances. " Shaw and McKay extended the theory of social ecology and introduced the concept of cultural transmission.

Delinquent values, in their opinion, were passed down through generations in criminal areas, therefore delinquency can be seen as deriving from learning theory. As criminal delinquent values dominated these areas, they saw that non-delinquent law abiding inhabitants were socialised and therefore gradually became deviant. Shaw and McKay detected juvenile delinquency in urban areas with spot, rate and zone map concepts. Spot maps detected where arrests occurred, rate maps recorded the percentage of juveniles with criminal histories and zone maps demonstrated delinquency rates for each of the five zones.

This influenced other studies by Chicago School researchers. Sutherland expanded on this point and developed his own theory of differential association, this theory was based on the work of Shaw and McKay,

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Sutherland believed that solely basing crime on social disorganisation was too simplistic a term to fully appreciate the model of criminality. Sutherland felt that it was too pathologised, his theory was based on the idea that crime was originated from the different type of cultural exposure inhabitants were subject to.

Sutherland stated in Taylor et al (1973): 126 " a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of law" (p93 Tierney). Sutherland also saw crime as a behavioural skill/syndrome, i. e. it was learned in much the same way as anything else. Differential association not only exposed the delinquent to practical criminal situations in which criminal techniques were learnt but also moral standpoints, views and motivations driving one to commit crime.

Sutherland's theory of differential association has been criticised for a lack of empirical verification due to the great mass of experiences. The Chicago School has been criticised on various levels for many reasons. Chicago researchers were said to rely too heavily on crime statistics, they also lacked a relative distinction between delinquency ridden areas and areas inhabited by delinquents. The Chicago School represented crime as the product and an example of social disorganisation, criminals seemed to be labelled as determined creatures, moulded by their environment.

According to Taylor, Walton and Young " the richness of their (the Chicago School) researches derives in some part from the fact that they never had to liberate themselves from viewing deviants as a kind of political low-life. "

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(pxii, Taylor, Walton & Young). They also find that the Chicago School implicate respectable society in protecting and condoning crime and deviance. " The work of the Chicago School is said to have relied heavily on dominant stereotypes yet clearly not all poor people were criminals. Crime in Chicago was also not stable over sustained periods of time, so it cannot be said to be entirely accurate.

The method of life histories was criticised for a suspected lack of genuineness. The crimes of the rich largely went unnoticed and were ignored even though white collar crime was ever increasing and there were no signs of it abating. Al Capone's mob rule denied the Chicago School the opportunity to make a complete ethnological study into Chicago, therefore their work suffered greatly and cannot be said to be a comprehensive study of crime in Chicago. The corruption of Al Capone and his mob was obvious to all through its portrayals in Hollywood, but it was deemed to be unsafe to research into the problem as it was so close to the source.

Landesco stated in 1968 that he believed that this ignorance of organised crime and the crimes of the rich and powerful was detrimental to their (the Chicago School) work, corruption was rife but fear of punishment was greater. Chicago's School of Sociology has left an imprint on the world of sociological criminology. Research methods have been refined and articulated to provide in-depth theoretical explanations, this has enriched ethnological studies and influenced many research projects over the last century. There have been various studies that have contradicted the concentric circle theory, due to differing city structures and layouts.

Lander (1954), produced a research paper on Baltimore and concluded that the industrial areas on the outskirts found crime to be more concentrated than the city centre and decided that sub-standard living, overcrowding and poverty were to blame. Morris broke the concentric circle theory, finding Croydon, his area of study to be filled by problem families and therefore creating an artificial crime zone. He defined the problems as economic position, administrative procedures and class differences, not just the area.

Supporters for the concentric circle theory were not small in their numbers, researchers such as Baldwin & Bottoms (Sheffield, 1976), Davidson (Hull, 1981) and Susan Smith (Birmingham, 1986) were keen believers in the theory. A critical evaluation of the Chicago School's contribution can be found in a quote by Heidensohn (1989: 18-19): " There is no single definitive view in their work, indeed, as was inevitable in such a productive group, ideas diverged between writers and even within the work of one man... their work was not systematised and did not generate a 'finished system of sociology'".