Social Disorganization Theory: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

Social disorganization theory is one of the most popular theories researchers employ to understand the spatial distribution of crime across communities. In this chapter, we outline the theory's historical trajectory, discuss its main arguments, and present key findings about neighborhoods and crime from the literature. We also summarize the theory's thorniest substantive and methodological issues, which include testing mediating concepts like informal social control and defining a neighborhood unit. Finally, we introduce newer challenges facing the theory including theorizing the role of neighborhood subculture and understanding how immigration impacts community crime rates in the context of current immigration patterns in the U.S. In the conclusion we encourage researchers to consider innovative methods and data sources in future tests of social disorganization theory.

Introduction

One of the most recognized facts about crime is that it is not randomly distributed across neighborhoods within a city. For this reason, residents can often identify where the "good" and "bad" areas of a city are. Social disorganization theory takes this fact—the non-random distribution of crime—as a point of departure for explaining crime. It asks why crime is higher in some neighborhoods than others and whether there is something about the characteristics of these neighborhoods themselves (above and beyond the people who live there) that fosters crime. Social disorganization theory has long occupied a significant place in criminological thought and continues to do so well into the 21st century. Despite its popularity and utility for understanding crime, nagging issues, both substantive and methodological, remain. Before we discuss these issues, we describe the history of social disorganization theory and its main arguments below.

History of Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization theory, like other theories reviewed in this volume, is a product of its time. Nearly a century ago, researchers at the University of Chicago became concerned about what they were witnessing in terms of the effects of growing urbanization, industrialization, and

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immigration on patterns of social organization in Chicago neighborhoods. Two researchers in particular, Park and Burgess (1925), studied how these drastic changes were impacting the city. With backgrounds in human ecology, they likened the city's growth to ecological competition, observing just as there is a natural ecology where animals and plants compete for space and existence, so too is there a social ecology where humans compete for scarce and desirable space. Their observations led to the Concentric Zone Theory, which emphasized a process of invasion, dominance, and succession to understand city life. First, Park and Burgess described the expansion of the central business district (CBD), the downtown area of the city. As Chicago's population continued to grow in size, the CBD expanded outward in successive stages. With the expansion of the CBD came the deterioration of residential properties, as most residents moved farther away to escape the hustle and bustle of the area, leaving their residences uninhabited. This deterioration ultimately led to "social disorganization." As part of their theory, Park and Burgess (1925) argued that cities can be divided into zones that correspond to areas of social (dis) organization.

At this stage, crime was not part of the equation. In fact, crime was not incorporated into the discussion until the work of Shaw and McKay (1942), who applied the zone theory to the study of delinquency. As a direct extension of the ecological perspective on community processes that was developing at the University of Chicago under the guidance of Park and Burgess, Shaw and McKay's primary interest was in determining the extent to which differences in economic and social characteristics of local areas paralleled differences in rates of delinquency. Questions of interest included: (1) To what extent do variations in rates of delinquency correspond to differences in economic, social, and cultural characteristics of local communities in different types of cities? (2) How are rates of delinquency in particular areas affected over time by successive changes in the nativity and nationality composition of the population? (3) Under what economic and social conditions does crime develop as a social tradition and become embodied in a system of criminal values? (4) What are the implications, for treatment and prevention, of wide variations in rates of delinquency in different types of communities?

In addressing these questions, Shaw and McKay studied the distribution of delinquency based on juvenile court cases and commitments for periods around 1900, 1920, and 1930. They supplemented this with extensive fieldwork data in Chicago neighborhoods. The results of their analysis, published in *Juvenile Delinquency in Urban Areas*, revealed the concentration of delinquency—its distribution was closely related to the location of industrial and commercial areas and to the composition of the population (e.g., rates of poverty, residential mobility, and racial/ethnic heterogeneity). Collectively, findings from the Chicago school studies formed the basis of social disorganization theory. These studies shaped the development and direction of the theory for decades to come.

What are the larger take-away lessons from these findings? First, researchers concluded there is a co-occurrence of crime and social/economic disadvantage such as low socio-economic status (reflected in the percentage of families on relief, home ownership levels, median rentals, and occupation) across Chicago neighborhoods. Stated alternatively, delinquency, crime, and deviance go hand and hand with other social problems. This finding challenged biological determinism and rational choice explanations for criminality, which had long dominated thinking about crime. Second, researchers documented the persistence of high crime areas noting they remained high in crime despite which racial/ethnic group inhabited the area. In other words, some neighborhoods in the city appear to be high crime or deviance areas, regardless of the characteristics or nationality of the residents living within them. The fact that high crime rates can persist in certain neighborhoods despite complete turnovers in the composition of their populations suggested to many, even decades later, that "kinds of places" explanations are needed along with "kinds of people" explanations (Stark, 1987).

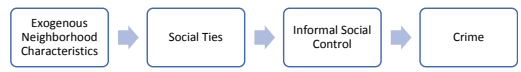
Basic Tenants of Social Disorganization Theory

According to the theory, communities can be characterized along a dimension of organization; at one end are socially organized communities and at the other are socially disorganized communities. Socially organized communities are marked by high levels of solidarity (internal consensus on important norms and values such as a crime-free community), cohesion (strong bonds among neighbors), and integration (social interaction among residents), which collectively help lower crime rates. Socially disorganized communities, on the other hand, lack these characteristics and thus have higher crime rates. The connection between social organization and crime has to do with informal social control, or the community's ability to regulate itself. In organized communities, there is evidence of (1) informal surveillance, or the casual but active observation of neighborhood streets that is engaged in by individuals during daily activities, (2) movement-governing rules, or the avoidance of areas in or near neighborhoods viewed as unsafe, and (3) direct intervention, or the questioning of strangers and residents of the neighborhood about suspicious activities, chastening adults and admonishing children for behavior that is defined as unacceptable (Greenberg, Rohe, & Williams, 1982).

Social disorganization can thus be defined as the inability of local communities to realize the common values of residents or solve commonly experienced problems (Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978). Consistent with this, we do not need communities so much to satisfy our private needs, which are best met elsewhere, but to express and realize *common* values and standards such as a crime-free community. What social disorganization theory provides then is a specification of the effects of neighborhood characteristics on the capacity and ability of community residents to implement and maintain public norms (Sampson, 1987).

So which neighborhood characteristics promote social organization and which are likely to create disorganized neighborhoods? Early theorists focused on the effects of poverty, residential mobility, and racial/ethnic heterogeneity, and found that they influence the degree of social (dis)organization, with implications for crime and delinquency. Consider residential mobility, or the frequency with which people move in and out of a neighborhood. Some communities are stable with residents living in the same homes for decades while others are unstable and experience significant turnover. It is easy to understand how residential mobility can disrupt a community's network of social relations. If individuals continually move in and out of a neighborhood, it becomes harder for residents to know, trust, and interact with one another, reducing the informal social control needed to prevent crime. According to the theory, communities marked by high rates of residential turnover should experience high crime rates, precisely because they suffer from weak social ties and little informal control —a finding that, in fact, is borne out in the literature (Bellair, 2000; Bellair & Browning, 2010; Boggess & Hipp, 2010; Chamlin, 1989; Kirk & Laub, 2010; Kubrin, 2000; Sampson, 2012; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Warner & Rountree, 1997; Xie & McDowall, 2008).

In sum, the basic social disorganization causal model can be expressed as:



Sampson (1987) summarizes the nature of the relationships among these factors:

> Neighborhood characteristics such as family disorganization, residential mobility, and structural density weaken informal social control networks; informal social controls are impeded by weak local social bonds, lowered community attachment, anonymity, and reduced capacity for surveillance and guardianship; other factors such as poverty and racial composition also probably affect informal control, although their influence is in all likelihood indirect; residents in areas characterized by family disorganization, mobility, and building density are less able to perform guardianship activities, less likely to report general deviance to authorities, to intervene in public disturbances, and to assume responsibility for supervision of youth activities; the result is that deviance is tolerated and public norms of social control are not effective. (p. 109)

Stark (1987) offers a complementary explanation of the inter-relationships among these various factors when he identifies aspects of urban neighborhoods that characterize high deviance areas of cities (e.g., density, poverty, transience), responses to these aspects (e.g., moral cynicism among residents, diminished social control), and how these responses can amplify the volume of deviance in these areas (e.g., by driving out the least deviant, by further reducing social control). His "theory of deviant places" delineates an integrated set of 30 propositions.

Two final points are worth mentioning. First, social disorganization is a property of neighborhoods, not individuals. It is incorrect to say that residents are disorganized. Instead, one must refer to disorganized neighborhoods. And second, community characteristics are largely indirectly related to crime. Poverty, mobility, heterogeneity, and other ecological characteristics are theorized to cause crime indirectly by increasing levels of social disorganization.

Early and Enduring Challenges for Social Disorganization Theory

Like all other theories presented in this volume, social disorganization theory faces ongoing challenges, some of which have been addressed more fully than others. These challenges have been discussed at length in two popular assessments of the theory, each at a different point in time: Bursik (1988) and Kubrin and Weitzer (2003a). Below we discuss key points from these works.

From its inception there were conceptualization and operationalization problems inherent in social disorganization theory. One key problem was with the measurement of social disorganization itself (Bursik, 1988, p. 526). At times Shaw and McKay (1942) did not clearly differentiate the presumed outcome of social disorganization (i.e., increased rates of crime and delinquency) from disorganization itself. The delinquency rate of an area was both an example of disorganization and something caused by disorganization. This problem was addressed 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, as noted earlier.

More recently, measurement issues have surfaced with respect to social disorganization's mediating concepts. Recall it is the mediating concepts of social ties and informal social control that account for the relationship between ecological characteristics of communities (e.g., poverty) and crime. In the more recent past, researchers have also considered the mediating effects of related concepts such as collective efficacy and social capital. Collective efficacy builds on the concept of social ties arguing that ties may be necessary but not sufficient for social control and that a key factor of purposive action (i.e., how ties are activated and resources mobilized to enhance social control) depends on conditions of mutual trust and solidarity among neighbors (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). With the concept of social capital, or those intangible resources produced "in relations among persons that facilitate action" for mutual benefit (e.g., combating crime) (Coleman, 1988, p. S100), researchers maintain that it is the resources transmitted through social ties, not the ties per se, that are key to facilitating social control (Browning, Dietz, & Feinberg, 2004; Burchfield, 2009; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, p. 377; Kubrin & Wo, 2016; Sampson, 2006; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Silver & Miller, 2004; Triplett, Gainey, & Sun, 2003; Warner, 2007, 2014; Wickes, Hipp, Sargeant, & Mazerolle, 2017).

As you may have noticed, there is some conceptual fuzziness regarding the mediating concepts of social disorganization. In particular, it is not always clear how social ties differ from informal control, or how collective efficacy and social capital are distinctive from, and truly represent an improvement over, ties and control (Kubrin, Stucky, & Krohn, 2008, p. 99; see also Gau, 2014; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a; Peterson, Krivo, & Harris, 2000; Taylor, 2002, 2015). Conceptual fuzziness has meant that some studies use survey questions that may reflect any or all of the concepts, depending on one's

perspective. As Kubrin and Weitzer (2003a) argue, what are needed are precise definitions, clearer distinctions, and better operationalization of concepts in studies:

> Methodologically, researchers should pay particular attention to developing indicators of concepts that are clearly distinguishable from each other, and should incorporate all measures into their research designs. In this way, the effects of social ties, capital, and efficacy can be directly compared. (p. 378)

A second ongoing challenge facing researchers has to do with the question, what is a neighborhood? Both in terms of conceptualization and operationalization, social disorganization theory has long struggled with the notion of "neighborhood." Conceptually, there is wide variation across individuals in what constitutes a neighborhood, including their own. If we were to ask five residents living in the same apartment building to define their neighborhood, there is little doubt we would get five different answers. In terms of operationalization, especially when it comes to tests of social disorganization theory, neighborhoods are often measured as the block, block group, census tract, zip code, or even police precinct in which one resides (Andresen & Linning, 2012; Gruenewald, Freisthler, Remer, LaScala, & Treno, 2006; Hipp, 2007; Morenoff, 2003; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Wooldredge, 2002). Apart from uncertainty as to whether they accurately constitute one's neighborhood in any true sense, officially designated units such as these are meaningless to most residents. How many of us can identify the census tract number where we live let alone the boundaries of the tract indicating where one tract ends and another begins?

One way researchers have attempted to address this issue is by using perceptual maps, an approach that involves asking respondents to indicate their perceived neighborhood boundaries on a map (Coulton, Korbin, Chan, & Su, 2001; Hart & Waller, 2013; Kohm, 2009; Lopez & Lukinbeal, 2010). Another approach involves the creation of a new definition of neighborhoods called "egohoods" (Hipp & Boessen, 2013). Egohoods are overlapping, non-independent, concentric circles that surround the focal unit, usually a block or other unit chosen by the researcher. For example, if one uses the block, a buffer of varying sizes (e.g., quarter mile, half mile, etc.) is drawn around each block centroid to capture all the socio-demographic information in the areas surrounding it. This allows the egohood to reflect a broader area, without being limited to the focal block. In other words, the egohood acts as a smoothing mechanism, or moving average across blocks in the study area in question. Egohoods allow researchers to put the local surrounding contexts of people's activity spaces at the forefront of the analysis.

Apart from the theoretical question of what constitutes a neighborhood, over the past decade or so, research has increasingly moved towards micro-spatial units of analysis such as the street segment. A street segment is defined as "the two block faces on both sides of a street between two interactions" (Weisburd, Bushway, Lum, & Yang, 2004, p. 290). Neighborhood and crime studies using street segments as the unit of analysis reveal the law of crime concentration, or the consistent finding that crime is highly concentrated in a small percentage of street segments throughout a city (Bernasco & Steenbeek, 2017; Curman, Andresen, & Brantingham, 2015; Gill, Wooditch, & Weisburd, 2017; Kim, 2016; Levin, Rosenfeld, & Deckard, 2017; Schnell, Braga, & Piza, 2017; Sherman, Gartin, & Buerger, 1989; Weisburd, 2015; Weisburd et al., 2004; Weisburd, Groff, & Yang, 2012). Some researchers have used street segments to focus on the theoretical integration of social disorganization theory and routine activities theory, another place-based theory that stipulates three necessary conditions for most crime—a likely offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian—coming together in space and time (Andresen, 2006; Braga & Clarke, 2014; Rice & Smith, 2002; Smith, Frazee, & Davison, 2000). As the field gains new and valuable insights from more spatially and temporally precise data, Taylor (2015) points out that researchers must consider the implications of this as they relate to spatial scaling, temporal scaling, construct validation of ecological indicators, and selectivity bias, as well as identify "both what shifts theoretically when

examining variables and processes at different geographic scales, and how variables and processes connect across different geographic scales" (p. 7). As this discussion reveals, the issue of what constitutes a neighborhood and how neighborhoods should be measured in studies remains an ongoing challenge for social disorganization theory.

A third early and ongoing issue relates to a reliance on official data. From the theory's inception, studies have relied on official data to document crime patterns across neighborhoods when testing social disorganization theory—a trend that largely continues today. One implication of this is that scholars have not sufficiently 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 particular, some neighborhoods are more likely to be "over-policed" than are others (Gelman, Fagan, & Kiss, 2007). The question remains: Given this 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, an 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 seem to be 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), as well as outside the United States (e.g., The Australian Community Capacity Study).

A reliance on official data has also made it challenging for researchers to empirically test the mediating factors linking neighborhood characteristics such as poverty to crime rates in disorganization studies, constituting a final early and ongoing challenge. Along these lines, from social disorganization theory's inception, critiques centered on the decided lack of attention paid to the processes that mediate the effect of community characteristics on crime (Byrne & Sampson, 1986; Kubrin & Wo, 2016). Yet increasingly studies are attempting to document the theoretical processes laid out by the theory (e.g., Bellair, 1997; Elliott et al., 1996; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Warner, 2014; Warner & Rountree, 1997). A key finding from this body of literature, however, is that this process may not be so straightforward–in particular, social ties may not play the expected role (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, pp. 375–379; see also Browning, 2002; Browning et al., 2004; Pattillo, 1998; Walton, 2016; Warner & Rountree, 1997). That social ties may not always lead to positive outcomes like greater social cohesion or increased informal social control and that social ties may, in fact, be present in structurally disorganized neighborhoods are two key findings in studies of social disorganization theory. In particular, the emergent finding is that network density and residential stability can have both positive *and* negative effects on social control depending on the context in question.

Pattillo's (1998) study of a black middle-class Chicago neighborhood provides a case in point. In this study, she found that dense social networks and residential stability did not prevent crime but rather "worked to circumscribe the criminal activity that does exist by holding the neighborhood delinquents within the bonds of familial and neighborhood associations" (p. 748). Social organization in this neighborhood, she found, was "partially dependent on the social control levied by neighborhood gang leaders on their local troops" (p. 757). In a neighborhood characterized by disorganizing structural forces, both groups of residents—those engaged in crime as well as law abiding residents—engaged in their own type of informal social control to achieve the common goal of living in a "safe" neighborhood.

In a different neighborhood context, specifically a multiethnic public housing neighborhood made up of renters, Walton (2016) examined collective efficacy and community perceptions. In this high poverty and high diversity

neighborhood she found surprisingly high levels of collective efficacy among residents, contrary to what social disorganization theory would predict. Walton (2016) concludes "the ability to exhibit collective efficacy in the face of structural disadvantage makes this neighborhood a useful case for understanding how we may refine social disorganization theory" (p. 256).

Newer Challenges and Future Directions

As social disorganization theory develops and progresses, new challenges and issues emerge alongside the older ones. Although today there are several newer challenges now confronting the theory that deserve discussion, we present two of the most critical. The resolution of these issues will greatly affect the direction social disorganization theory will take in the upcoming decades.

The first pressing issue relates to the role of neighborhood subcultures in social disorganization theory. Note that neighborhood subculture was a key interest for Shaw and McKay (1942) and other early theorists (e.g., Kornhauser, 1978). As indicated earlier, a key question had to do with how neighborhood subcultures became entrenched and further affected rates of delinquency. Theorists questioned: Under what economic and social conditions does crime develop as a social tradition and become embodied in a system of criminal values?

In their research, Shaw and McKay (1942) found evidence regarding neighborhood subculture—they noted key differences in social values across communities—as well as documented how this variation was linked to variation in rates of crime and delinquency across communities. First, in areas of high economic status, they found a similarity in values, especially those related to the welfare of children. In particular, there was pressure exerted on children in these communities to keep them engaged in conventional activities. Second, in middle and high-class areas, they found similar values with respect to social controls, expressed in institutions and voluntary associations designed to perpetuate and protect those values. And third, by contrast, they found that areas of low economic status were characterized by greater diversity in norms and standards of behavior, rather than uniformity. Children were exposed to a wide variety of contradictory (and sometimes unlawful) standards rather than to a relatively consistent and conventional pattern. Specifically, Shaw and McKay (1942) determined that in low socio-economic status communities, children were exposed to adult criminals, from whom they could learn (illegal) behavior.

Following Shaw and McKay (1942), other researchers took interest in directly documenting aspects of "lower class culture," wanting to determine how it related to delinquency within poor communities. Miller (1958), for example, identified six focal concerns of lower class culture including trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy. His thesis was that a dominant component of the motivation underlying delinquent behavior engaged in by members of the lower class involves the positive effort to achieve status, conditions, or qualities associated within the actor's most significant cultural milieu.

Although the role of neighborhood culture was evident in the explanations of early disorganization researchers, over time, this component of the theory became less and less important. In fact, in the decades following Shaw and McKay's early contribution, later work downplayed cultural influences and researchers focused almost exclusively on structural factors and their relationship to neighborhoods (Kubrin, 2015).

Fortunately, in the past couple of decades, there have been increasing calls for the reintroduction of culture into contemporary community-level crime studies. These calls are found in theoretical statements (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Bruce, Roscigno, & McCall, 1998; Bursik, 1988; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a; Ousey & Wilcox, 2005; Sampson et al., 2002; Sampson & Bean, 2006; Small & Newman, 2001) as well as empirical studies, where culture is incorporated into the analyses (e.g., Berg, Stewart, Brunson, & Simons, 2012; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003b; Matsueda, Drakulich, & Kubrin, 2006; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998;

Stewart & Simons, 2006; Warner, 2003; Warner & Burchfield, 2011; Warner & Rountree, 2000).

One approach discussed is the oppositional subculture model, where it is argued that lower class communities generate distinctive values and beliefs that endorse aggressive behavior and law violation. These values and beliefs (1) are in direct opposition to conventional, middle-class values which typically support conformity to legal norms, (2) are passed down from generation to generation, and perhaps most importantly, (3) are relatively independent of structural factors (i.e., they are not seen as stemming from structural conditions such as poverty). Wolfgang and Ferracuti's (1967) subculture of violence thesis is most representative of this argument but other examples exist (e.g., Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958). This approach to culture is largely rejected by scholars today (e.g., Kubrin, 2015; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a; Sampson & Bean, 2006) on two important fronts.

First, researchers argue that residents in high crime areas do not develop oppositional subcultures but instead share conventional values, including the desire for a crime-free community —a point emphasized decades ago by Kornhauser (1978) (see also Kubrin, 2015). That is, there is general consensus in community beliefs, norms, and values, including those concerning crime. It is argued rather than condoning crime, members of disadvantaged communities have a degree of fatalism or moral cynicism about crime, viewing it as inevitable in their communities (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). As a result, crime in these communities is less vigorously condemned by residents. Stated alternatively, in neighborhoods where conventional values are attenuated, "High crime rates exist…not because oppositional values are anchored in the community but because limited opportunities make it difficult for residents to pursue conventional goals and because they lack the willingness or capacity to prevent deviance" (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, p. 379). In this explanation for the role of culture, it is assumed "residents have weaker cultural support for exerting social control over others" (p. 379) (see Kubrin, 2015; Warner, 2003).

Second, recent studies that incorporate culture in some way explicitly recognize the linkage between structure and culture in generating crime. As such, certain neighborhood conditions make it difficult for communities to provide informal social control because of attenuated culture. Consider the work of Sampson and Wilson (1995) who seek to explain high crime rates in inner-city, minority communities. Their basic thesis is that macrosocial patterns of residential inequality give rise to the social isolation and ecological concentration of the "truly disadvantaged" (Wilson, 1987), which in turn leads to structural barriers and cultural adaptations that undermine social organization and hence the control of crime (p. 38). Sampson and Wilson (1995) describe how structural changes in inner-city neighborhoods have led to poor minority neighborhoods being socially isolated from middle-class resources. Although most residents in these neighborhoods accept the moral validity of middle-class values, they may be less able to live out those values due to the constraints imposed by pervasive poverty. Social isolation is distinguished from other cultural arguments by virtue of its focus on adaptations to structural constraints and opportunities, rather than internalization of norms, consistent with our earlier point.

Ethnographic studies generally support the notion that "structurally disorganized communities are conducive to the emergence of cultural value systems and attitudes that seem to legitimate, or at least provide a basis of tolerance for, crime and deviance" (Sampson & Wilson, 1995: 50). Most often cited is the work of Anderson (1999), who argues that macrostructural patterns of racial inequality, disadvantage, and limited economic opportunities foster a "street code" that is conducive to violence, in large part because these conditions create a sense of hopelessness and cynicism about societal rules and their application. Additional support is found in other works, such as Kubrin and Weitzer (2003b), whose study lends support to a more integrated structural-cultural perspective on violent crime in urban neighborhoods. Using data to examine the structural correlates and ecological distribution of homicide in St. Louis, Missouri, and narrative

accounts of homicide incidents, they find that a certain type of homicide—what they call "cultural retaliatory homicide"—is more common in some neighborhoods than others due to the combined effects of economic disadvantage and problematic policing and of neighborhood cultural responses to these structural conditions. Problems confronting residents of these communities, they find, are often resolved informally, without calling the police, and neighborhood cultural codes support this type of problem solving, even when the "solution" involves a retaliatory killing.

As this discussion highlights, it is becoming abundantly clear that "cultural factors deserve greater attention" (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, p. 380) and should not be ignored. Like Shaw and McKay (1942) and other early theorists believed, we cannot understand variations in crime rates across communities without also understanding the role that neighborhood subcultures occupy in the calculus. Future work on social disorganization theory must continue to specify subculture's important role.

A second pressing issue facing social disorganization researchers stems from current immigration patterns in the U.S. At the turn of the 21st century, scholars maintained that "the latest wave of immigration is likely to have a more significant impact on society than any other social issue" (Martinez & Lee, 2000, p. 487). According to social disorganization theory, increased immigration to American cities should result in higher crime rates in those neighborhoods where immigrants settle. Why? In the theory's original formulation, immigration was considered a disorganizing force that contributed to community crime rates through increased residential instability and racial and ethnic heterogeneity, both of which weaken informal social control, and thus increase crime (Gostjev, 2017; Lee & Martinez, 2002).

Concerning instability, theorists maintain that rapid change of any kind, including change resulting from an influx of immigrants into a community, can lead to the breakdown of community social institutions, which are necessary to prevent crime (Lee, Martinez, & Rosenfeld, 2001; see also Mears, 2002; Reid, Weiss, Adelman, & Jaret, 2005). Bankston (1998), for example, suggests that heightened population turnover as a result of immigration to an area can destabilize local institutions and reduce informal social control. Recall the earlier discussion on the reasons why, according to disorganization theorists, residential instability and crime are related.

Concerning racial and ethnic heterogeneity, the argument is similar. Racial and ethnic heterogeneity are theorized to affect the strength and salience of informal social control within communities (Kubrin, 2000; Taylor & Covington, 1993; Warner and Rountree, 1997). In particular, in communities with diverse racial groups living in close proximity, interaction between members will be low, or at least lower than in racially homogenous neighborhoods (Gans, 1968). Heterogeneity can also undermine ties between neighbors, limiting their ability to agree on a common set of values or to solve commonly experienced problems (Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978), including those related to crime. Reasons point to cultural differences between racial groups, language incompatibility, and the fact that individuals prefer members of their own race to members of different races (Blau and Schwartz, 1984; Gans, 1968). As a result, in heterogeneous neighborhoods, individuals are less likely to look out for one another and take an interest in their neighbors' activities. Informal social control will be limited and crime rates should be higher. As Kornhauser (1978) notes, "Heterogeneity impedes communication and thus obstructs the quest to solve common problems and reach common goals" (p. 78). Indeed, studies have found that racial heterogeneity contributes to higher community crime rates (Chamlin, 1989; Kubrin, 2000; Smith & Jarjoura, 1988; Warner & Pierce, 1993; Warner & Rountree, 1997). In essence, social disorganization's traditional approach to immigration (and resulting residential instability and racial and ethnic heterogeneity) is that it constitutes a disorganizing force, one which can generate heightened crime rates in communities.

Despite these claims, empirical evidence overwhelmingly reveals that immigration and crime do *not* go hand in hand. In fact, studies of neighborhood crime rates reveal the exact opposite

of what social disorganization theory predicts: immigration into an area is either unrelated or negatively related to crime rates, controlling for a host of other factors (Butcher & Piehl, 1998; Chavez & Griffiths, 2009; Feldmeyer, 2009; Gostjev, 2017; Graif & Sampson, 2009; Kubrin & Desmond, 2015; Kubrin, Hipp, & Kim, 2018; Kubrin & Ishizawa, 2012; Lee & Martinez, 2002; Light & Miller, 2018; Martinez, Stowell, & Lee, 2010; Nielsen & Martinez, 2009; Ousey & Kubrin, 2009, 2014, 2018; Stowell, Messner, McGeever, & Raffalovich, 2009; Velez, 2009; Wadsworth, 2010). Indeed, a recently published meta-analysis on the immigration-crime relationship that examines more than 50 U.S.-based macro-level studies published between 1994 and 2014 reveals that overall, the immigration-crime association is negative—but very weak (Ousey & Kubrin, 2018). Across the studies, significant negative effects were found to be 2.5 times as common as significant positive effects but null effects were by far the most common result reported in studies. One implication of these findings is that immigration may actually strengthen—not compromise—community social control.

How are we to make sense of the current research findings on immigration in the context of social disorganization theory? Did the theory get it wrong? Or is it simply "out of date" with what is happening today in terms of immigration patterns, neighborhood change, and crime?

Whatever the explanation, the findings from this growing literature have led many to reconsider the role of immigration and its effects on community crime rates beyond the traditional disorganization argument. Martinez (2006) claims:

> Contemporary scholars are now more open to the possibility that an influx of immigrants into disadvantaged and high-crime communities may encourage new forms of social organization and adaptive social structures. Such adaptations may mediate the negative effects of economic deprivation and various forms of demographic heterogeneity (ethnic, cultural, social) on formal and informal social control, thereby decreasing crime. (p. 10)

One new approach making this claim is the immigration revitalization thesis, which argues that immigration revitalizes poor areas and strengthens social control due to strong familial and neighborhood institutions and enhanced job opportunities associated with enclave economies—the result being less crime (Lee & Martinez, 2002). Lee et al. (2001) explain, "Far from being a disorganizing and possibly criminogenic force, this view posits immigration as an essential ingredient to the continued viability of urban areas that had experienced population decline and community decay in previous decades" (p. 564). Lee and Martinez (2002) further note:

> Contemporary immigration may encourage new forms of social organization that mediate potentially crime-producing effects of the deleterious social and economic conditions found in urban neighborhoods. These new forms of social organization may include ethnically situated informal mechanisms of social control and enclave economies that provide stable jobs to co-ethnics. (p. 376)

The mechanisms linking immigration to lower crime rates in communities have yet to be fully determined (Kubrin & Desmond, 2015; Ousey & Kubrin, 2018) but the empirical literature documenting this connection is unambiguous. A challenge for future social disorganization theorists, then, is to rework the theory to more accurately reflect how immigration patterns and the presence of immigrants within communities are associated with neighborhood crime rates.

Conclusion

Social disorganization theory is a staple of criminological thought and extremely important because of its contribution to understanding the distribution of crime across geographic areas, notably communities. It was created during a time when researchers wanted to understand how large-scale changes within the city of Chicago corresponded to changes in crime rates, particularly in certain areas of Chicago. Its relevance for cities and neighborhoods today is no less apparent.

Moving forward, researchers will need to get creative in how they approach the reworking and development of social disorganization theory. With the advent of more extensive and detailed datasets, newer data should be used to test,

update, and refine existing concepts related to the theory. One example of an innovative data collection and analysis effort involves using Google Street View to capture the physical environment of a neighborhood via social systematic observation (Odgers, Caspi, Bates, Sampson, & Moffitt, 2012; Vandeviver, 2014) while another can be seen in recent work that uses data from drones to capture neighborhood physical disorder (Grubesic, Wallace, Chamberlain, & Nelson, 2018). As yet another example, Hipp, Bates, Lichman, & Smythe (2018) integrate geocoded Twitter data into an analysis of crime and ambient population.

As innovative data and approaches surface and as cities and neighborhoods continue to grow, shift, and evolve over time, so too will social disorganization theory develop and evolve to more accurately reflect the processes at work. Social disorganization researchers must always keep their pulse on "the growth of the city," as early Chicago School researchers Park and Burgess (1925) successfully did.

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