A GENERAL STRAIN THEORY OF COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES IN CRIME RATES

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This article draws on Agnew's general strain theory to explain community differences in crime rates. After reviewing the communities and crime research, the author discusses the ways in which community-level variables contribute to strain, including the failure to achieve positively valued goals and the loss of positive stimuli/presentation of negative stimuli. The ways in which community-level variables condition the impact of strain on crime are then examined.

Several major theories attempt to explain community differences in crime rates. Crime rates are an aggregation of individual criminal acts, so these theories essentially describe how community-level variables affect individual criminal behavior. In the words of Coleman (1990), the focus is on the "movement from macro to micro." It is no surprise, then, that these theories explicitly or implicitly draw on microtheories when they explain how community-level variables lead individuals to engage in crime (and thereby produce crime rates). Social disorganization theory draws on social control theory, with disorganization theorists pointing to those community characteristics that ultimately reduce the level of social control to which individuals are subject. Subcultural deviance theory draws on differential association/social-learning theory, with subcultural theorists arguing that community values and norms lead some individuals to define crime as a desirable or justifiable response in certain situations. Relative deprivation theory draws on Merton's (1938) version of strain theory, with deprivation theorists arguing that high levels of income or socioeconomic inequality lead some individuals to experience strain or frustration. This article draws on Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (GST) to offer another explanation for community differences in crime rates. This explanation encompasses relative deprivation theory but goes beyond this theory by describing additional ways in which

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community characteristics may generate strain and foster criminal responses to such strain.

Community is broadly defined to include areas of settlement from the block level to standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs). With certain noted exceptions, the theory is best tested with data from smaller areas, such as "face-blocks" and "nominal communities" (see Bursik and Grasmick 1993). These areas are more homogeneous in terms of most of the independent and intervening variables described in this article. At the same time, there are gross differences in the independent and intervening variables *between* larger aggregates. As such, the theory can also partly explain differences in crime rates across units like cities, SMSAs, and beyond (see Linsky, Bachman, and Straus 1995).

The article begins with a brief overview of previous research and theories on community differences in crime rates—including neighborhood, city, and SMSA differences. The GST is then presented. There is a discussion of the ways in which community-level variables contribute to strain, including the failure to achieve positively valued goals and the loss of positive stimuli/presentation of negative stimuli. The ways in which community-level variables condition the impact of strain on crime are then examined. I note the existence of evidence compatible with GST and point to ways in which GST may be tested.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORY ON COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES IN CRIME RATES

There has been much recent research on the determinants of community differences in crime rates. The results of this research are often contradictory, but there are some conclusions that we can draw with confidence.[1] High crime communities tend to be low in economic status, with economic status being measured in terms of such variables as income, poverty, unemployment, welfare, occupation, education, inequality, owner-occupied dwellings, and substandard housing. Economic deprivation, in fact, is perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of high-crime communities (see, especially, Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). High-crime communities also tend to be large in size and high in population density, overcrowding, residential mobility (particularly poor communities), and percentage non-White. Although these variables usually have significant zero-order correlations with community crime rates, their effect on crime is sometimes reduced to insignificance in multivariate analyses. A key variable that partly mediates the relationship between at least certain of these variables and community crime rates is family disruption, usually measured by

divorce/separation rates and/or female-headed households (see Sampson 1995).

Criminologists have offered several explanations for the fact that high-crime communities tend to be poor, urban, dense and overcrowded, transient, and populated by non-Whites and disrupted families. The dominant explanation derives from Shaw and McKay's (1942) social disorganization theory, particularly the reinterpretations and extensions of that theory proposed in recent years (Bursik 1988; Bursik and Grasmik 1993, 1995; Elliott et al. 1996; Kornhauser 1978; Sampson 1995; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Wilson 1995). The above factors are said to weaken the ability of local residents to control crime in their communities, which directly causes crime and indirectly causes crime by allowing for the development of delinquent peer groups. Several studies suggest that these factors do, in fact, weaken control at the community level (e.g., Bellair 1997; Elliott et al. 1996; Sampson 1991, 1993; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson et al. 1997).

Relative deprivation and subcultural deviance theory have somewhat less support. Relative deprivation theory focuses on the economic plight of high-crime communities, and the theory is usually tested by examining the impact of income or socioeconomic inequality on community crime rates. Inequality has a large direct effect on crime in some studies and an insignificant effect in other studies. Certain methodological and other refinements in recent studies have resulted in more support for the theory (Balkwell 1990; Fowles and Merva 1996; Kovandzic, Vieraitis, and Yeisley 1998; Messner and Golden 1992; Rosenfeld 1986). This article provides further direction for research on relative deprivation and crime rates and extends strain theory so that it can also explain the association between noneconomic variables and community crime rates.

Subcultural deviance theory argues that many of the community characteristics listed above contribute to or are associated with the development of subcultures that hold values conducive to crime (Bernard 1990; Curtis 1975; Luckenbill and Doyle 1989; Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckinbill 1992; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). The data on subcultural deviance theory are mixed, although recent studies also hold out some hope for this theory (Anderson 1994; Cao, Adams, and Jensen 1997; Felson et al. 1994; Heimer 1997; Markowitz and Felson 1998; Matsueda et al. 1992). This article builds on previous theory and research and argues that those values conducive to crime are rooted in the "strainful" experiences of community members.

In sum, social disorganization theories now dominate the current research on communities and crime (e.g., Elliott et al. 1996; Sampson et al. 1997; Wilson 1996). It is next argued, however, that community differences in crime rates

are a function not only of differences in social control but also of differences in the motivation for crime.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE GST OF COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES IN CRIME RATES

GST argues that strain or stress is a major source of criminal motivation. The theory explains community differences in crime by community differences in strain and in those factors that condition the effect of strain on crime. In particular, high-crime communities are more likely to select and retain strained individuals, produce strain, and foster criminal responses to strain.

The idea that communities may cause crime through the strain they produce is not new. It is at the heart of relative deprivation theory, and it is a central idea in the theories advanced by Bernard (1990), Hagan (1994), Hagan and McCarthy (1997a), Harvey (1986), Hawkins (1983), Linsky et al. (1995), and numerous conflict theorists. It is also one of the central arguments of Thrasher (1927) and Shaw and McKay (1942; also see Gold 1987), the theorists most closely associated with the development of social disorganization theory. These theorists indicate that slum communities contribute to several types of strain, most notably the failure to achieve economic goals. The strain elements of Shaw and McKay, however, were cut from their theory by Kornhauser (1978) and others in an effort to construct a pure social disorganization theory.

Although a number of researchers have attempted to explain community differences in crime in terms of strain, such attempts have not considered fully the different ways in which communities may promote strain and the ways in which they may condition the effect of strain on crime. This may explain why certain prominent researchers claim that strain theory has little role to play in the explanation of community differences in crime rates (e.g., Sampson and Wilson 1995:45). The GST explanation that follows draws heavily on the work of the above-mentioned theorists and on the communities and crime research to more fully specify the community-level sources of strain and the community-level factors that condition the impact of strain on crime.

A simplified model of the GST explanation is shown in Figure 1. The left side of the model shows those community characteristics that are associated with higher crime rates. These characteristics contribute to strain and the reaction to strain in several ways.

1. Selection and retention of strained individuals. Communities with these characteristics, especially deprived communities, are more likely to select for and retain strained individuals. Strained individuals, especially those experiencing

economic strain, are more likely to move into deprived communities because they cannot afford to live elsewhere and because community residents are less able to resist their migration (Reiss 1993). Furthermore, strained individuals are less able to move out of these communities than nonstrained individuals. Nonstrained individuals, in fact, may deliberately migrate to other communities (e.g., Anderson 1990; Bursik 1986a; Farrington 1993; Liska and Bellair 1995; Morenoff and Sampson 1997; Reiss 1986, 1993; Stark 1987; Wilson 1987, 1996). GST, however, argues that these communities are higher in crime not only because they are more likely to attract and hold strained individuals but also because they cause strain.

2. The failure to achieve positively valued goals. Communities with these characteristics are more likely to cause goal blockage—the first type of strain in GST. In particular, such communities lead individuals to place a strong emphasis on certain goals and make it more difficult for individuals to achieve these goals through legitimate channels. Three goals are emphasized: money, status/respect, and the desire to be treated in a just or nondiscriminatory manner.
3. Relative deprivation. These community characteristics not only increase one's absolute level of goal blockage but also increase one's feeling of relative deprivation. In particular, these and certain other community characteristics influence whether individuals compare themselves to advantaged others, decide that they want and deserve what these others have, and decide that they cannot get what these others have through legitimate channels. An effort is made to extend relative deprivation theory to shed light on the mixed results of past research.
4. The loss of positive stimuli/presentation of negative stimuli. These community characteristics increase the other two types of strain in GST: the loss of positive stimuli and the presentation of negative stimuli. In particular, these community characteristics (1) increase the sensitivity of residents to certain types of aversive stimuli and (2) increase the likelihood that residents will be exposed to aversive stimuli. Several types of aversive stimuli are considered, including economic deprivation, family disruption and its correlates like child abuse, signs of incivility, social cleavages, and "vicarious strain."
5. Aggregate levels of negative affect. Goal blockage, relative deprivation, and exposure to aversive stimuli increase the likelihood that community residents will experience a range of negative emotions, including anger and frustration. Aggregated levels of anger/frustration should have a direct effect on crime rates and should *partly* mediate the effect of community characteristics on crime rates (community characteristics may also affect crime rates for reasons related to social control and social learning theories).
6. Increasing the frequency of interaction with angry/frustrated individuals. These community characteristics not only produce angry/frustrated individuals but also increase the likelihood that such individuals will interact with one another. This further increases the level of strain/anger in the community, because these individuals are more likely to mistreat and get into conflicts with one another.

7. Increasing the likelihood of a criminal response to strain. These community characteristics influence several factors that increase the likelihood that individuals will react to strain with anger/frustration and crime. These factors, in particular, condition the effect of strain on anger/frustration and crime.
8. Community crime rates have a direct and an indirect effect on strain. The high rate of crime that results from the above processes functions as a major source of strain in itself. Criminal victimization, in fact, is one of the most serious types of strain to which individuals are subject, and data suggest that it is a major source of subsequent crime (Dawkins 1997). Furthermore, certain data suggest that high crime rates lead to a further deterioration in community characteristics. Crime prompts many individuals—especially those with economic resources—to flee the community. And crime undermines relationships among those who remain in the community (see Bursik 1986a; Liska and Bellair 1995; Morenoff and Sampson 1997; Reiss 1986, 1993; Sampson and Lauritsen 1993). The result is an amplifying loop. Deprived communities generate strain and crime, whereas crime contributes to a further deterioration in the community and more strain.

The key portions of the GST explanation focus on the effect of community characteristics on individual strain (arguments 2 to 4 and 6). It should be noted that community characteristics might have both a direct and an indirect effect on individual strain. Direct effects are *not* mediated by individual traits or characteristics of the individual's immediate social environment (e.g., family, school, work, peer group). To illustrate, imagine two individuals who are identical in all ways, except that one lives in a deprived community of the type described above and the other does not. The individual in the deprived community will experience more strain. This individual, for example, is more likely to be treated negatively or victimized by others. This argument implies that community characteristics will have a significant direct effect on individual crime after individual-level variables are controlled. Communities also have an indirect effect on strain by influencing individual traits and the individual's immediate social environment. For example, individuals in deprived communities are less likely to develop those skills necessary for successful school and work performance. As a consequence, they are less likely to achieve their economic goals and are more likely to end up in school and work situations that are experienced as aversive. This argument implies that controls for individual-level variables will reduce (but not eliminate) the direct effect of community characteristics on individual crime. The issue of direct versus indirect effects is discussed at certain points in the article.

The GST explanation contributes to the literature on communities and crime in three major ways. First, it integrates much previous theory and research dealing with strain and community crime rates. Second, it extends

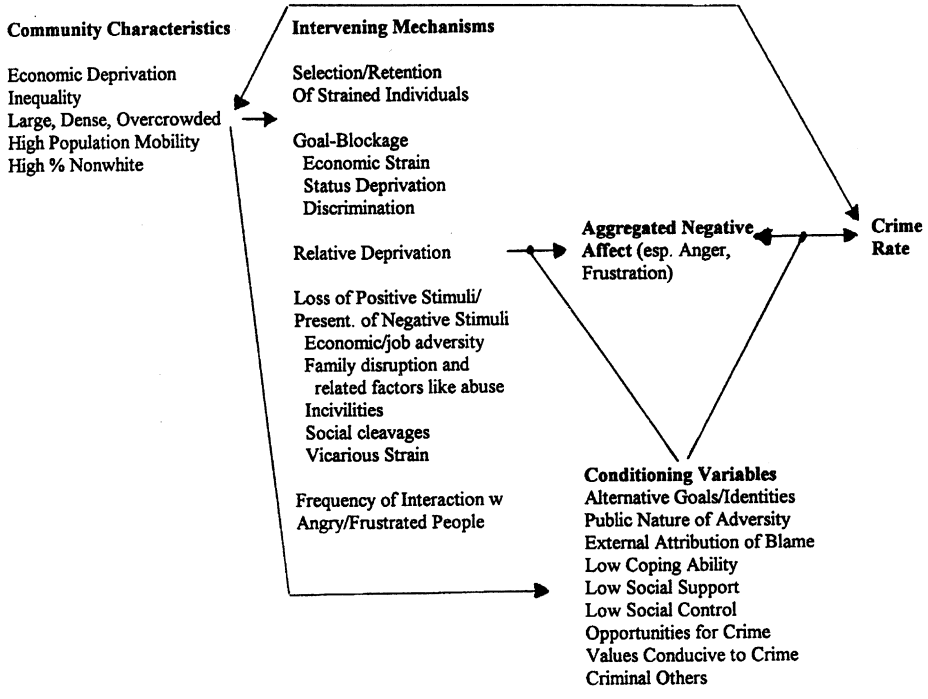

Figure 1: A General Strain Theory of Community Differences in Crime Rates

previous theory by pointing to several new community-level variables that may influence crime, especially intervening and conditioning variables. Third, it offers a new interpretation for the effect of community-level variables on crime. Much data indicate that variables like economic deprivation, mobility, family disruption, and signs of incivility have a large effect on community crime rates. The mechanisms by which these variables affect crime rates, however, are much less clear. GST argues that these variables not only reduce social control but also increase strain. It is important to examine the reasons why community-level variables affect crime rates because these reasons influence the policy recommendations we make. In particular, social disorganization theory suggests that we should help community residents exercise more control over their communities. Strain theorists do not necessarily disagree with this approach, but they argue that we should also focus on reducing the motivation for crime (see Agnew 1995a, 1995c; Brezina forthcoming for a fuller discussion).

Selected parts of the GST explanation in Figure 1 are elaborated in the rest of the article. I first describe how community characteristics cause strain (arguments 2-4 and 6) and then describe how community characteristics condition the effect of strain on crime (argument 7). These represent the central and most original parts of the GST explanation.

THE FAILURE TO ACHIEVE POSITIVELY VALUED GOALS

Communities may affect crime rates by influencing the goals that residents pursue and the ability of residents to achieve such goals through legitimate channels. Most research has focused on the inability to achieve the goal of economic success. This source of strain also occupies a central place in GST. GST, however, argues that monetary strain is not the only type of goal blockage experienced by the residents of high-crime communities. GST also focuses on the inability of residents to achieve their status goals and to be treated in a just/fair manner.

Economic Success

Economic status is the factor that most distinguishes high-crime from low-crime communities. GST argues that one reason economically deprived communities are higher in crime is because the residents of such communities have more difficulty achieving their economic goals. This goal blockage creates frustration with one's monetary situation, which, in turn, leads to

income-generating crime, aggression, and drug use (see Agnew 1992; Agnew et al. 1996; Wilson 1996).

First, economically deprived communities contribute to goal blockage by encouraging residents to place great emphasis on money. Deprivation in the midst of affluence often encourages an emphasis on monetary success (see below). The individual's own deprivation is further heightened by the deprivation that pervades the community—including the lack of recreational, shopping, health, and other facilities. The individuals in deprived communities are more likely to interact with other deprived individuals who emphasize money. This reinforces the individual emphasis on money and results in the development of a "community culture" stressing money (e.g., Anderson 1994). Deprived communities often lack the organizational and cultural resources to support the pursuit of alternative goals. Although there are no good community-level data addressing these issues, individual-level data indicate that deprived individuals place more emphasis on their monetary goals and desire proportionately more money than higher socioeconomic status individuals (Agnew 1983, 1995b; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Cook and Curtin 1987; Empey 1956).

Second, deprived communities not only encourage a strong emphasis on money; they also limit the ability of residents to achieve their monetary goals through legitimate channels. In particular, individuals in deprived communities have less access to jobs in general and to stable, well paying, primary-sector jobs in particular. Manufacturing and service-sector jobs are often located at a distance from deprived communities, so they are less accessible. Relatively few individuals in the community have job contacts or job information, and there are relatively few individuals in the community to teach and model those skills and attitudes necessary for successful job performance (for a fuller discussion, see Crutchfield 1989; Hagan 1994; Hagan and Peterson 1995; McGahey 1986; Sampson and Wilson 1995; Wilson 1987, 1996). These economic problems are most severe in inner-city, African American communities for reasons indicated by Wilson (1987, 1996) and others (Bursik 1989; Hagan 1994; Sampson and Wilson 1995).

The employment problems faced by inner-city residents, in turn, create a host of additional problems that serve to further reduce legitimate opportunities for goal achievement. Such problems include poor pre- and postnatal care and family disruption—along with its negative impacts on child care, inadequate preparation for school, and low-quality schools (see Blau and Blau 1982; Bloom, Asher, and White 1978; Hagan and Peterson 1995; Majors and Billson 1992; Sampson 1985b, 1985c, 1986, 1987, 1992; Sampson and Wilson 1995; Shihadeh and Steffensmeier 1994; Wilson 1987, 1996). These

problems not only create economic strain for adults but for adolescents as well. Adolescents have trouble finding part-time work, and their parents cannot provide them with adequate spending money (McGahey 1986).

GST, then, can easily explain the strong association between economic deprivation at the community level and crime: Residence in a deprived community increases the likelihood of economic strain. This argument is best tested by surveying the residents of different neighborhoods. Neighborhoods rather than cities or SMSAs are the most appropriate unit of analysis, because cities and SMSAs contain more variation in economic level. If this argument is correct, the residents of economically deprived communities should express more dissatisfaction with their monetary situation. Community economic status should have a direct effect on dissatisfaction and an indirect effect through individual economic status. Aggregated levels of dissatisfaction should, in turn, influence aggregated levels of negative affect, particularly anger/frustration. Such negative affect should partly mediate the effect of community characteristics and economic strain on crime rates. No study has directly tested these hypotheses, although several ethnographic and other studies suggest that economic strain is a major motive for crime in deprived communities (see Hagan 1994 for a review; for additional data compatible with these arguments, see Agnew et al. 1996; Hagan and McCarthy 1997a; Jankowski 1995; McCarthy and Hagan 1992; Messner 1983; Williams 1984; Wilson 1996).

Status/Respect

Closely related to the desire for money is the desire for status: "achieving respect in the eyes of one's fellows" (Cohen, 1955:65). Individuals may desire status in general as well as particular types of status, with the desire for "masculine" status being especially relevant to crime (see Majors and Billson 1992; Messerschmidt 1993). In the United States, status—including masculine status—is largely a function of income, education, occupation, and race (see Majors and Billson 1992). As a consequence, individuals in deprived communities—especially non–Whites—face status problems more often (see Anderson 1994; Brezina 1995; Cohen 1955; Jankowski 1995; Majors and Billson 1992; Suttles 1968). They may adapt by attempting to achieve status through alternative channels—certain of which involve or are conducive to crime.

One common alternative, particularly among young, African American males, is described by Anderson (1994) in "The Code of the Streets." People attempt to achieve status/respect through their presentation of self, particularly through the display of certain material possessions (e.g., clothing,

jewelry) and the adoption of a tough demeanor—which includes the willingness to respond to even minor shows of disrespect with violence. Individuals who lack material possessions may take them from others, and individuals may actively "campaign for respect" by verbally and physically abusing others (also see Bernard 1990; Majors and Billson 1992).

The code of the streets ultimately derives from the inability to achieve status through conventional channels, which is influenced by residence in a deprived community. GST, then, can explain the development of an alternative behavioral/value system that includes criminal elements (also see Cohen 1955). If this argument is correct, individuals in deprived, minority communities should be most likely to adopt or live by the code of the streets. Furthermore, the prevalence of the code should partly mediate the effects of economic deprivation and race on community crime rates.

Class/Race/Ethnic Discrimination

According to GST, individuals not only want to achieve specific goals like monetary success and status/respect; they also have a more general desire to be treated in a just or fair manner. Class, race, and ethnic discrimination represent a fundamental violation of this desire, and for that reason they are discussed as a distinct source of strain. (Such discrimination, of course, also has a major effect on the achievement of the economic and status goals discussed above and on the removal of positive stimuli/presentation of negative stimuli discussed below [e.g., Anderson 1990; Bernard 1990; Hawkins 1983; Mann 1995; Russell 1994; Wilson 1987, 1996].)

Individuals in deprived, inner-city communities—especially communities with high concentrations of African Americans and other minority groups—may be more likely to experience and perceive class and race/ethnic discrimination. The existence of such communities may increase the likelihood that others will form negative stereotypes of the residents who live there and treat them in a discriminatory manner (Cook and Curtin 1987). Some evidence, for example, suggests that this may be the case with the police (Miller 1996). Negative experiences with the police, in turn, may generate feelings of injustice and increase the likelihood of further crime (see Paternoster et al. 1997). Also, the existence of such communities may lead residents to the obvious conclusion that race/ethnicity is strongly correlated with a host of social ills—thereby fostering impressions of discrimination.

Russell (1994) provides some suggestions as to how racial discrimination may be measured at the individual level, and such individual measures may be aggregated to form community-level measures. We would expect these community measures to be positively associated with aggregate levels of

anger/frustration and community crime rates, even after controls for economic and other types of strain. The *experience* of discrimination should have a negative impact on individuals over and above whatever other negative consequences result from discrimination.

RELATIVE DEPRIVATION

As argued above, the residents of deprived communities are more likely to engage in crime because they are more likely to experience goal blockage. But as several strain theorists have argued, individuals do not determine whether they are experiencing goal blockage in isolation from one another. They compare themselves to others; such comparisons influence the goals they pursue and their perceptions about the amount of goal blockage they are experiencing (Cohen 1965, 1997; Passas 1997). In this connection, strain theorists have argued that perceptions of goal blockage should be highest in communities with high levels of income or socioeconomic inequality. In fact, virtually all of the community-level research on strain theory has focused on the relationship between inequality and crime rates. It is assumed that when inequality is high, people compare themselves to advantaged others, decide that they want and deserve what these others have, and decide that they cannot get what these others have through legitimate channels.

As indicated above, the research on relative deprivation theory has produced mixed results. Such research, however, is often rather simplistic. The larger literature on relative deprivation, social comparison, and social justice suggests that inequality only leads to feelings of relative deprivation and crime under certain conditions (for overviews, see Martin 1986; Masters and Smith 1987; Nagata and Crosby 1991; Olson, Herman, and Zanna, 1986; Suls and Wills 1991). In particular, individuals do not always compare themselves to advantaged others; they often avoid comparison, make self-comparisons, or make "downward" or "lateral" comparisons. Comparisons to advantaged others are most likely when such others are very visible, are perceived as similar on relevant dimensions, and there is cultural support for upward comparisons (see Atkinson 1986; Major, Testa, and Bylsma, 1991; Passas 1997; Ross, Eyman, and Kishchuk 1986; Stroebe and Stroebe 1996; Suls 1986; Tesser 1991; Wills 1991; Wood and Taylor 1991). Furthermore, comparisons to advantaged others do not necessarily result in feelings of relative deprivation; individuals often believe that advantaged others *deserve* what they have or they employ other cognitive coping strategies to reduce feelings of deprivation (see Agnew 1992; Folger 1987; Major et al. 1991; Salovey 1991; Wood and Taylor 1991). Finally, feelings of relative

deprivation do not always result in crime. The effect of relative deprivation on crime is conditioned by a number of factors (see Agnew 1992).

Drawing on these arguments, we would expect inequality to be most likely to lead to crime in those communities in which advantaged others are very visible, in which they are perceived as similar, in which individuals are encouraged to make upward comparisons, in which the reasons for inequality are perceived as unfair, and in which individuals are constrained or disposed to respond to deprivation with crime. At a more concrete level, we might predict that such conditions are most likely to obtain in urban communities in which (1) there are high levels of inequality within and between neighborhoods; (2) illicit markets are common and there are high levels of social mobility, both of which increase the likelihood of knowing *similar* others who are advantaged (see Hagan 1994; Passas 1997); (3) people hold egalitarian beliefs that stress the similarity between all people and encourage the universal pursuit of monetary success (see Martin 1986; Messner and Rosenfeld 1994; Passas 1997; Suls 1986); (4) inequality is linked to race/ethnicity (see Blau and Blau 1982; Phillips 1997); (5) there are large individual and group differences in the economic returns to education; and (6) people score high on those factors that increase the likelihood of a criminal response to strain (see below). The fact that empirical research only takes account of certain of these factors may help explain the mixed results of such research.

LOSS OF POSITIVE STIMULI/PRESENTATION OF NEGATIVE STIMULI

Agnew (1992) argues that strain not only results when others prevent you from achieving your goals but also when others present you with negatively valued stimuli (e.g., verbally and physically abuse you) or remove positively valued stimuli you possess (e.g., take your possessions). Communities may contribute to these types of strain by influencing the types of treatment that are defined as aversive and by influencing the exposure of residents to such treatment.

Types of Treatment Defined as Aversive

Some types of treatment—such as physical attack—are defined as negative or aversive across virtually all groups. Other types of treatment, however, are defined differently in different groups. Several theorists have argued that the residents of high-crime communities—especially young, African American males—are more likely to define certain types of treatment as aversive.

This is, in fact, a central theme in the leading subcultural theories of violence (Bernard 1990; Luckenbill and Doyle 1989; Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967; also see Harvey 1986). Luckenbill and Doyle (1989), for example, claim that the subculture of violence "enjoins individuals to be highly sensitive and boldly responsive to affronts"—especially to affronts in which "fundamental properties of the self are attacked." Ethnographic accounts confirm such views. Anderson (1994), for example, states that

> many of the forms that dissing [disrespectful treatment] can take might seem petty to middle-class people (maintaining eye contact for too long, for example), but to those invested in the street code, these actions become serious indications of the other person's intentions. Consequently, such people become very sensitive to advances and slights. (P. 82)

Residents of high-crime communities, then, are more likely to view a range of slights and provocations as aversive. This may partly explain the fact that lower-income individuals are more likely to experience psychological distress in response to a given stressor (e.g., Thoits 1982, 1991).

There are several explanations for such sensitivity, certain of which derive from strain theory. Most notably, certain theorists have argued that the continued experience with adversity may heighten one's sensitivity to slights. The residents of deprived communities must often tolerate aversive treatment from others, including racial discrimination and the "frustrations of persistent poverty" (Anderson 1994:83). In the words of Balkwell (1990), this leads them to develop a "short fuse" (also see Anderson 1994; Bernard 1990; Harvey 1986; Majors and Billson 1992). If this argument is correct, the residents of deprived communities—particularly the young males—should be more likely to report that they are upset or angered by a range of slights and provocations. In particular, the community characteristics listed in Figure 1 should have both a direct and indirect effect on sensitivity to aversive stimuli, because they have a direct and indirect effect on the individual's exposure to aversive stimuli (more below).

Exposure to Aversive Stimuli

Not only are individuals in deprived communities more sensitive to certain types of treatment, but they are more exposed to aversive treatment as well—including undesirable life events and chronic strains (e.g., Thoits 1982). Many data suggest that this greater exposure largely is due to the economic deprivation of the community and its residents (with the community contributing to individual deprivation in the ways listed above). Economic

deprivation is, itself, a major source of strain, and it directly or indirectly contributes to such additional strains as family disruption, exposure to a host of "incivilities" in the community, and social cleavages.

Economic deprivation. Individuals in deprived communities suffer from a range of economic hardships, including inadequate financial resources, unemployment, and employment in secondary sector jobs—which are poorly paid, sporadic, and characterized by adverse working conditions (see Crutchfield 1989; Crutchfield and Pitchford 1997). These hardships may cause stress/strain because they interfere with the desire for money and status, as described above. They may also cause strain because the conditions of life associated with these hardships are experienced as aversive, regardless of individual goals. Data, for example, suggest that the conditions associated with work in the secondary labor market contribute to psychological distress, with these conditions including low autonomy or control and low use of capacities (Greenberg and Grunberg 1995; Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Ross and Huber 1985). More generally, data suggest that economic hardship is a major source of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and anger (e.g., Aneshensel 1992; Horwitz 1984; Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Ross and Huber 1985; Thoits 1982).

Given the above, we would expect economic hardship to have at least a moderate direct effect on community crime rates. As indicated, the data in this area are mixed. Although studies indicate a strong zero-order relationship between economic deprivation and community crime rates, not all studies find evidence of significant direct effects. As numerous authors have noted, however, problems of multicollinearity often make it difficult to estimate such direct effects. Measures of economic hardship are strongly correlated with one another and with many of the other key correlates of crime. Nevertheless, recent data suggest that at least certain measures of economic hardship may have a direct effect on community crime rates. There is some evidence, for example, that unemployment increases crime rates, although its effect may be partly offset by a decrease in criminal opportunities (Land, Cantor, and Russell 1995; Phillips 1997). And Crutchfield (1989) found that employment rates in the secondary sector were the best predictor of neighborhood crime rates (also see Crutchfield and Pitchford 1997).

Family disruption and related problems. Economic deprivation should also have a large indirect effect on community crime rates because it increases the exposure of community residents to other types of strain. One especially important type of strain is family disruption and the problems associated with such disruption. Data suggest that economic problems are perhaps the major cause of family disruption (e.g., Jankowski 1995; Sampson 1987; Wilson 1987). Family disruption, in turn, has a large direct effect on

crime rates—particularly juvenile crime rates—in most studies. Furthermore, family disruption partly or fully mediates the effect of other variables on crime—like percentage African American and economic variables (e.g., Sampson 1987; Shihadeh and Steffensmeier 1994).

The effect of family disruption on crime rates, however, is usually explained in terms of social disorganization rather than strain theory. Family disruption is said to reduce informal social control (e.g., supervising neighborhood kids and watching out for strangers) and participation in community organizations. GST, however, offers an additional explanation for the effect of family disruption. As Blau and Blau (1982) state, family disruption is a major source of strain as well as low social control: "marital breakups entail disruptions of profound and intimate social relations, and they generally occur after serious estrangement, if not prolonged conflicts" (p. 124). Sampson (1986:279-80; 1987:354) also notes the association between family disruption and strain. Nevertheless, no one has interpreted the effect of family disruption on crime rates in terms of strain theory.

Ample data support such an interpretation. Family disruption has been linked empirically to a wide range of strains. Family disruption is often preceded by high levels of interpersonal conflict in the family, and the divorce/separation often precipitates additional conflict, especially between the mother and children. The children make more demands on the mother at a time when she is less able to meet them, and an escalating cycle of conflict often results (Martens 1993; McGahey 1986; Sampson 1986). Among other things, family disruption is highly correlated with rates of child abuse (Sampson 1992, 1995). Child abuse, in turn, is an important cause of crime and delinquency, with part of the effect of abuse being explained in terms of strain theory (Brezina 1998). Family disruption also has been linked to such strains as financial difficulties, housework burdens, sexual problems, and feelings of shame and failure (Bloom et al. 1978; Thoits 1982). It is no surprise, then, that family disruption is associated with higher levels of psychological distress (Mirowsky and Ross 1989). It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that communities with high rates of family disruption are higher in crime for reasons related to strain as well as social disorganization theory.

Signs of incivility. Economic deprivation and family disruption also contribute to one of the strongest community correlates of crime: signs of incivility, such as vandalism, street harassment, and the presence of unsupervised teenage peer groups. Miethe and McDowall (1993) found that the most important contextual factor predicting victimization was a measure indicating whether the respondent had the following problems within four blocks of their home: teenagers hanging out on the street, litter and garbage on the street, abandoned houses and buildings, poor lighting, and vandalism. Data

from Sampson and Groves (1989) suggest that unsupervised peer groups in the community are perhaps the best predictor of community crime rates (also see Sampson et al. 1997). Such groups mediate much of the effect of family disruption on crime. Although unsupervised peer groups and other signs of incivility may contribute to crime for a number of reasons, a strain theory explanation readily suggests itself. Signs of incivility index the aversive or negative treatment that community residents must endure. The presence of unsupervised peer groups, for example, increases the likelihood that neighborhood residents—including the members of these peer groups—will be subject to negative treatment.

Social cleavages. At a more general level, several researchers have noted that factors like deprivation, heterogeneity, density, overcrowding, and population mobility undermine social relationships in a community. Among other things, they are said to lead to "social cleavages," "exploitative and manipulative relationships," "mutual mistrust and estrangement," and "disruptive social demands" (e.g., Chamlin and Cochran 1997; Gove, Hughes, and Galle 1979; Kornhauser 1978; Sampson 1993; Suttles 1968). Such negative relations are a major source of strain, with some data suggesting that they contribute to anger and community crime rates (see Gove et al. 1979 and the review in Bellair 1997).

For example, Sampson et al. (1997) found that deprived communities are lower in "collective efficacy." This measure partly indexes how well community residents get along with one another (it contains items like "people in this neighborhood generally get along well with one another," and "people in this neighborhood can be trusted"). Collective efficacy not only has a large impact on crime, but it also mediates a substantial portion of the effect of community deprivation on crime rates.

Vicarious strain. The residents of deprived communities are not only more likely to directly experience the above types of strain, they are also more likely to witness family members, friends, and others—including members of their racial/ethnic group—experience such strains (see Russell 1994). So, community residents are higher in both direct and "vicarious" strain. It is uncertain whether vicarious strain has an effect on crime, although data from the stress literature suggest that it has an effect on one's psychic well-being (e.g., Turner, Wheaton, and Lloyd 1995).

Other strains. Deprived communities may expose individuals to still other types of negative treatment, many of which have been linked to crime (see Bernard 1990). In fact, one could easily compile a long list of community-related factors that might reasonably be expected to increase individual strain (see Linsky et al. 1995 for a list of state-level factors).

Testing the Above Arguments

Testing these arguments will require that we examine certain variables that have been neglected in previous community-level research, like rates of child abuse and vicarious strain. More important, it will require that we devote special attention to intervening processes. It is reasonably well established that there is an association between crime rates and community characteristics like economic deprivation, family disruption, the presence of unsupervised peer groups, and the quality of social relationships. The issue is the extent to which these associations are best explained in terms of social disorganization, subcultural deviance, or strain theory. We cannot answer this question until we measure intervening variables like anger/frustration, perceptions of formal and informal sanctions, and beliefs regarding crime (see Agnew 1995c). Unfortunately, the macrolevel research has paid only limited attention to intervening processes (Bursik 1986a, 1986b; Byrne and Sampson 1986:13; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Lauritsen 1993; Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz 1986). If GST has any merit, aggregated levels of anger/frustration should partly mediate the effect of variables like family disruption and unsupervised peer groups on community crime rates. A preliminary test of this proposition can be conducted with cross-sectional data, although a full test should employ longitudinal data so as to better estimate the causal ordering between variables (e.g., see Brezina 1996).

Although no study has attempted to test the above proposition, the Youth in Transition (YIT) data set contains a measure of anger/frustration that can be aggregated to the school level. We can, therefore, estimate the percentage of angry/frustrated individuals in each school. The YIT data also allows us to construct rough measures of school disorganization and school values conducive to crime/violence (see Felson et al. 1994). If GST is correct, we would expect the aggregate measure of anger/frustration to be related to school crime rates even after school disorganization and values are controlled. (We would also expect the aggregate measure of anger/frustration to be related to individual crime, even after individual anger/frustration and other individual-level variables were controlled.)

INCREASING THE FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION WITH ANGRY/FRUSTRATED INDIVIDUALS

High-crime communities not only produce more strained and angry/frustrated individuals, they also increase the likelihood that such individuals will interact with one another. This contributes to a further increase in strain,

negative affect, and crime because these individuals are more likely to mistreat and victimize one another.

An angry/frustrated person in a high-crime community is more likely to interact with other angry/frustrated people partly because high-crime communities contain a greater percentage of angry/frustrated individuals. Beyond that, the characteristics of high-crime communities foster frequent interaction between certain community residents—especially the young males most subject to the above types of strain. Young males spend much idle time in public settings. This partly stems from family disruption, which creates a large pool of unsupervised teenagers and unattached males (McGahey 1986; Reiss 1986; Sampson 1986; Stark 1987). It partly stems from high rates of unemployment and sporadic work. It partly stems from overcrowded living arrangements, which make street life more attractive (Stark 1987). And it partly stems from the mixed-used nature of many deprived communities, which provides more opportunities for congregating outside the home (Stark 1987). In this connection, Miethe and McDowell (1993) found that victimization was higher in busy places, that is, places available for public activity, like stores, bars, and parks (also see R. Felson 1993; Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger 1989). Finally, overcrowded living conditions increase the likelihood of contact with angry individuals in the home setting. The end result is that large numbers of strained/angry people are in frequent contact. Furthermore, the deprived nature of the community increases the likelihood that such contact may occur in the context of competition over scarce resources. In the words of Wikstrom (1990), we have an environment that is likely to "provoke friction."

This argument may be tested by asking individuals about the extent to which they encounter angry/upset individuals and get into conflicts with others in their neighborhood. We would expect such encounters and conflicts to be more frequent among the residents of deprived communities, even after individual characteristics are controlled. Such encounters/conflicts, in turn, should partly mediate the effect of neighborhood characteristics on crime rates.

FACTORS INCREASING THE LIKELIHOOD OF A CRIMINAL RESPONSE

As noted in GST, there are a variety of ways to cope with strain, only some of which involve crime. Individuals may employ cognitive coping strategies in an attempt to minimize the subjective strain or adversity they experience. For example, they may reduce their monetary strain by focusing on

alternative goals, convincing themselves that they will soon achieve monetary success or blaming themselves for their misfortune. They may employ behavioral coping strategies that attempt to reduce their objective strain; that is, they may attempt to achieve positively valued goals, protect or retrieve positively valued stimuli, or terminate or escape from negative stimuli (Agnew 1992). Such strategies may involve conventional or criminal behavior, and they may employ emotional coping strategies that attempt to alleviate the negative emotions they feel. Such strategies may also involve conventional (e.g., exercise) or criminal (e.g., illicit drug use) behavior.

Whether people respond to strain with crime depends on a number of factors, many of which are influenced by community characteristics. Certain of these factors are listed below. Although these factors are correlated with community deprivation, the correlations are not perfect; ideally, researchers should obtain independent measures of these factors and treat them as conditioning variables. In most cases, independent measures can be obtained by aggregating individual responses within communities.

Limited Range of Alternative Goals/Identities

Evidence suggests that individuals often cope with goal blockage or attacks on their identity by focusing on new goals that they can achieve or new identities they can successfully manage (Agnew 1992). Several theorists have argued that this coping strategy may be more difficult in deprived communities, because such communities provide less cultural and structural support for alternative goals/identities (Gans 1968; Kornhauser 1978; Wilson 1987:183). The fact that this coping strategy is less available in deprived communities increases the likelihood of a criminal response to strain.

The Public Nature of One's Adversity

As indicated above, individuals in deprived communities spend much time interacting with one another in public and private settings. Also, there is a greater interest in the personal affairs of community residents, partly because conventional markers of moral character like educational and occupational success are unavailable (Suttles 1968). The result is that one's aversive experiences are more likely to be witnessed by or known to others. As Hagan and Peterson (1995) state, the "press of people in dense underclass areas imposes upon residents a unique kind of community organization characterized by a high level of mutual surveillance. This restricts residents' privacy, making their activities, both legal and illegal, more frequently 'public' " (p. 27) (also see Stark 1987).

The public nature of one's adversity increases the likelihood of a criminal response to strain for several reasons. First, it increases the likelihood that individuals will have their attempts at cognitive reinterpretation challenged. Because others are often aware of the adversities that individuals have experienced, it is more difficult for individuals to cognitively minimize their adversity without being challenged. Second, others may remind individuals of the adversities they have experienced. This may cause individuals to "cognitively relive" their aversive experiences, thereby increasing their level of subjective strain (Bernard 1990). Third, it increases the likelihood that individuals will feel pressure to respond to mistreatment with crime to "save face" and prevent future predation by others (Anderson 1994; Felson 1993; Felson et al. 1994; Luckenbill and Doyle 1989; Stark 1987).

The External Attribution of Blame

The residents of deprived communities also may be more likely to blame their strain on others, thereby increasing their level of anger and tendency to respond to strain with crime (see Agnew 1992). According to Bernard (1990) and others, the chronic strains that characterize life in deprived communities increase the likelihood of external attributions. Furthermore, such communities are more likely to develop subcultures that encourage the external attribution of blame. Such subcultures result from a combination of chronic strain, social isolation, and a tendency to blame one's aggressive acts on others (also see Luckenbill and Doyle 1989).

Ability to Engage in Legitimate Behavioral Coping

Not only are the residents of deprived communities less able to employ cognitive coping strategies, they are also less able to engage in legitimate behavioral coping. They are less able to cope as individuals, due to their limited coping resources and skills—like money, power, and problem-solving skills. These individual deficits are partly a function of community characteristics. For example, deprived communities provide fewer models of effective coping (Anderson 1990). Also, they are less able to cope as a community. In particular, they are less able to unite with one another to solve community-wide problems. The reasons for this are described by social disorganization theorists. In fact, social disorganization essentially refers to the inability of communities to cope successfully with the problems that confront them (see Bursik 1988; Kornhauser 1978; see also Grant and Martinez 1997 for data suggesting that a community's perceived ability to cope with problems through legitimate channels has an influence on that community's crime rate).

Lack of Social Support/Capital

Not only are the residents of deprived communities less able to cope on their own behalf, they are less likely to receive social support from others. This is especially true in recent decades as the concentration of poverty has increased. In particular, there has been a dramatic decline in social support in deprived inner-city communities as working- and middle-class African Americans have moved to more affluent areas (Sampson 1992; Tonry, Ohlin, and Farrington 1991; Wilson 1987, 1996). This migration has not only resulted in a loss of supportive individuals but has weakened educational, religious, recreational, and other institutions in the community. Increased levels of family disruption have also contributed to a reduction in social support (Thoits 1982). The same is true of government cutbacks, which have resulted in a decline in social services. In this area, recent data suggest that higher welfare expenditures are associated with lower crime rates (DeFronzo 1997; Grant and Martinez 1997). More generally, data from Hagan and McCarthy (1997a) suggest that community differences in social support have an important effect on the ability of individuals to cope with strain and that such differences in social support are linked to differences in crime rates (also see Cullen 1994; Cullen and Wright 1997; Hagan 1994; Hagan and McCarthy 1997a, 1997b; Sampson 1992, 1993; Wilson 1996).

Low Social Control

As social disorganization theorists have argued, deprived communities are lower in social control. Community residents, in particular, are less likely to be taught values that condemn crime, to be sanctioned for criminal behavior, and to develop a "stake in conformity." Although low social control may lead directly to crime, it also increases the likelihood that community residents will respond to strain with crime.

Opportunities for Crime

As Felson (1998) and others argue, certain communities provide more opportunities for crime than other communities; that is, they increase the likelihood that strained individuals (motivated offenders) will encounter attractive targets in the absence of capable guardians. Many of the characteristics of deprived communities have been linked to an increase in criminal opportunity—although the relationship between community deprivation and criminal opportunity is far from perfect. The effect of criminal opportunity on community crime/victimization rates has been examined in several studies.

The results of such research are somewhat mixed, perhaps because of the questionable validity of certain of the measures of criminal opportunity. Nevertheless, we would expect measures of criminal opportunity to condition the effect of strain on crime rates (see Birkbeck and LaFree 1993; M. Felson 1998; Massey, Krohn, and Bonati 1989; Messner and Blau 1987; Miethe and McDowall 1993; Miethe and Meier 1994; Sampson and Wooldredge 1987; Sherman et al. 1989).

Values Conducive to Crime

As indicated above, there is reason to believe that the residents of deprived communities—particularly young, minority males—are more likely to hold or live by values conducive to crime. The origin of such values can be at least partly explained in terms of strain theory (see above; also see Bernard 1990; Harvey 1986; Luckenbill and Doyle 1989; Wilson 1996). Although such values may have a direct effect on crime, they also increase the likelihood that one will respond to strain with crime. In fact, a central component of such values is that disrespectful treatment by others often requires an aggressive response. Using state-level data, Linsky et al. (1995) found that values conducive to deviance sometimes condition the effect of stressors on crime/deviance rates.

Presence of Criminal Others/Groups

Finally, the increased presence of criminal others and groups in deprived communities increases the likelihood that residents will respond to strain with crime. Such others are more likely to both model and reinforce criminal responses, among other things (see Reiss 1986; Stark 1987; Wilson 1987, 1996). The more public nature of life in deprived communities, described above, makes such modeling especially likely. The idea that crime is an appropriate or justifiable response to certain strains may spread or diffuse throughout the community—or at least certain segments of the community.

SUMMARY

The GST described in this article argues that communities differ in their level of crime partly because they differ in the extent to which they produce strain and foster criminal responses to strain.

Communities contribute to strain in several ways. First, they influence the goals that individuals pursue and the ability of individuals to achieve these

goals. Economic goals, status goals, and the desire for just/fair treatment occupy a central place in GST. Second, they influence the individual's sense of relative deprivation as well as absolute level of goal blockage. Third, they influence definitions of aversive stimuli and the degree of exposure to such stimuli. A range of aversive stimuli was considered, including economic deprivation, family disruption, child abuse, signs of incivility, social cleavages, and vicarious strains. Fourth, they increase the likelihood that strained and angry/frustrated individuals will interact with one another, which further increases levels of strain and negative affect.

These types of strain, in turn, influence aggregated levels of negative affect in the community—with the emotions of anger/frustration receiving special attention. Aggregated levels of anger/frustration have a direct effect on community crime rates and partly mediate the effect of community characteristics on crime rates. Communities, however, may condition the impact of strain on crime in a number of ways. In particular, communities may make it more difficult for individuals to "define away their strain" through the use of cognitive coping strategies, engage in legitimate behavioral coping, and obtain support from others. Communities may also reduce the costs of criminal coping and increase the disposition to engage in such coping. Relevant community-level variables in these areas were described.

There was a brief overview of the evidence compatible with these arguments, and several strategies for testing these arguments were suggested. At the most general level, it was argued that empirical tests need to devote more attention to intervening processes. With respect to goal blockage, researchers should determine the extent to which the community characteristics in Figure 1 are associated with the experience of monetary strain, status deprivation, and discriminatory treatment by others. These factors influence aggregated levels of negative affect—especially anger and frustration. Negative affect, in turn, influences community crime rates. With respect to relative deprivation, one should examine the extent to which the community characteristics listed in Figure 1 and certain other community characteristics mentioned in the discussion influence perceptions of relative deprivation. Such perceptions, in turn, should influence levels of negative affect. With respect to the loss of positive stimuli/presentation of negative stimuli, one should examine the extent to which the community characteristics in Figure 1 influence exposure to aversive stimuli. Such exposure, in turn, should influence levels of negative affect. With respect to interactional patterns, one should examine the extent to which community characteristics influence the level of interaction with angry/frustrated individuals. Such interaction should influence negative affect.

Finally, one should examine the extent to which community characteristics influence those variables said to condition the effect of strain on

anger/frustration and crime. Such variables, however, may not be a complete function of those community characteristics in Figure 1. Therefore, researchers also should obtain independent measures of these variables and examine the extent to which they condition the effect of strain on aggregated levels of negative affect and crime rates.

GST represents a major alternative to those theories that now dominate the research on communities and crime. In particular, GST provides another explanation for the effect of previously examined variables on community crime rates—variables like economic deprivation, mobility, family disruption, and signs of incivility. The effect of these variables is usually explained in terms of social disorganization and, to a lesser extent, subcultural deviance theory. As argued above, one can also explain the effect of these variables in terms of strain theory.

It is important to emphasize, however, that GST is proposed as a supplement rather than as a replacement for social disorganization and subcultural deviance theories. As exemplified in the work of Thrasher (1927) and Shaw and McKay (1942), a full explanation of community differences in crime rates must draw on a range of theories, including those that examine the ways in which communities *motivate* as well as *control* crime.

NOTE

1. For overviews and selected studies, see Bailey 1984; Balkwell 1990; Blau and Blau 1982; Byrne and Sampson 1986; Carroll and Jackson 1983; Crutchfield 1989; Crutchfield, Geerken, and Gove, 1982; Elliott et al. 1996; Farrington 1993; Golden and Messner 1987; Gottfredson and Taylor 1986; Hagan and Peterson 1995; Harer and Steffensmeier 1992; Hsieh and Pugh 1993; Kornhauser 1978; Kovandzic, Vieraitis, and Yeisley 1998; Krivo and Peterson 1996; Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990; Loftin and Parker 1985; Messner 1982, 1983a, 1983b; Messner and Golden 1992; Messner and South 1986; Messner and Tardiff 1986; Patterson 1991; Rosenfeld 1986; Sampson 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1986, 1987, 1995; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Lauritsen 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Shihadeh and Steffensmeier 1994; Smith and Jarjoura 1988; Taylor and Covington 1988; Warner and Pierce 1993; Williams 1984; Williams and Flewelling 1988.

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