

Social Causes Turing into Uncontrollable Chaos:
A Sociological Examination of the Crime Surrounding the Seattle Riots of 2020

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May 25th, 2020 is a day that will forever be remembered in American history books. On this day, a man named George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officers, sparking worldwide outrage. In Seattle and across America, protesters, activist groups, opportunists, radical political groups, and others took to the streets. Despite whatever noble or not so noble intentions these people had, the movement in Seattle left communities destroyed, people displaced from their homes, and an untold amount of physical and emotional damage to the neighborhoods of Seattle. Before continuing any further into this essay, it is essential to note that this essay in no way intends to take sides or comment on Black Lives Matter (BLM), police reform, or other related ongoing issues here in America and across the world. Instead, this essay will examine the communities and the sociology behind the actions that led to Seattle's unprecedented display of violence.

Concepts

Social disorganization theory and legal cynicism are the theories that this essay uses to base most of its hypothesis, analysis, and conclusions on. Social disorganization theory essentially states that "low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, and family disruption lead[s] to community social disorganization, which, in turn, increases crime and delinquency rates."¹ Legal cynicism is defined as "[the] dissatisfaction with police, and the tolerance of various

¹ Robert J. Sampson & W. Byron Groves, *Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory*, 94 AM. J. SOCIO. 774, 774 (1989), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780858>.

forms of deviance.”² This essay aims to explore how these two concepts can help explain the events that took place during the Seattle Riots¹ of 2020.

Background Information

In an article published by the New York Times titled, “Abolish the Police? Those Who Survived the Chaos in Seattle Aren’t So Sure,” business owners and community residents alike share their perspectives and provide insights on what happened in Seattle during the protests. Here is a quote from that article, “Young white men wielding guns would harangue customers as well as Mr. Khan, a gay man of Middle Eastern descent who moved here from Texas so he could more comfortably be out.”³ This quote was from a section of the article where Faizel Khan, a coffee shop owner in the capitol hill neighborhood, retold his business experience during the BLM protests and the CHAZ occupation. Applying social disorganization theory to this example would highlight one of its factors, unorganized peer groups. One might argue that one account of a group of men with guns to be unreliable or unsubstantial in the grand scheme of things; however, Khan’s statement is far from the only one.

Further on in the news article by the New York Times tells the story of John McDermott, another business owner that also works in the capitol hill neighborhood. Mr. McDermott paints a

² Robert J. Sampson, *Legal Cynicism and (Subcultural?) Tolerance of Deviance: The Neighborhood context of Racial Differences*, 32 LAW & SOC’Y REV. 777, 777 (1998), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/827739>.

³ Nellie Bowles, *Abolish the police? those who survived the chaos in Seattle aren't so sure*, N.Y. TIMES, August 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/07/us/defund-police-seattle-protests.html>.

vivid picture having this to say, “They started coming across the fence -you see all these beautiful kids, a mob but kids -and they have guns and are pointing them at you and telling you they’re going to kill you ... Telling me I’m the K.K.K. I’m not the K.K.K.”⁴ Mr. McDermott’s story is enough to send fear into anyone willing to imagine being in a similar situation. Furthermore, according to the same article, many in the community blame much of the violence and destruction caused in Seattle by the protest on opportunists and armed white activists. Khan had this to add in the article, “It’s antifa ... They don’t want to see the progress we’ve made. They want chaos.”⁵ In this one section of the article alone, there is more evidence to support that several unsupervised peer groups, such as Antifa, were active in the area causing crime. Interestingly this part of the article also calls out another characteristic of social disorganization theory, low economic status. Opportunists took advantage of the situation to better provide for themselves, breaking into businesses and stealing what they could.

Application of Concepts

Suppose you argued that social disorganization theory only applies to “general crime” and not in situations like riots. In that case, you might have a point, as riots were not a part of the original theory. However, a study done in 2015 did just this, applying social disorganization theory to the London Riot of 2011.ⁱⁱ In this study, the researchers used economic deprivation, social disorganization, and political grievances to understand what type of people were more likely to have participated in the London Riot of 2011. The London Riot of 2011, much like the BLM protests in Seattle, lasted several days, encompassed thousands of people, and caused millions of

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

dollars of destruction. The researchers' conclusion at the end of their study was that social disorganization does hold. They challenged skeptics to develop another explanation for the data as this finding challenges the previous understandings.⁶ More specifically, the researchers found that "rioters came from economically deprived areas and from boroughs where policing had less legitimacy ... rioters [also] came from areas with high ethnic diversity and with low organizational density."⁷ This article provides precedence that social disorganization plays a role in riots. That same article also supports that rioters tend to come from communities where the police and the overarching legal system are not positively viewed. It is worth noting that it is not without good reasons that these communities are cynical toward the legal system. According to one scholarly journal, "Despite the demise of de jure segregation and discrimination, de facto discriminatory policies and practices perpetuate a substantially authoritarian, regularity, and punitive relation between racial minorities and the police."⁸ What this quote is saying without the fancy Latin legal words is that even though segregation and discrimination are now outlawed, there are still policies that negatively discriminate against minority groups. The effect of these policies is outrage and distrust from the affected communities. In a recent supreme court case, *Utah v. Strieff*, it was decided that if a police officer makes an unconstitutional stop and learns that the individual has an

⁶ Jusa Kawalerowicz & Michael Biggs, *Anarchy in the UK: Economic Deprivation, Social Disorganization, and Political Grievances in the London Riot of 2011*, 94 SOC. FORCES 673, 692 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sov052>.

⁷ *Id.* at 692.

⁸ Sandra Bass, *Policing Space, Policing Race: Social Control Imperatives and Police Discretionary Decisions*, 28 SOC. JUST. 156, 156 (2001), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768062>.

arrest warrant during that stop, the stop becomes valid.⁹ While this is an oversimplified explanation of this court ruling, Justice Sotomayor had this to say in her dissenting opinion, “[This ruling] implies that you are not a citizen of a democracy but the subject of a carceral state, just waiting to be cataloged.”¹⁰ Cases like this create unfair laws that enable law enforcement to conduct their policing in unconstitutional methods and harm minority communities already struggling to trust the criminal justice system.

Individual Factors at Play

The common denominator is that all the examples and evidence examined so far have included factors of unsupervised peer groups and economic status. Then to explain the state of mind and escalation, we have the third factor of legal cynicism. According to a self-report study conducted in 1986, 13% of youth in Seattle said they belonged to a gang.¹¹ While the age of this study makes it difficult to conclude if this number is still representative of today’s youth, there are many other factors we can look at. For example, in a 1990 study examining youth gangs, they said, “There is some evidence that gang size grows during periods of crisis, especially with threats of strike or retaliation or competition for drug markets and decreases in the absence of conflict and the presence of ‘peace.’”¹² These findings mean that during a period of crisis such as the pandemic,

⁹ See *Utah v. Strieff*, 579 U.S. 232, 136 S. Ct. 2056, 2064 (2016).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 2070-71 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).

¹¹ Irving A Spergel, *Youth Gangs: Continuity and Change*, 21 CRIME & JUST. 171, 186 (1990), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1147440>.

¹² *Id.* at 205.

economic, and social crises experienced in the leadup to the Seattle Riots of 2020, it would have been the perfect breeding ground for recruiting new gang members.

To specifically tie gangs to riots, the same 1990 study found that “Gangs were not an essential component or precipitant of urban riots or civil-rights-related disorders but were peripheral and opportunistic.”¹³ This information essentially means that Seattle gangs did not start the riots in 2020 but, once they started, joined in to cause as much destruction as possible. Revisiting Mr. Khan’s claim that he was extorted for protection by a group of armed individuals, in the same 1990 research article, they learned that some gangs would protect store owners and their shops during a riot for a fee.

The other major factor seen in the riots was economic inequality. Seattle is one of the most expensive cities in the United States to live in. In fact, between the years 1996 and 2016, Seattle experienced a median home value increase of 94%.¹⁴ This price increase in only ten years resulted in the sorting and segregation of the rich and the poor. A 2018 research article examining rapidly expanding communities such as Seattle had this to say:

While acknowledging that this sorting results partially from divergent personal preferences, it is clear that the outcomes are not all benign. They include the secession of the wealthy into enclaves where they can provide good schools for

¹³ *Id.* at 241.

¹⁴ Gabriel Metcalf, *Sand Castles Before the Tide? Affordable Housing in Expensive Cities*, 32 J. ECON. PERSP. 59, 60 (2018), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297969>.

their children; the segregation of the poor into cities that lack the resources to pay for adequate public services; and the chronic tendency to underproduce housing.¹⁵

This research shows that there are systemic problems that need to be addressed. Funneling poor people into underdeveloped communities and are unable to sustain themselves intensifies the factors put forward by the social disorganization theory.

This brings us to the third factor, which influenced the events during the Seattle Riots of 2020. Referring to the article on the London Riot of 2011, we will remember that it stated, “rioters came ... from boroughs where policing had less legitimacy ...”¹⁶ This quote establishes a direct connection between rioters and the community’s perception of the police. This should be no surprise to anyone, given that the entire protest was aimed at a lack of public trust in police departments and their officers.¹⁷ As previously mentioned, numerous examples of legislation have negatively affected minority groups in this country.

In the context, of recent debates over police legitimacy and police-community relations, these orders implicitly paint the challenges facing criminal justice as stemming solely from criminality. They ignore the institutional failures of certain police departments and erase the structural underpinning of tense police-community relations, specifically racial isolation and class marginalization.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Id.* at 70.

¹⁶ Kawalerowicz & Biggs, *supra* at 692.

¹⁷ *See* Bowles, *supra*.

¹⁸ Monica C. Bell, *Police Reform and the Dismantling of Legal Estrangement*, 126 YALE L.J. 2054, 2064-65 (2017), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45222555>.

All the evidence points us to one conclusion. That we knew what was wrong and actively chose to ignore the problem. In doing so, we ignored an entire group of people who needed to not be forgotten and not swept under the rug. So, what happens when society enables the government to have discriminatory policies? These communities feel backed into a corner and look for a way out. One of these ways out is through violence. “Violence seems justified when the injustices appear so grave that the norm of compliance no longer feels obligatory or even appropriate.”¹⁹ Have trouble believing that crime and violence can become a rational decision? Just listen to this quote from an employee at a community center located in a community that is negatively affected by discriminatory policies and has a cynical view of the legal system, “It’s like ‘if a prison sentence is the worst that can happen, what do I have now, what do I have to lose? I don’t have a place, I can’t move, I don’t have a job.’”²⁰ This individual’s remarks are just one of many that, over the years, have fallen on deaf ears. Because of this, the frustrations of this community have snowballed and eventually exploded into the violence that we saw across the country in the year 2020. A cycle that has happened before and that we will continue to see until real progress is made.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Seattle riots in 2020 were an important event in history, and the implications have yet to be realized. Through this essay, we were able to apply social disorganization theory to explain why so much crime took place during the protests and subsequent

¹⁹ Markus Holdo & Bo Bengtsson, *Marginalization and Riots: A Rationalistic Explanation of Urban Unrest*, 37 HOUS., THEORY SOC’Y 162, 172 (Feb. 26, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2019.1578996>.

²⁰ *Id.* at 170.

riots. We have examined the ongoing, unsupervised peer group problem in metropolitan cities all over the United States and the economic inequality plaguing the Seattle area. Additionally, we were able to briefly look at legal cynicism, which we can use to understand why the protests escalated into violence and how the violence could be justified for some of those involved. Together, all these factors contributed to the immense amount of violence and destruction received over the days of protest. It is essential to take away why this violence occurred and correct our behavior to provide a more inclusive and fairer world for all.

ⁱ Riots is a term used often in the media and everyday life to describe events but is never well defined. Here is a definition of riots from Black's Law Dictionary which can be helpful when attempting to understand the application of the concepts talked about in this essay,

1. An assembly of three or more persons in a public place taking concerted action in a turbulent and disorderly manner for a common purpose. 2. An unlawful disturbance of the peace by an assemblage of usu. three or more persons acting with a common purpose in a violent or tumultuous manner that threatens or terrorizes the public or an institution. *Riots*, BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY (11th ed. 2019).

ⁱⁱ The London Riots of 2011 occurred from August 6th through 11th of 2011. Across England, thousands of individuals partook in rioting which caused widespread looting and vandalism. In total more than 3,000 people were arrested, 2815 homes and business damaged, and 205 people injured. While the Seattle Riots of 2021 were smaller in both scale and overall damage, they both lasted similar lengths and evolved in similar ways. Despite any perceived differences, it is without question that that these are comparable events, and the London Riots of 2011 can lend insight on the Seattle Riots of 2020.