

Social disorganization theory



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The social disorganisation theory was one of the most important criminological theories developed from the Chicago School of thought, namely research conducted by Shaw and Mckay (1942). Shaw and McKay (1942) used spatial maps to study the residential locations of juveniles referred to Chicago courts, they discovered that rates of crime were not equally dispersed. Instead, crime was concentrated in certain areas and interestingly remained stable in such areas despite the changes of the individuals who lived there. Unlike other theories of delinquency, The Social Disorganisation Theory suggested that where an individual lived was more instrumental in determining the likelihood that an individual will become involved in criminal activities than individual characteristics such as age and gender. The theory was not intended to be applicable to all types of crimes but mainly to street crimes at neighbourhood level. The Social disorganization theory directly linked high crime rates to neighbourhood ecological characteristics such as poverty, residential mobility, family disruption and racial heterogeneity (Gaines and Miller, 2011). All of which will be discussed in more detail throughout this essay.

The first core element of the social disorganization theory to be discussed is Poverty, which can be defined as the state of being extremely poor. Such a lack of wealth is often seen to be due to the lack of employment opportunities. Such incentives like the Princes Trust and Catch 22 focus on poorer areas of society and seek to increase the employment opportunities for young people there. Jenson (2003) found that when employment opportunities increase pressures on residents to flee decrease ensuring more stable and improved communities. However it is when employment

opportunities remain low that economic deprivation grows which could lead to social disorganization, which in turn leads to crime (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Other theories such as The Strain Theory (Merton, 1957) support the impact that poverty can have on a communities crime rates as due to lack of employment opportunities people turn to other methods of fulfilling their financial and material needs in an anti social way if this cannot be done pro-socially such as through employment.

Racial Heterogeneity is the second element of the social disorganisation theory to be reviewed; this notion is related to the diverseness of races within a society. The social disorganization theory proposes that crime occurs when the methods of social control are weakened (Sun, Triplett and Gainey, 2004). Interestingly it is racial heterogeneity and urbanization that are predicted to weaken the control of individuals to most, due to lack of communication and interaction among residents (Sun, Triplett and Gainey, 2004). It is the lack of knowledge that allows for the racial separation along with the media often using particular races as scapegoats for certain crimes almost creating a moral panic within the communities singling out a certain race which would then increase the likelihood of their engagement in criminal activity (Bowling, 2002). This is supported by the findings that even among poorer neighborhoods, some racially diverse and others racially homogeneous, local friendships lower certain crime rates such as assault (Sun, Triplett and Gainey, 2004).

The third element of the social disorganisation theory to be considered is residential mobility this refers to the frequency of which individuals change their residence. Residential mobility has proven to help to explain the social

disorganization theory, it has successfully explained automobile theft (Rice and Smith, 2002), gang crime (Lane and Meeker, 2000) and sexual re-offending (Mustaine, Tewksbury and Stengel, 2006). Shaw and McKay (1942) also noted that socially disorganized communities tended to produce “criminal traditions” that could be passed to successive generations of youths, due to the lack of residential mobility; criminal subcultures developed and overrun communities. It was hard for people to re-locate for reasons such as financial and fears of leaving that community. Residential mobility and poverty were often seen as interrelating factors in research on the social disorganisation theory as they were both significant predictors of delinquency but were stronger predictors when looked at together (Blau and Blau, 1982).

The final element to be discussed is family disruption; family has proven to be leading process within the social disorganisation theory (Sun, Triplett and Gainey, 2004). Sampson (1986) suggested that social disorganization may affect youth crime in particular its effects on family structures and stability. Consistent with the previous research social disorganization may influence the level of crime through its effect on family, however other researchers found that family may be used to alleviate the damaging effects of social disorganization. Tolan, Gorman-Smith and Henry (2003) found that parenting practices somewhat mediated the correlation between disorganised community and delinquency. However this study looked at families who were not seen to be disrupted. Burfeind (1984) found that that family disruption influenced delinquency in different ways, such as: the level of attachment to the father and paternal discipline. However the majority of studies that

looked at the interaction of family disruption and social disorganisation theory focused on male offenders and did not consider female crime; something which has been steadily on the increase in today's society.

Despite its early origins, social disorganization theory continues to be prominent in the study of delinquency. In fact, Kubrin and Weizer (2003) suggested that the theory may be stronger now than when it was first proposed. As suggested in this essay, social disorganization theory continues to dominate in explaining delinquency in regards to the neighbourhood characteristics such as; poverty, racial heterogeneity, family disruption and residential mobility. It could be suggested that to prevent delinquency it is important to organise communities who are disorganized for example providing youth centres, employment opportunities and empowering individuals to maintain their homes in disorganized communities. By improving neighbourhoods and making them more appealing, social controls and relationships will be strengthened. All the elements discussed within the essay have a clear impact on the social disorganisation theory and the more of which are present in a community increases the likelihood of social disorganisation and delinquency (Shaw and McKay, 1942). However it must be noted that poverty was often found to be the strongest and most consistent predictor of crime compared to the other three core elements: racial heterogeneity, racial mobility and family disruption (Warner and Pierce, 1993).