

# **The Social Ecology of Crime: The Role of the Environment in Crime Causation**

# Social Ecology

- ◆ ‘the study of the social and behavioural outcomes of the interaction between man and his environment’ (Wikström, 2007)
- ◆ Most studies of the social ecology of crime are not ‘ecological’ enough
  - ◆ Concentrate on the role of environmental influences, neglecting
    - ◆ (i) the interaction of environmental and individual level factors in crime causation
    - ◆ (ii) the role of the environment in individual development

# Key environmental features

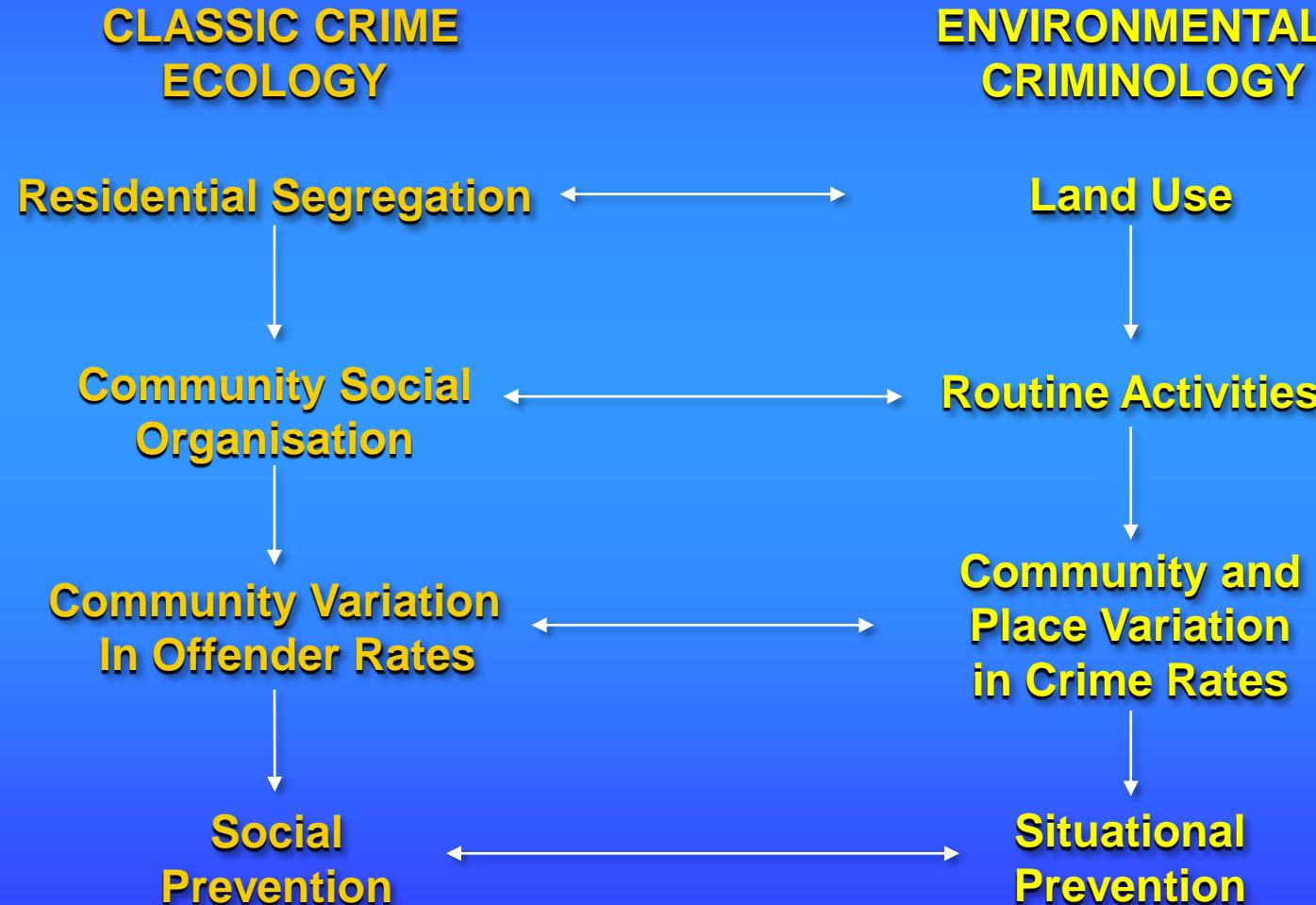
## ◆ Physical environment:

- ◆ Natural environment (e.g., landscape, flora and fauna)
- ◆ Ambient environment (e.g., light, temperature)
- ◆ Built environment (e.g., manmade structures and spaces)

## ◆ Social environment:

- ◆ Social dynamics (norms, cohesion, efficacy)
- ◆ Social activities (monitoring, formal social control)
- ◆ Presence of other people (e.g., bonds, informal social control)

# Ecological vs. environmental perspectives



# Definition of 'environment'

- ◆ Main Idea: Social and organizational characteristics of an environment can explain variations in crime which are not attributable to demographics
- ◆ However... *Environment* is often poorly defined
  - ◆ Communities, Neighbourhoods
  - ◆ Settings

# Defining the Environment

- ◆ Environment = all that is external to an individual with which he or she comes into contact
- ◆ An individual's environment may be conceptualised as an *activity field*
  - ◆ An activity field = the configuration of the *settings* in which an individual takes part (during the time of interest)
  - ◆ A setting = the social and physical environment (objects, persons, events) that an individual, at a particular moment in time, can access with his or her senses (see, hear, feel, etc.)
- ◆ Only the settings in which an individual takes part will influence his/her action

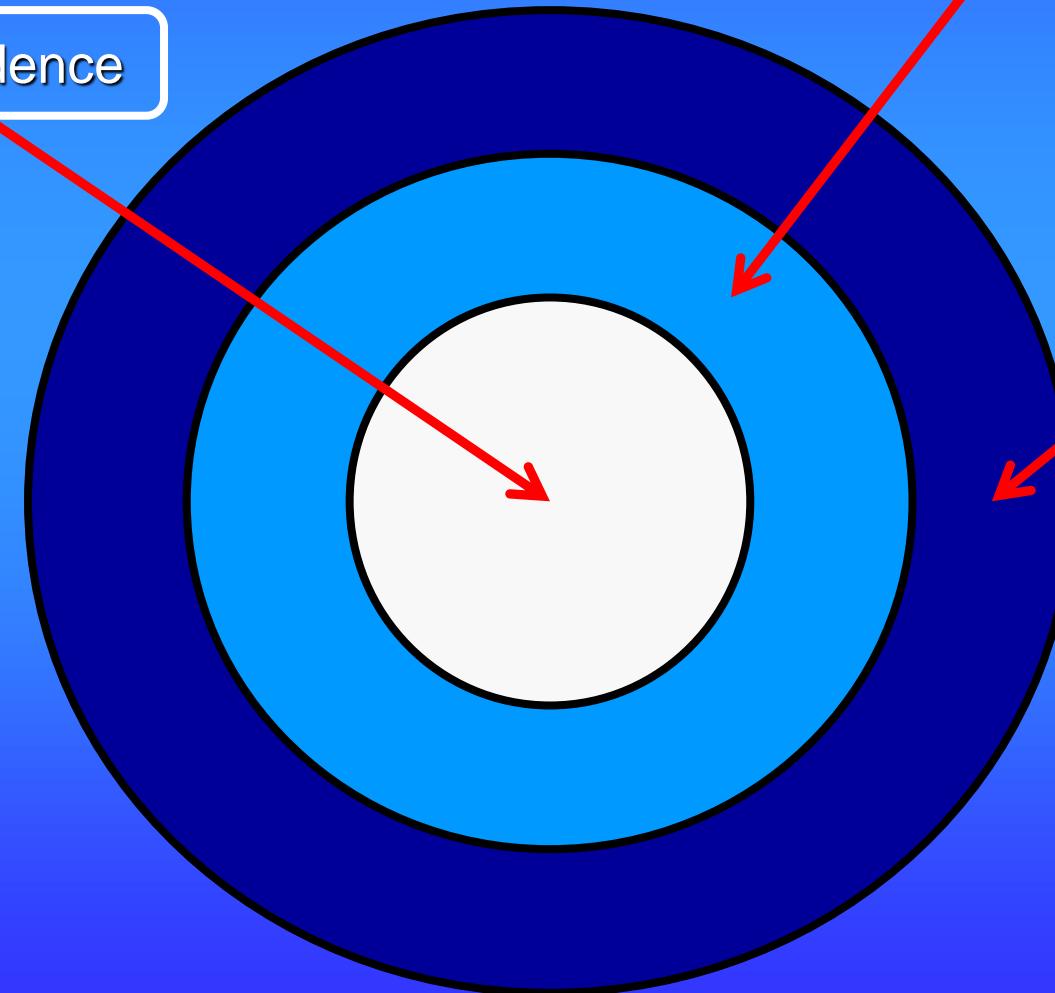
# Key Methodological Problems

## ◆ What to measure?

Residence

Neighbourhood

Rural Area,  
Town or City



# Measurement Problems

- ◆ Lack of (and attention to) effective methods to measure
  - ◆ relevant *environmental features*
  - ◆ individuals' *exposure* to different environments

# Positive Steps

- ◆ Community Surveys – residents as social observers
- ◆ **Social environments** (social cohesion, social trust, informal social control)
- ◆ **Eometrics** = assesses the reliability of measures of the social environment
  - ◆ Takes into consideration the characteristics of the residents and the coherence of their social observations

# Positive Steps

- ◆ Space-Time Budgets (time diaries) = measure of exposure and settings
- ◆ Measures subjects' hour by hour exposure to social settings
- ◆ Key characteristics of these settings
- ◆ Enables the study of movement patterns

# Key Empirical Findings

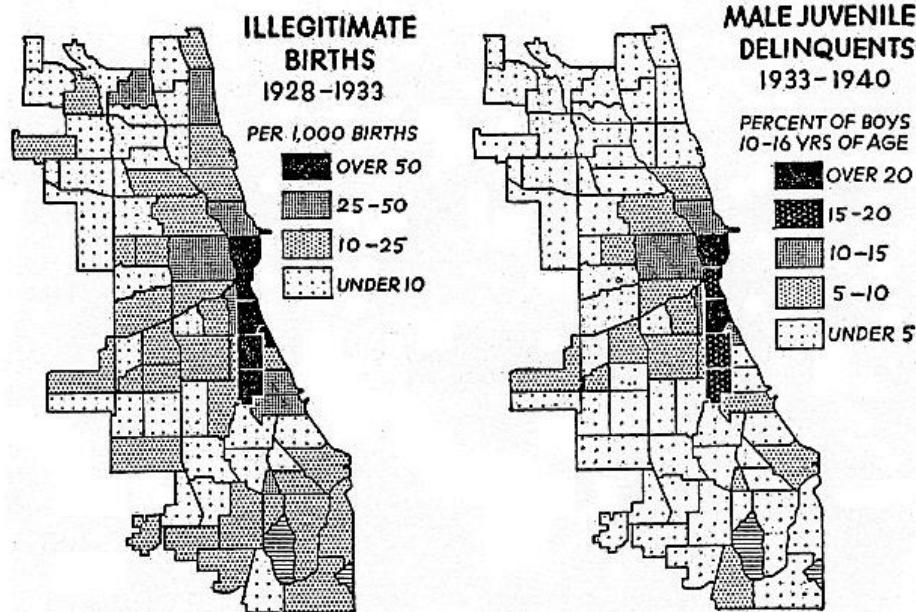
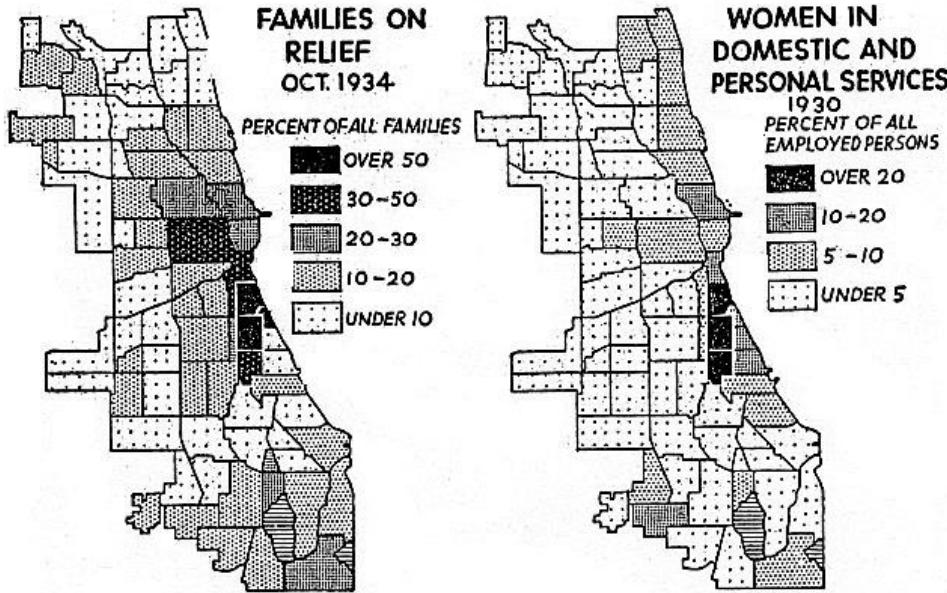
- ◆ Geographical areas (places) differ in their social and physical environments
- ◆ Levels of crime (and the rate of residents' involvements in crime) vary between areas (places)
- ◆ There is a relationship (correlation) between a particular area's (or place's) environmental features and the level of crime (and the rate of residents' involvement in crime)
- ◆ The geographical distribution of offences and offenders may be different
- ◆ Changes in a particular area's (or place's) environmental features can predict changes in the level of crime (or residents' rate of crime involvement)

- ◆ Main reasons for the concentration of offending and offenders in particular areas:
  - ◆ More crime-prone social groups may be segregated into certain types of neighbourhoods
  - ◆ Area of residence may itself influence residents' propensity and motivation to commit crime through area contextual characteristics (social and built environment)

# Explanations

- ◆ Social Disorganization Theory
- ◆ Social Disorganization - Definition
  - ◆ Lack of a 'structure through which common values can be realised and common problems solved' (Kornhauser, 1978)
  - ◆ Disruption or breakdown of a community's normative (social and moral) structures
  - ◆ 'variations in the abilities of local communities to regulate and control the behaviour of their residents' (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993)

## POVERTY AND SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION



**Rate of male juvenile delinquents associated with a range of other 'social problems'**

# Social Disorganization

- ◆ Emergence
- ◆ Residential segregation
  - ◆ Stratified by key social characteristics
  - ◆ Social and economic resources
    - ◆ At the one extreme, there will be wealthy communities with residential stability and a homogeneous population.
    - ◆ At the other extreme, there will be poor communities with residential instability and a heterogeneous population.

# Social Disorganization

- ◆ In poor, residentially unstable and heterogeneous communities
- ◆ Difficult to realise *common values*
  - ◆ *Poor communication* due to residents diverse and changing cultural backgrounds and experiences
  - ◆ *Inadequate, isolated and unstable social institutions* due to factors such as lack of money, skills, and personal investment by residents

# Social Disorganization

- ◆ *Poorly functioning social institutions* and a *lack of common values* among the residents of a community results in
  - ◆ *Poor informal social controls*
    - ◆ ‘the capacity of a group to regulate its members according to desired principles – to realize collective, as opposed to forced, goals’ (Sampson et al., 1997)
    - ◆ Lack of monitoring/supervision and sanctioning of delinquent behaviour
  - ◆ *Defective socialisation*
    - ◆ Inadequate creation of social bonds and moral conscience
  - ◆ Leading to *high rates of offending* by community residents, particularly juveniles

# Social Disorganization

## Structural Characteristics

- ◆ Poverty
- ◆ Heterogeneity
- ◆ Mobility



## Community Processes

- ◆ Lack of common values
- ◆ Poorly functioning institutions



- ◆ Poor socialization
- ◆ Poor informal social control

## Outcome

- ◆ Higher rates of offending  
(especially by juveniles)



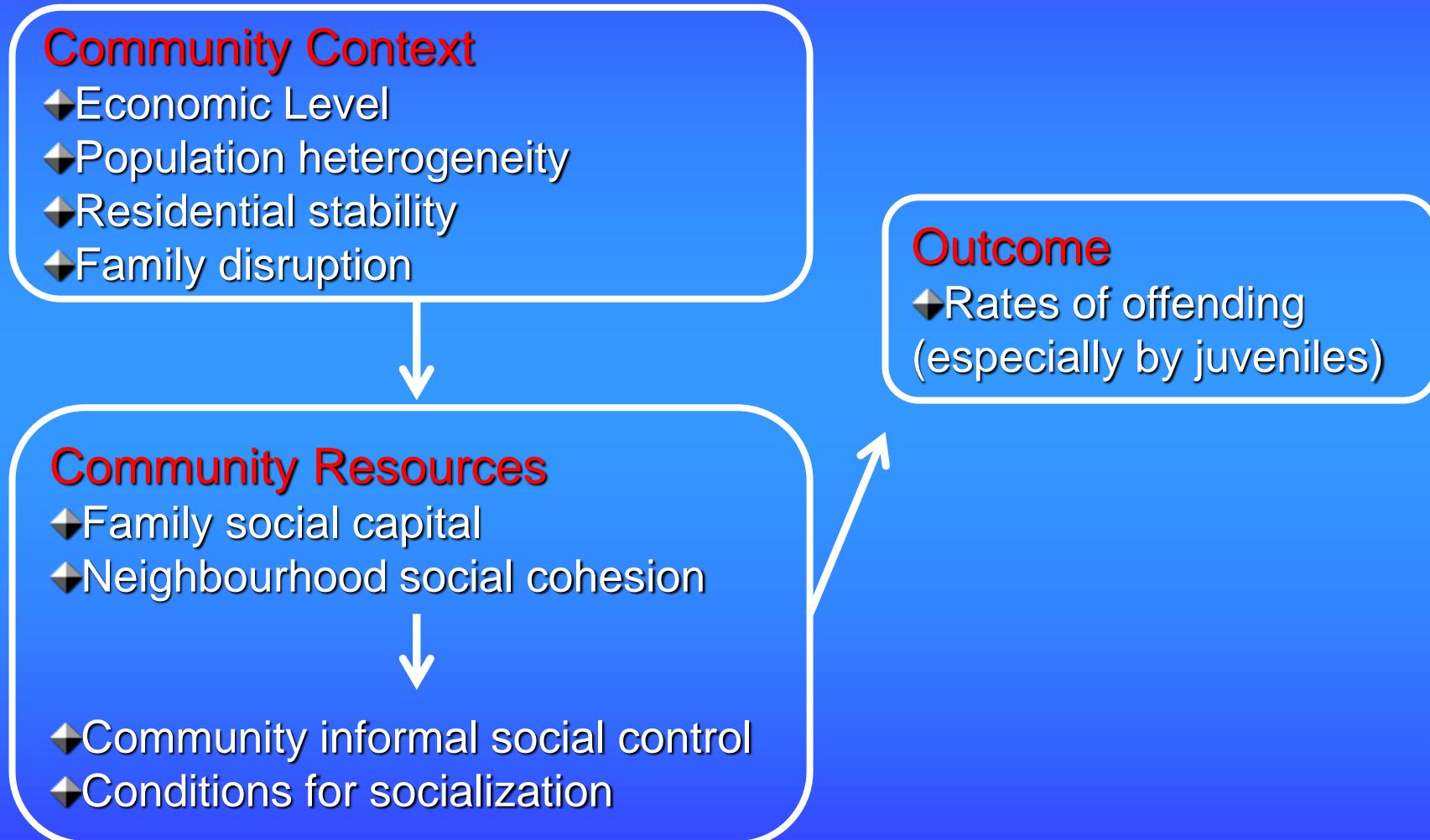
# Disorganization vs. Collective efficacy

- ◆ Collective efficacy theory 'accepts the basic idea of Social Disorganization theory that social control is a collective challenge not attributable to the characteristics of individuals alone and that it constitutes a major source of variation in crime rates' (Sampson 2012)
- ◆ ...but collective efficacy theory 'relaxed the traditional disorganization assumption that the ideal contextual setting for social control is necessarily one characterized by dense, intimate, and strong neighbourhood ties (e.g., through friends or kin)' (Sampson 2012)

# Explanations

- ◆ Collective Efficacy - Definition
  - ◆ “The linkage of mutual trust and the willingness to intervene for the common good” (Sampson)
    - ◆ i.e., residents’ ‘potential to exercise informal social control... as a result of shared expectations and mutual trust’ (Wikström, 2007)
  - ◆ Socially cohesive neighbourhoods are more capable of realizing informal social controls
    - ◆ Rules for action are clear
    - ◆ People trust one another
  - ◆ Neighbourhoods vary in their capacity to achieve common goals (e.g., maintaining public order)

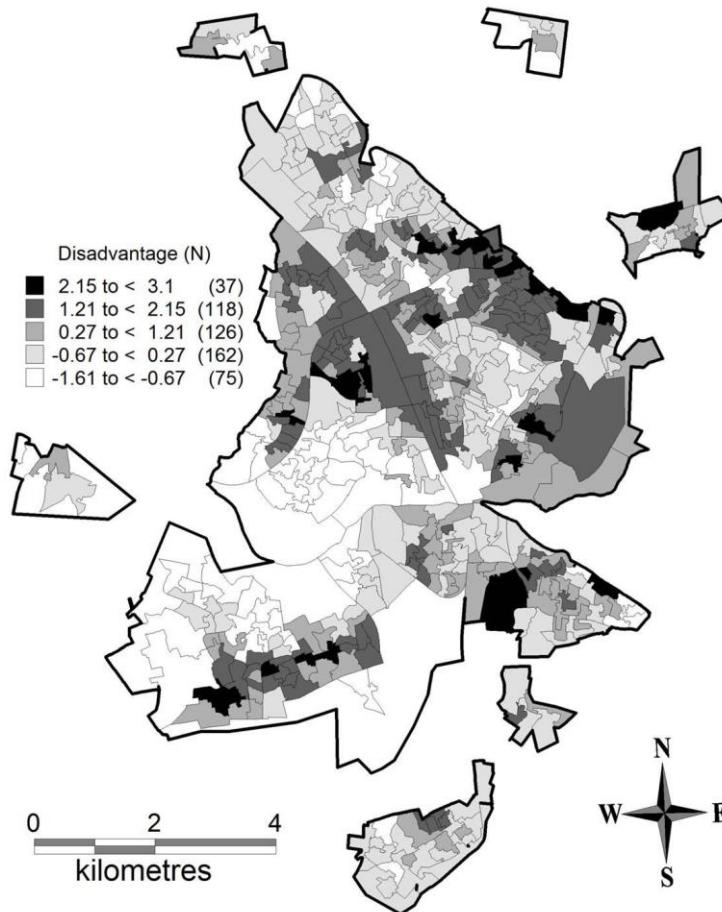
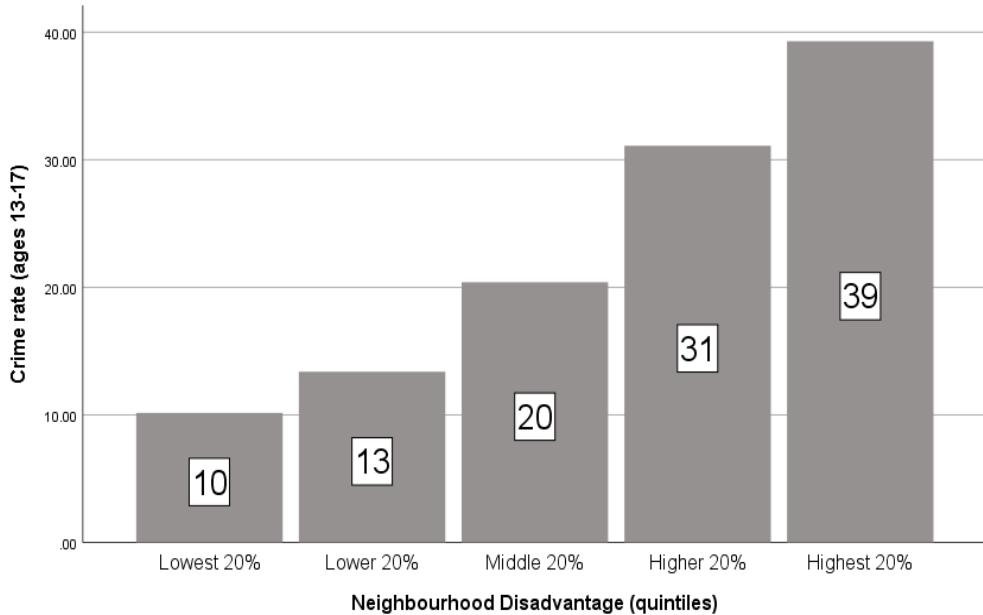
# Collective Efficacy



# Challenges

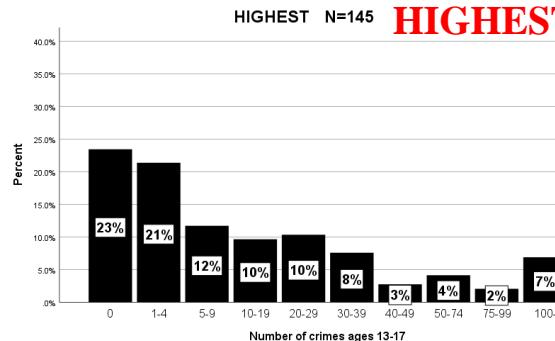
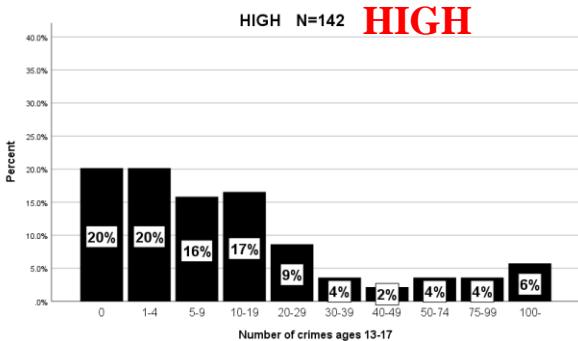
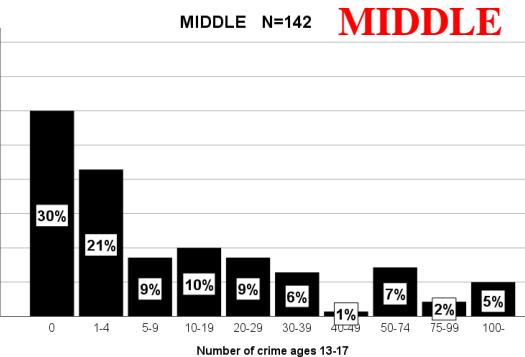
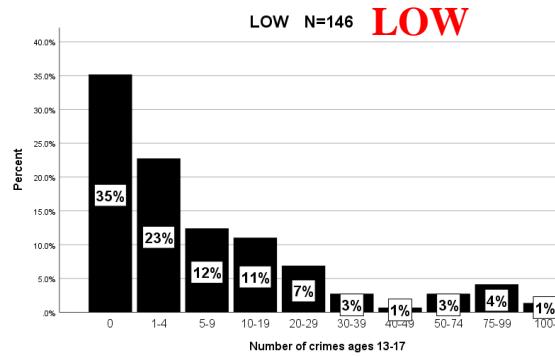
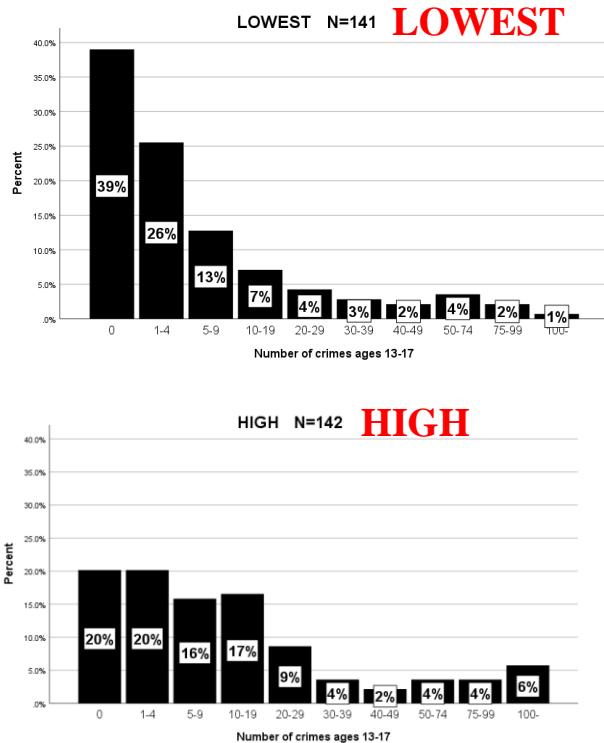
- ◆ Challenges for Social Disorganization and Collective Efficacy Theory
- ◆ Greater clarity about the developmental and situational mechanisms
  - ◆ Leading to greater clarity of differences between residents within a community

## Neighbourhood Disadvantage and crime rates



## WHY SOME AND NOT OTHERS?

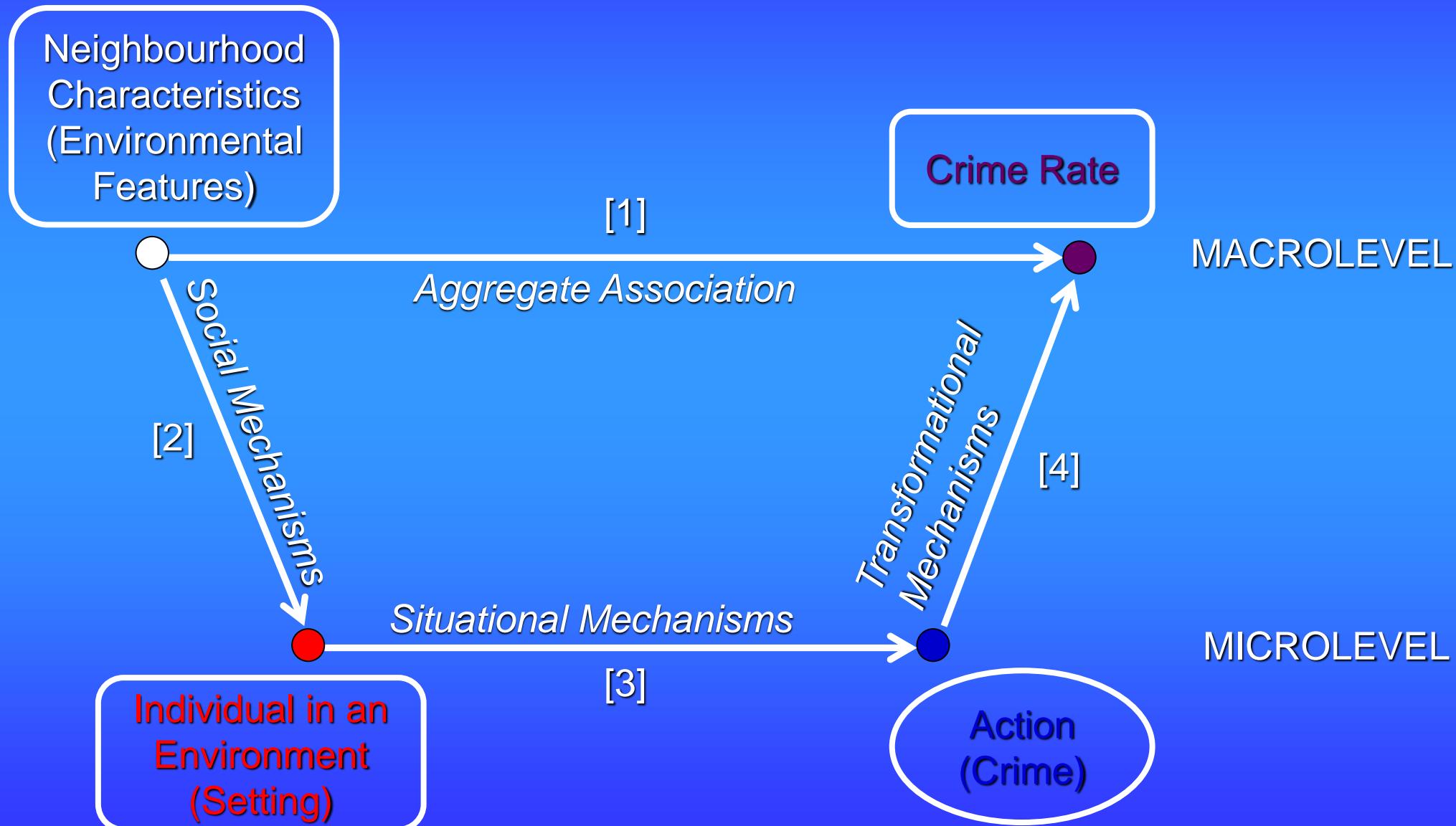
### Crime distribution (total crime ages 13-17) by childhood (age 12) neighbourhood disadvantage quintiles



In each disadvantage group there are young people who commit no crime and young people who commit a lot of crime. Non-offenders are somewhat more common in the least disadvantaged groups and high frequency offenders are somewhat more common in the most disadvantaged groups.

# Explaining Aggregate Relationships

Boudon & Coleman



# Routine Activity Theory

- ◆ Two basic ideas
  - ◆ The structure of routine activities in a society influence what kinds of opportunities for crime emerge
  - ◆ People commit acts of crime in response to these opportunities

# Routine Activities

“Somewhat stable patterns for the organization of family life, work, leisure, etc. in society”

“any recurrent and prevalent activities which provide for basic population and individual needs, whatever their biological and cultural origin”

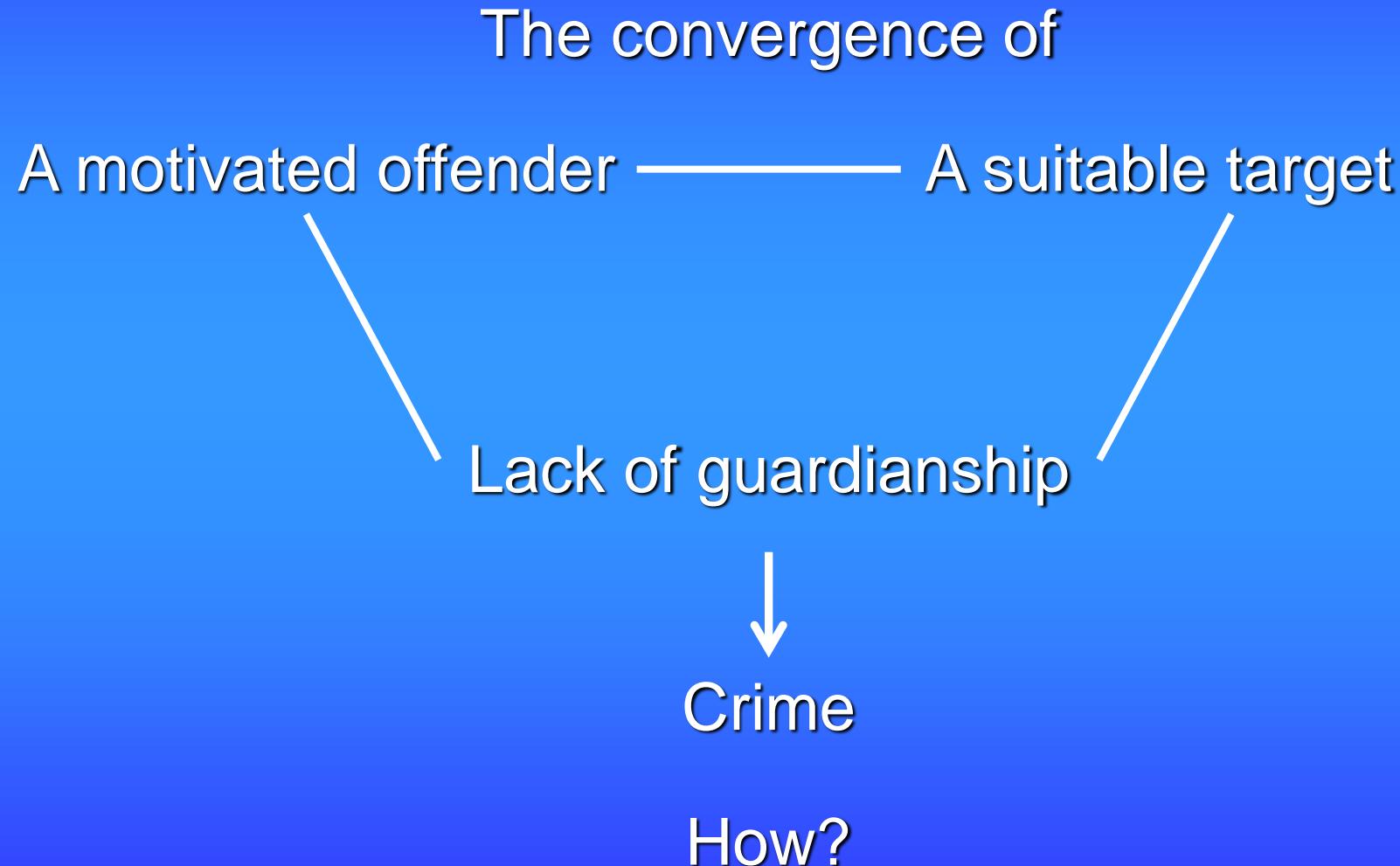
“Since illegal activities must feed upon other activities, the spatial and temporal structure of routine legal activities should play an important role in determining the location, type and quantity of illegal acts occurring in any given community”

# Explanations

- ◆ Routine activities theory
  - ◆ Opportunities
  - ◆ “The probability that a violation **will occur at any specific time and place** might be taken as function of the **CONVERGENCE** of
    - ◆ likely offenders
    - ◆ and suitable targets
    - ◆ in the absence of capable guardians”

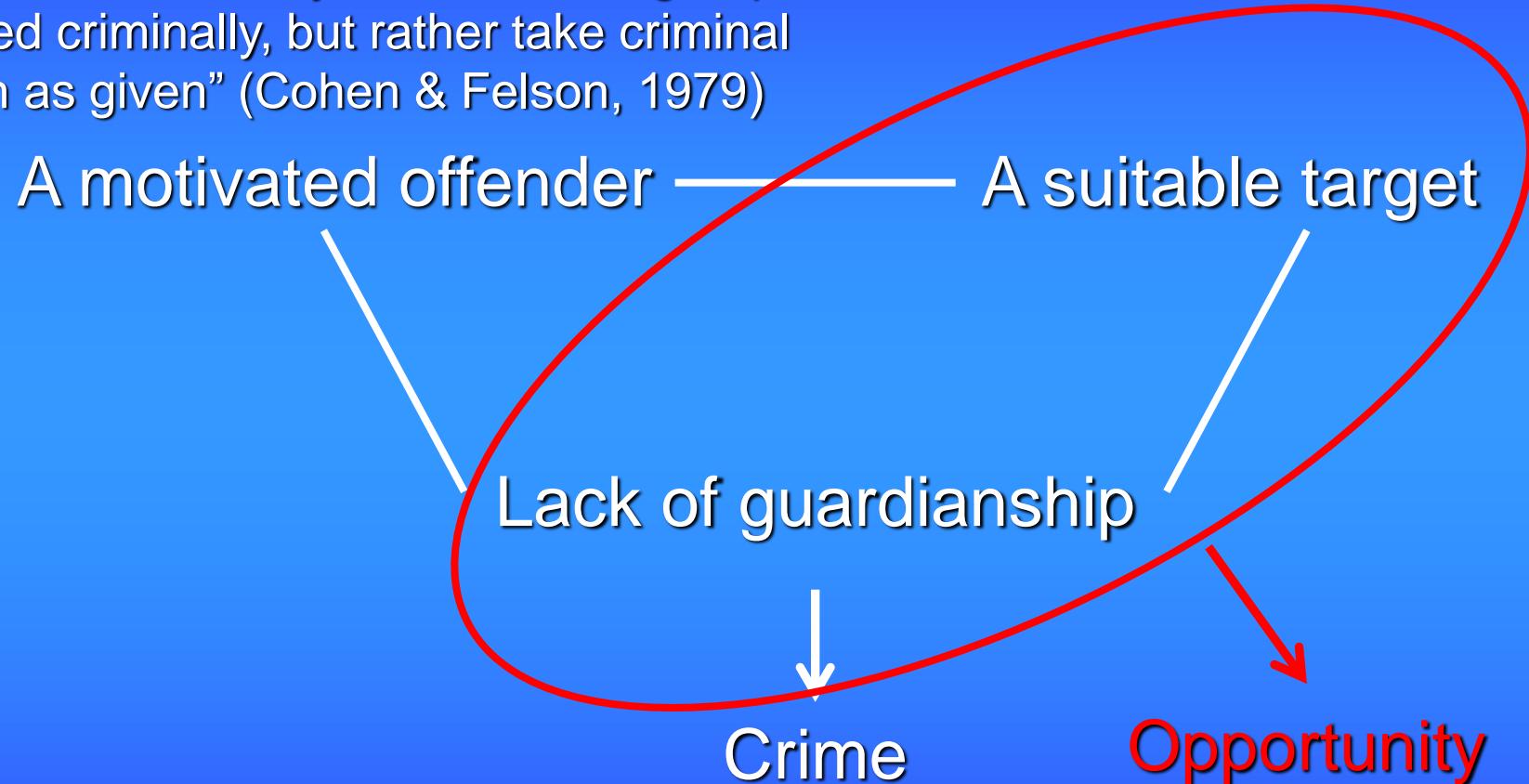
(Cohen & Felson, 1979)

# Routine Activities Theory



# Routine Activities Theory

"We do not examine why individuals or groups are inclined criminally, but rather take criminal inclination as given" (Cohen & Felson, 1979)



- ◆ Suggests that all individuals are criminally inclined and vary only in their opportunities to offend
- ◆ Ignores the role of individual differences in criminal inclination and its interaction with opportunity

- ◆ Motivated offender – ‘anybody who for any reason might commit a crime’ (Clarke and Felson 1993)
- ◆ Suitable target - ‘any person or thing that draws the offender toward a crime’ (Felson and Boba)
- ◆ Guardianship – ‘the presence of a human element which acts - whether intentionally or not – to deter the would-be offender from committing a crime against an available target’ (Hollis, Felson and Welsh)

# Routine Activities Theory

- ◆ ~~Individual x Environment = Action~~
- ◆ 'We do not examine why individuals or groups are inclined criminally, but rather take criminal inclination as given'  
(Cohen and Felson 1979)
- ◆ 'Opportunity is the root cause of crime'  
(Felson 2002)

- ◆ Arguing that if someone is motivated to commit a crime and faces a suitable target lacking adequate guardianship, he or she will commit an act of crime does not take us very far towards understanding what causes that crime, or the role of the environment. For example, it does not explain why some people, but not others, commit an act of crime in response to (particular) suitable targets lacking guardianship; why some targets are suitable to some people, but not others; or why some forms of guardianship, but not others, influence some people's, but not others', crime involvement.



Per-Olof Wikström & Kyle Treiber (2015)

# **Towards a truly ecological approach in the study of crime**

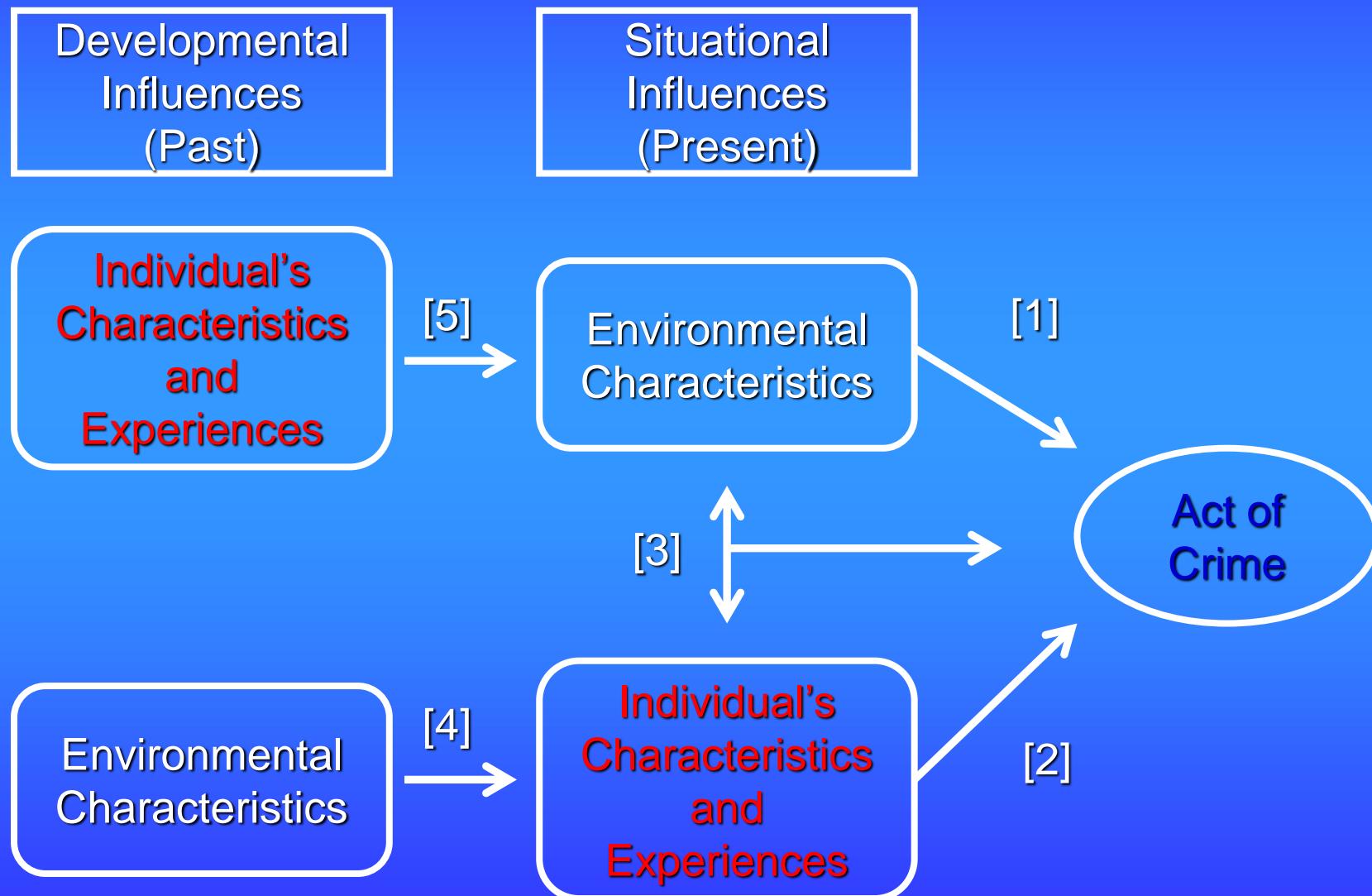
- ◆ We need to link the *individual tradition* and the *ecological tradition* to advance our knowledge about crime and its causes
- ◆ “*more is to be gained by linking those traditions than by their continued separate development and testing*”

Reiss (1986)

# Shortcomings

- ◆ The ‘ecological tradition’ has largely failed to specify...
  - ◆ the *situational mechanisms* that link individuals’ characteristics and experiences and the features of the environments in which they take part to their acts of crime
  - ◆ the *developmental mechanisms* that link environmental features and their changes to individual development and changes in characteristics and experiences relevant to individuals’ propensity (predisposition) to engage in acts of crime

# Direct vs. Indirect Influences on Crime



# Explaining Aggregate Relationships

Boudon & Coleman

