CHAPTER 12

Social Disorganization Theory: Then, Now, and in the Future

CHARIS E. KUBRIN

INTRODUCTION

One of the most recognized facts about crime is that it is not randomly distributed across neighborhoods within a city. That is, crime does not occur equally in all areas; rather, it tends to cluster in certain locales but not others. It is for this reason that residents can often identify where the "good" and "bad" areas of a city are. Social disorganization theory takes this fact—the nonrandom distribution of crime—as a point of departure for explaining crime. It is one of only a handful of social structural theories of crime and the only one to consider why rates of crime vary across areas such as neighborhoods. Two key questions of interest for social disorganization theorists are as follows: (1) Why is crime higher in some neighborhoods than others? (2) Is there something about the characteristics of these neighborhoods themselves (above and beyond the people who live there) that fosters crime? Social disorganization theory has long occupied an important place in criminological thought and continues to do so well into the twenty-first century. Despite its popularity and utility for understanding crime, nagging issues, both substantive and methodological, remain. Before I discuss these issues, I briefly describe the history of social disorganization theory and its main arguments below.

CHARIS E. KUBRIN • George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

HISTORY OF SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY

Social disorganization theory, like many other theories reviewed in this book, is a product of its time. During the 1920s and 1930s, researchers at the University of Chicago became increasingly concerned about what they were witnessing in terms of the effects of growing urbanization, industrialization, and immigration on patterns of social organization in Chicago neighborhoods. Two researchers in particular, Park and Burgess (1925), studied how these drastic changes of the time were affecting the city. With backgrounds in human ecology, they likened the growth of the city to ecological competition, concluding just as there is a natural ecology where animals and plants compete for space and existence, so there is a social ecology where humans compete for scarce and desirable space. Their observations led to the Concentric Zone Theory, which emphasized a process of invasion, dominance, and succession to understand city life. First, they noted the expansion of the central business district (CBD), the downtown area of the city. As Chicago continued to grow in population, so did the CBD expand outward in successive stages. With the expansion of the CBD came the deterioration of residential properties in the area, since most residents moved farther away to escape the hustle and bustle of the area and left residences there uninhabited and uncared for. This deterioration and change ultimately caused "social disorganization." In their zone theory, Park and Burgess (1925) explained that cities can be divided into sections that correspond to areas of social (dis)organization.

At this stage, crime was not part of the equation. Crime did not become the focus of study until researchers Shaw and McKay (1942) entered the scene. Their orientation was a direct extension of the ecological perspective on community processes that had been developing at the University of Chicago under the guidance of Park and Burgess. They applied the zone theory to the study of delinquency. Their primary interest was in determining the extent to which differences in economic and social characteristics of local areas paralleled variations in rates of delinquency. Some questions they sought to examine included the following: To what extent do variations in rates of delinquency correspond to demonstrable differences in economic, social, and cultural characteristics of local communities in different types of cities? How are rates of delinquency in particular areas affected over a period by successive changes in the nativity and nationality composition of the population? Under what economic and social conditions does crime develop as a social tradition and become embodied in a system of criminal values? What are the implications, for treatment and prevention, of wide variations in rates of delinquency in different types of communities? (Shaw & McKay, 1942).

To begin to address these questions, they examined the distribution of delinquency based on juvenile court cases and commitments presented for periods roughly centered around 1900, 1920, and 1930. Shaw and McKay (1942) also collected extensive fieldwork data in Chicago neighborhoods over this time period. The results of their analysis, published in *Juvenile Delinquency in Urban Areas*, showed a certain concentration of delinquency—its distribution was closely related to the location of industrial and commercial areas and to the composition of the population (e.g., rates of poverty, residential mobility, and racial heterogeneity). Collectively, the findings from Chicago school studies formed the basis of social disorganization theory. These studies shaped the development and direction of the theory for years to come.

Two key findings from the Chicago school stand out in importance. First, researchers concluded that there is a co-occurrence of crime and social ills such as low socioeconomic status (represented as the percentage of families on relief, home ownership levels, median rentals, and occupation) across neighborhoods in Chicago. Stated alternatively, delinquency, crime, and

deviance in general go hand in hand with other social problems such as poverty, unemployment, and residential turnover. This finding offset biological determinism and rational choice explanations for criminality, which had long dominated thinking about crime. Second, Chicago researchers documented the persistence of high-crime areas, noting they remained high-crime areas despite which racial/ethnic group inhabited the area. In other words, some neighborhoods in the city appear to be high-crime or deviance areas, regardless of the characteristics or nationality of the people living within them. The fact that high rates of crime and deviance can persist in certain neighborhoods despite repeated complete turnovers in the composition of their populations suggested to many, even decades later, that "kinds of places" explanations are needed along with "kinds of people" explanations (Stark, 1987).

BASIC TENANTS OF SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY

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

Social disorganization can thus be defined as the inability of local communities to realize the common values of their residents or solve commonly experienced problems (Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978, p. 63). Along these lines, we do not need communities so much to satisfy our private needs, which are best met elsewhere, but to express and realize *common* values and standards (such as a crime-free community). What social disorganization theory has to offer then is a specification of the effects of neighborhood characteristics on the capacity and ability of community residents to implement and maintain public norms (Sampson, 1987).

So which neighborhood characteristics promote social organization and which are likely to create disorganized neighborhoods? Theorists have typically focused on the effects of poverty, residential mobility, and racial/ethnic heterogeneity. Studies find that these ecological characteristics can and do influence the degree of social (dis)organization, with implications for crime and delinquency. For example, consider residential mobility, or the frequency with which people move in and out of a neighborhood. Some communities are stable with people living in the same homes for decades while others are unstable and experience significant turnover. It is not difficult to understand how residential mobility can disrupt a community's network of social relations. If people continually move in and out, it becomes harder for residents to know, trust,

and interact with one another, which reduces informal social control needed to prevent crime. According to the theory, communities marked by high rates of residential turnover should experience high crime rates, precisely because these communities suffer from weak social ties and little informal control. In fact, disorganization studies find just this (Bellair, 2000; Chamlin, 1989; Kubrin, 2000; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Warner & Rountree, 1997). Similar results have been reported with respect to the effects of poverty, racial/ethnic heterogeneity, and other ecological factors (e.g., divorce rates, unemployment) thought to affect social ties and informal control within communities.

Given the above discussion, the basic social disorganization causal model can be expressed as follows: exogenous neighborhood characteristics → social ties → informal social control → crime. In line with this causal model, Sampson (1987) describes the nature of the relationships among these factors:

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

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

There are two important points to consider with respect to this theory. First, social disorganization is a property of neighborhoods, not individuals. It is incorrect to say that residents are disorganized. Instead, one must refer to neighborhoods as disorganized. And second, community characteristics are only indirectly related to crime. Poverty, mobility, heterogeneity, and other ecological characteristics only cause crime indirectly by increasing levels of social disorganization and reducing informal social control. In short, community characteristics and crime are not directly related.

ONGOING CHALLENGES FACING SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY

Like any other theory presented in this book, there are ongoing challenges facing social disorganization theory, some of which have been resolved more fully than others. These challenges have been discussed at length in two important assessments of the theory at two points in time: Bursik (1988) and Kubrin and Weitzer (2003a). Below I present some of the key points from these works.

Early on there were conceptualization and operationalization problems inherent in social disorganization theory. A key problem was with the measurement of social disorganization itself (Bursik, 1988, p. 526). Shaw and McKay (1942) at times did not clearly differentiate the presumed outcome of social disorganization (i.e., increased rates of crime and delinquency) from

disorganization itself. The delinquency rate of an area was both an example of disorganization and something caused by disorganization. This problem was resolved when theorists attempted to clarify the unique conceptual status of social disorganization by defining it in terms of the capacity of a neighborhood to regulate itself through formal and informal processes of social control, as noted earlier.

More recently, measurement issues have surfaced with respect to social disorganization's mediating concepts. Recall it is the mediating concepts of social ties and informal social control that account for the relationship between ecological characteristics of communities (e.g., poverty) and crime. In the last few years, researchers also have considered the mediating effects of related concepts such as collective efficacy and social capital. Collective efficacy builds on the concept of social ties arguing that ties may be necessary but not sufficient for social control and that a key factor of purposive action (i.e., how ties are activated and resources mobilized to enhance social control) depends on conditions of mutual trust and solidarity among neighbors (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). With the concept of social capital, or those intangible resources produced "in relations among persons that facilitate action" for mutual benefit (e.g., combating crime) (Coleman, 1988, p. S100), researchers argue that it is the resources transmitted through social ties, not the ties per se, that are key to facilitating social control (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, p. 377).

As you may have noticed, there is some conceptual fuzziness regarding the mediating concepts of social disorganization. Based on their definitions, it is not always clear how social ties differ from informal control or how collective efficacy and social capital are distinctive from, and truly represent an improvement over, ties and control (Kubrin, Stucky, & Krohn, 2008, p. 99; see also Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a). Conceptual fuzziness has meant that some studies use survey questions that may reflect any or all of the concepts, depending on how one looks at things. What are needed are precise definitions, clearer distinctions, and better operationalization of concepts in studies. As Kubrin and Weitzer (2003a) argue,

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

A second ongoing challenge facing disorganization researchers has to do with the question, what is a neighborhood? Both in terms of conceptualization and operationalization, social disorganization theory has struggled with the notion of "neighborhood." Conceptually, there is wide variation across individuals in what constitutes a neighborhood, including their own. Even when asked about their own neighborhood, there is wide variation across individual responses about the conceptual definition of a neighborhood. If we were to ask five residents living in the same apartment building to define their neighborhood, I am sure we would get five different answers. In terms of operationalization, neighborhoods are often measured as the block, block group, census tract, or even police precinct in which one resides. Apart from uncertainty as to whether these accurately constitute one's neighborhood in any true sense, officially designated units such as these are meaningless to most residents. How can many of us identify the census tract number where we live, let alone the boundaries of the tract indicating where one ends and another begins? Perhaps more importantly, as Bursik (1988) notes,

> It is fairly easy to derive measures of the ecological dynamics pertinent to the social disorganization model (e.g., socioeconomic composition, population turnover, and population heterogeneity) from published census materials. This is not the case for the concept of social disorganization itself, however... (p. 530).

In short, the issue of what constitutes a neighborhood and how neighborhoods should be measured in studies has not been fully resolved.

A third ongoing issue relates to the theory's reliance on official data. All but a handful of studies use official data to document crime patterns across neighborhoods when testing social disorganization theory. Even Shaw and McKay (1942) relied on official court records to determine the distribution of juvenile court cases and commitments. Yet few scholars have considered the extent to which neighborhoods themselves are a consideration in police and court decisions and there is a significant degree of community-specific bias that may exist within police departments (Bursik, 1988). In other words, some neighborhoods are more likely to be "over-policed" than others are. Thus, the assumption that policing practices do not vary across neighborhoods is unfounded. The question remains: Given variation, how might policing practices influence official data collection? Whatever the answer, it is clear that official rates represent a mixture of differentials in neighborhood behavior patterns, neighborhood propensities to report behavior, and neighborhood-specific police orientations. Thus, an ideal situation involves collecting alternative indicators of neighborhood crime and delinquency based on self-report or victimization data to be used in conjunction with official records. Luckily, such data collection efforts are occurring more and more through the use of large-scale surveys in cities throughout the United States (e.g., The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, The Seattle Neighborhood and Crime Project, and The Neighborhood Project in Denver, Chicago, and Philadelphia).

A reliance on official data has also led to researchers' inability to empirically test the mediating factors linking neighborhood characteristics such as poverty to crime rates in disorganization studies. Thus, a final ongoing challenge has to do with researchers' ability to empirically test the mediating factors of social ties, social control, collective efficacy, and social capital. Byrne and Sampson (1986) noted that a major conceptual limitation of ecological research is the decided lack of attention paid to the processes that mediate the effect of community characteristics. Twenty years later, things have not changed much. Only a handful of studies (e.g., Elliott et al., 1996; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Warner & Rountree, 1997) successfully document the theoretical processes laid out by social disorganization theory—namely that exogenous characteristics of neighborhoods lead to crime and delinquency precisely because they affect social ties and informal social control. In fact, the findings from this small but critical literature suggest that this process may not be so straightforward. A finding emerging from the literature with increasing frequency is that social ties may not play the expected role (see Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, pp. 375–379).

NEW CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The challenges described above are not new to social disorganization theory. Researchers have worked hard and continue to work hard to resolve many of these issues. As the theory develops and progresses and as our society evolves over time, new challenges and issues emerge alongside the older ones. Although there are many new challenges now confronting the theory that deserve discussion, I will present two of the most critical. The resolution of these issues will greatly affect the direction social disorganization theory will take in the upcoming decades.

The first pressing issue facing researchers is related to the role of neighborhood subcultures in social disorganization theory. Note that neighborhood subculture was a key interest for Shaw and McKay (1942) and other early theorists. As indicated earlier, a key question for these

researchers had to do with how neighborhood subcultures became entrenched and further affected rates of delinquency. They questioned, Under what economic and social conditions does crime develop as a social tradition and become embodied in a system of criminal values?

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

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

Although the role of neighborhood culture was evident in the explanations of early disorganization researchers, over time, this component of the theory became less and less important. In fact, later work downplayed cultural influences, and researchers focused almost exclusively on structural factors and their relationship to neighborhood crime rates. Perhaps the most ardent voice against incorporating culture came from Kornhauser (1978), who wrote, "So abused have been the concepts of culture and subculture in the explanation of delinquency that if these terms were struck from the lexicon of criminologists, the study of delinquency would benefit from their absence" (p. 253). Sampson and Bean (2006) further characterize Kornhauser's position:

> In a blistering critique, Kornhauser argued that so-called deviant cultures are entirely epiphenomenal. No one truly values crime, chaos, and misery. The cultural particularities of criminals are pseudocultures, the stories people tell to account for their disgrace after the fact. The real causes of petty crime, violence, and unemployment operate in the structural realm of networks, labor markets, and human capital. When hardened criminals glorify their choices and disavow the straight life, their words are only sour grapes. Obviously, the causal power of culture in this view is weak to nonexistent (p. 22).

Most recently, however, cultural explanations have been resurrected in studies of social disorganization, which, along with others, I argue is a positive development. Cultural explanations are increasingly being incorporated into standard disorganization models to predict and understand neighborhood crime rates. Research in this area is new, so there is much to be worked out with respect to the precise role that subculture occupies in the theory. Yet researchers are beginning to sort out these issues. Kubrin and Weitzer (2003a, p. 379–381) discuss, at length, the varying ways in which culture may be (re)incorporated into explanations by considering alternative cultural explanations. They first describe the oppositional subculture model, where it is argued that lower class communities generate distinctive values and beliefs that endorse

aggressive behavior and law violation (p. 379). These values and beliefs (1) are in direct opposition to conventional, middle-class values which typically support conformity to legal norms, (2) are passed down from generation to generation, and, perhaps most importantly, (3) are relatively independent of structural factors (i.e., they are not seen as stemming from structural conditions such as poverty). Wolfgang and Ferracuti's (1967) subculture of violence thesis is most representative of this argument but other examples exist (e.g., Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958).

A second perspective on the role of culture discussed by Kubrin and Weitzer (2003a) takes a different approach than the first, by arguing that, in fact, residents in high-crime areas do not develop oppositional subcultures but instead share conventional values, including the desire for a crime-free community (p. 379). That is, there is general consensus in community beliefs, norms, and values, including those concerning crime. It is argued that rather than condoning crime, members of disadvantaged communities have a degree of fatalism or moral cynicism about crime, viewing it as inevitable in their communities. As a result, crime in these communities is less vigorously condemned by residents. Stated alternatively, in neighborhoods where conventional values are attenuated, "High crime rates exist. . .not because oppositional values are anchored in the community but because limited opportunities make it difficult for residents to pursue conventional goals and because they lack the willingness or capacity to prevent deviance" (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, p. 379). In short, in this explanation for the role of culture, it is assumed "residents have weaker cultural support for exerting social control over others" (p. 379).

A final perspective suggests a model of the cultural order in disadvantaged neighborhoods as both diverse and structurally conditioned. Concerning diversity, this model refutes the notion of a singular neighborhood subculture. Instead, there is diversity and conflict with respect to community values, beliefs, and ideas—even concerning crime. Stated another way,

> . . .disadvantage not only deprives neighborhoods of resources that may be mobilized to control crime, but also increases social isolation among residents, which impedes communication and interferes with their capacity to pursue common values. . .At the same time, some residents, who lack conventional opportunities for economic advancement and status attainment, embrace unconventional values and pursue alternative routes to gaining status and prestige, which may include criminal acts (Kubrin & Weitzer 2003a, p. 380).

This diversity has been documented in several studies of high-crime communities where researchers find evidence of cynicism regarding legal norms (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998) and the emergence of a "street code" that legitimizes crime and violence in certain situations (Anderson, 1999; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Horowitz, 1983; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003b; Stewart & Simons, 2006). It is important to note these studies depict violent neighborhoods as culturally heterogeneous, "with residents who gravitate mainly towards the mainstream but switch between competing sets of cultural values depending on the situation" (Sampson & Bean, 2006, p. 22). Beyond diversity in values and beliefs, this perspective also maintains that violent cultural reactions and the street code occur in direct response to disadvantaged structural conditions within those communities. That is, culture is viewed as an adaptation to structural circumstances.

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

Kubrin

pposi-
ns, (2)
itively
litions
repre-

) takes
do not
e for a
norms,
.mem-
crime,
is less
ntional
ored in
onven-
brin &
I "resi-

rhoods
notion
pect to

٠٢
m
d-
iy

where
, 1998)
uations
Stewart
cultur-
switch
; Bean,
hat vio-
ructural
ructural

.g abun-
p. 380)
ved, we
ling the
specify

The second pressing issue facing social disorganization researchers today has to do with immigration patterns in the United States. Many scholars in the new millennium believe that "the latest wave of immigration is likely to have a more significant impact on society than any other social issue" (Martinez & Lee, 2000, p. 487). According to social disorganization theory, increased immigration to American cities should result in higher crime rates in those neighborhoods where immigrants are most likely to settle. Why is this? In the theory's original formulation, immigration was considered a disorganizing force that contributed to community crime rates. It is argued that immigration increases residential instability and racial and ethnic heterogeneity, both of which weaken informal social control, thereby increasing crime (Lee & Martinez, 2002, p. 366).

Concerning instability, theorists maintain that social change of any kind, including change resulting from an influx of immigrants into a community, can lead to the breakdown of community social institutions, which are needed to prevent crime (Lee, Martinez, & Rosenfeld, 2001, p. 562; see also Mears, 2002, p. 284; Reid, Weiss, Adelman, & Jaret, 2005, p. 760). Along these lines, Bankston (1998) notes that heightened population turnover as a result of immigration to an area can destabilize local institutions and reduce informal social control. Recall the earlier discussion on the reasons why residential instability and crime are related according to disorganization theorists.

Concerning racial and ethnic heterogeneity, the argument is quite similar. Racial and ethnic heterogeneity are theorized to affect the strength and salience of informal social control within communities (Taylor & Covington, 1993; Warner & Rountree, 1997). Theorists posit that in communities with diverse racial groups living in close proximity, interaction between members will be low, or at least lower than in racially homogenous neighborhoods (Gans, 1968). Heterogeneity can also undermine ties between neighbors, limiting their ability to agree on a common set of values or to solve commonly experienced problems (Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978), including those related to crime. Reasons point to cultural differences between racial groups, language incompatibility, and the fact that individuals prefer members of their own race to members of different races (Blau & Schwartz, 1984, p. 14; Gans, 1968). As a result, according to the theory, in heterogeneous neighborhoods, individuals are less likely to look out for one another and will not (to the same extent as in racially homogenous neighborhoods) take an interest in their neighbors' activities. Informal social control will be limited and crime rates should be higher. As Kornhauser (1978) notes, "Heterogeneity impedes communication and thus obstructs the quest to solve common problems and reach common goals" (p. 78). Indeed, studies have found that racial heterogeneity contributes to higher community crime rates (Chamlin, 1989; Kubrin, 2000; Smith & Jarjoura, 1988; Warner & Pierce, 1993; Warner & Rountree, 1997). In essence, social disorganization's traditional approach to immigration and resulting residential instability and racial and ethnic heterogeneity is that immigration serves as a disorganizing force that can lead to heightened crime rates in communities.

Despite these claims, over the years there has been empirical evidence that finds that, in fact, immigration and crime do *not* go hand in hand. More recently, studies of neighborhood crime rates find the exact opposite of that predicted by social disorganization theory—that immigration into an area is unrelated and in some cases negatively related to crime rates, controlling for a host of other factors. For example, in their study of Miami, El Paso, and San Diego neighborhoods, Lee et al. (2001) discover that, controlling for other factors, immigration generally does not increase homicide levels among Latinos and African-Americans. In a related study of black homicide in the northern section of Miami (an area that has received numerous recent arrivals

from Haiti and contains an established African-American community), Lee and Martinez (2002, p. 372) likewise find the presence of immigrants does not appear to have the disorganizing effect predicted by social disorganization theory. And in a third study comparing and contrasting Asian homicide in the three largest Asian communities in San Diego, Lee and Martinez (2006, p. 109) yet again conclude that recent immigration does not have the deleterious consequences expected by disorganization and related theories. The implication from all of these studies is that community social control may actually be strengthened by immigration rather than compromised.

How are we to understand the current research findings on immigration in the context of social disorganization theory? Did social disorganization theory get it wrong? Or is the theory simply "out of date" with what is happening today in terms of immigration patterns, neighborhood change, and crime? Whatever the answer, the findings from this small but significant literature have led many to reconsider the role of immigration and its effects on community crime rates beyond the traditional disorganization argument. Martinez (2006) claims,

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

Social disorganization theory is a staple of criminological thought and extremely important because of its contribution to understanding the distribution of crime across geographic areas, notably communities. It was created during a time when researchers wanted to understand how large-scale changes within the city of Chicago corresponded to changes in crime rates, particularly in certain areas of Chicago. Its relevance to cities and neighborhoods today is no less apparent. As cities and neighborhoods continue to grow, shift, and evolve over time, so too will social disorganization theory develop and evolve to more accurately reflect the processes at work.

Social disorganization researchers must always keep their pulse on "the growth of the city," as early Chicago School researchers Park and Burgess (1925) successfully did.

REFERENCES

Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the street*. New York: Norton.

Bankston, C. L., III. (1998). Youth gangs and the new second generation: A review essay. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 3*, 35–45.

Bellair, P. E. (2000). Informal surveillance and street crime: A complex relationship. *Criminology, 38*, 137–167.

Blau, P. M., & Schwartz, J. E. (1984). *Crosscutting social circles*. Orlando, FL: Academic.

Bursik, R. J. (1988). Social disorganization: Problems and prospects. *Criminology, 26*, 519–551.

Byrne, J. M., & Sampson, R. J. (1986). *The social ecology of crime*. New York: Springer Verlag.

Chamlin, M. B. (1989). A macro social analysis of the change in robbery and homicide rates: Controlling for static and dynamic effects. *Sociological Focus, 22*, 275–286.

Cohen, A. K. (1955). *Delinquent boys*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*, S95–120.

Elliott, D. S., Wilson, W. J., Huizinga, D., Sampson, R. J., Elliott, A., & Rankin, B. (1996). The effects of neighborhood disadvantage on adolescent development. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 33*, 389–426.

Fagan, J., & Wilkinson, D. (1998). Guns, youth violence, and social identity in inner cities. In M. Tonry & M. Moore (Eds.), *Crime and justice, Volume 24* (pp. 105–188). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gans, H. (1968). The balanced community: Homogeneity or heterogeneity in residential areas? In H. Gans (Ed.), *People and plans: Essays on urban problems and solutions* (pp. 161–181). New York: Basic Books.

Greenberg, S., Rohe, W. M., & Williams, J. R. (1982). Safe and secure neighborhoods: Physical characteristics and informal territorial control in high and low crime neighborhoods. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.

Horowitz, R. (1983). *Honor and the American dream: Culture and identity in a Chicano community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Kornhauser, R. D. (1978). *Social sources of delinquency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kubrin, C. E. (2000). Racial heterogeneity and crime: Measuring static and dynamic effects. In D. A. Chekki (Ed.), *Community structure and dynamics at the dawn of the new millennium* (pp. 189–218). Stamford, CO: JAI Press.

Kubrin, C. E., & Weitzer, R. (2003a). New directions in social disorganization theory. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 40*, 374–402.

Kubrin, C. E., & Weitzer, R. (2003b). Retaliatory homicide: Concentrated disadvantage and neighborhood culture. *Social Problems, 50*, 157–180.

Kubrin, C. E., Stucky, T. D., & Krohn, M. D. (2008). *Researching theories of crime and deviance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lee, M. T., & Martinez, R. (2006). Immigration and Asian homicide patterns in urban and suburban San Diego. In R. Martinez & A. Valenzuela (Eds.), *Immigration and crime: Race, ethnicity, and violence* (pp. 90–116). New York: New York University Press.

Lee, M. T., & Martinez, R. (2002). Social disorganization revisited: Mapping the recent immigration and black homicide relationship in northern Miami. *Sociological Focus, 35*, 363–380.

Lee, M. T., Martinez, R., & Rosenfeld, R. (2001). Does immigration increase homicide? Negative evidence from three border cities. *Sociological Quarterly, 42*, 559–580.

Martinez, R. (2006). Coming to America: The impact of the new immigration on crime. In R. Martinez Jr. & A. Valenzuela Jr. (Eds.), *Immigration and crime: Race, ethnicity, and violence* (pp. 1–19). New York: New York University Press.

Martinez, R., & Lee, M. T. (2000). On immigration and crime. *Criminal justice 2000: Vol. 1. The nature of crime: Continuity and change* (pp. 485–524). Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

Mears, D. P. (2002). Immigration and crime: What's the connection? *Federal Sentencing Reporter, 14*, 284–288.

Miller, W. B. (1958). Lower class culture as a generating milieu for gang delinquency. *Journal of Social Issues, 14*, 5–19.

Park, R. E., & Burgess, E. W. (1925). The growth of the city: An introduction to a research project. In R. E. Park, E. W. Burgess, & R. D. McKenzie (Eds.), *The city* (Chapter 2). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reid, L. W., Weiss, H. E., Adelman, R. M., & Jaret, C. (2005). The immigration-crime relationship: Evidence across US metropolitan areas. *Social Science Research, 3*, 757–780.

Sampson, R. J. (1987). Communities and crime. In M. R. Gottfredson & T. Hirschi (Eds.), *Positive criminology* (pp. 91–114). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sampson, R. J., & Bartusch, D. J. (1998). Legal cynicism and (subcultural?) tolerance of deviance: The neighborhood context of racial differences. *Law and Society Review, 32*, 777–804.

Sampson, R. J. & Bean, L. (2006). Cultural mechanisms and killing fields: A revised theory of community-level racial inequality. In R. D. Peterson, L. J. Krivo, & J. Hagan (Eds.), *The many colors of crime: Inequalities of race, ethnicity, and crime in America* (pp. 8–36). New York: New York University Press.

Sampson, R. J., Groves, W. B. (1989). Community structure and crime: Testing social disorganization theory. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*, 774–802.

Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science, 277*, 918–924.

Shaw, C., & McKay, H. (1942). *Juvenile delinquency in urban areas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, D. A., & Jarjoura, R. G. (1988). Social structure and criminal victimization. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 25*, 27–52.

Stark, R. (1987). Deviant places: A theory of the ecology of crime. *Criminology, 25*, 893–911.

Stewart, E. A., & Simons, R. L. (2006). Structure and culture in African-American adolescent violence: A partial test of the code of the street thesis. *Justice Quarterly, 23*, 1–33.

Taylor, R. B., & Covington, J. (1993). Community structural change and fear of crime. *Social Problems, 40*, 374–395.

Warner, B. D., & Pierce, G. L. (1993). Reexamining social disorganization theory using calls to the police as a measure of crime. *Criminology, 31*, 493–517.

Warner, B. D., & Rountree, P. W. (1997). Local social ties in a community and crime model: Questioning the systemic nature of informal social control. *Social Problems, 44*, 520–536.

Wolfgang, M. E., & Ferracuti, F. (1967). *The subculture of violence: Towards and integrated theory in criminology*. London: Tavistock.