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Images of Community in Criminological Thought

Where in the city do you live? The answer to this question should be simple to provide, but it holds profound social implications. Most of us think carefully about where we might purchase a home or even rent an apartment. As we well understand, our place of residence can determine in important ways who our neighbors will be, where we will shop and what restaurants we will frequent, and which schools our children will attend. Most salient, where we reside will also affect whether the threat of criminal victimization is a daily worry or an occasional nuisance that rarely intrudes into our lives or consciousness—except perhaps when we are watching the news and learn about some awful crime in one of those "other neighborhoods."

To phrase it a touch differently, we choose to live in a particular *community* because of its reputation for a certain quality of life. We conduct an informal factor analysis—assuming that nice neighbors, good schools, well-kept houses, and a safe environment coalesce into a restricted geographical area. But, of course, not everyone can reside in such a pleasant place. In the "big sort," as Bill Bishop (2008) calls it, some of us end up in communities in which we do not know if we can trust our neighbors, must enroll our kids in schools that send few students to college, endure dilapidated housing, have our property stolen, and witness dead bodies lying on the street surrounded by police officers. There are many reasons why some among us lose the community lottery—lack of financial resources, the custom of living where we have always lived, or perhaps the barriers that still make it uncomfortable for people of color to move into "White" neighborhoods.

These observations capture what we suspect is widely known: that crime is not evenly distributed across the urban landscape. In fact, this pattern has been shown consistently since scholars, as far back as the 1800s, first started to map crime events across space. Using computers and modern data technology, contemporary studies confirm this conclusion. Criminal conduct is highly concentrated in certain neighborhoods (Weisburd, Groff, and Yang, 2012). This is not to say that lawlessness—especially minor delinquent acts, drug use, domestic disputes that turn violent, tax evasion, and perhaps other white-collar crimes—is not common in other social domains. But when it comes to predatory street crime, the "hot spots" for these offenses are located only in certain communities.

Why is this so? This project is an intellectual history of the answer that American criminologists have given to this question over the past century. At different points in time, particular *images of communities* have emerged. These images have reflected empirical reality, but they also have been social constructions—ideas that flourished because they resonated with how scholars understood the urban world. These images also have proven consequential because they have influenced which theories arose and earned allegiance and because they have justified certain crime-control policies but not others.

In short, our goal is to tell a story—to present a narrative that explains how images of communities and crime have arisen but then, in turn, have been succeeded by alternative ideas about why some neighborhoods produce so much crime. We should caution that once set forth, theoretical paradigms—including those in the community area—rarely are falsified and relegated to the criminological dustbin. Such perspectives linger for decades on end and, at times, reemerge as competing explanatory frameworks. In the end, theories never seem to perish. Rather, criminology is a field that accumulates perspectives but, at any given time, tends to pay attention mainly to the latest model.

In the remainder of this chapter, we outline the seven major images that have shaped the development of theory, research, and policy in the area of communities and crime. This introduction is intended to provide a road map that will help readers negotiate their travels through the remainder of our book. As will soon be apparent, each image is granted its own chapter in the pages ahead. Before embarking on this excursion through the intellectual history of the study of communities and crime, two issues merit comments.

First, it might seem a touch odd that we have not provided a clear definition of the organizing concept of this venture—*community* (or *neighborhood*, a term we at times use as its synonym). Our reticence reflects the conceptual ambiguity that prevails within criminology, where no supreme body exists to settle such definitional issues. We seem to be in that awkward scientific developmental stage where the concept is defined on the following basis: "Well, we all know a community when we see one!" In reality, researchers

have operationalized *community* in units as small as a street block to as large as a city (and the metropolitan region around it). Census tracks are often used as proxies for communities, but mainly because they offer a geographic area on which the government collects much data. The best we can do at this point is to caution readers to remain attuned to the unit of analysis that is being used when theorists cite research in favor of their ideas. We revisit this issue in Chapter 9.

Second, the community images captured in criminology's major theoretical perspectives emerged in a particular sociohistorical context. In that sense, they were a product of their time and resonated with scholars because they seemed to "make sense." Any categorization of urban historical eras is challenging because the lines demarcating one period to the next are fuzzy rather than specific. Even so, it is possible to outline three general periods that are distinct in the sense that they experienced unique urban developments.

Lasting roughly from 1920 into the 1960s, the first era might best be labeled *the growth of the city*. The central challenge that urban residents faced was how to integrate the mass immigration, mostly of ethnic Europeans, into the inner city. Theories emphasizing social disorganization, culture conflict, and the ameliorative effects of systemic ties arose as ways of understanding this immense social change. Lasting roughly from the middle 1960s through the 1990s, a second era might be labeled *the decline of the city*. During this time, inner-city neighborhoods faced the emergence of racially segregated hyper-ghettos, deindustrialization and concentrated economic disadvantage, physical deterioration and social disorder, and rising drug markets and violent crime. Scholars often prioritized one of these conditions in arguing why the nation's cities were burdened by decline, disorder, and crime. Most of the theories reviewed in this book were developed in response to conditions of urban decline. Finally, lasting from around 2000 to the present, a third era might be labeled the *resurgence of the city*. With violent and other offenses declining and the attractiveness of urban life rising, this era offers a more optimistic view of how to address both emergent and enduring pockets of crime. It is now believed that residents have the capacity to bind together collectively to deal effectively with urban problems, including crime, despite the increasing complexity and anonymity of urbanicity.

Seven Images

Community as Socially Disorganized

Within American criminology, the potential importance of community in crime causation was established in brilliant fashion in the first half of the twentieth century by Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay. These researchers

would become part of the Chicago School of criminology, which included sociologists—most raised in rural areas—who were drawn to the city to study the influx of new peoples and the challenges these groups experienced in the American urban environment. As the name Chicago School hints, these scholars mainly were drawn to Chicago and were affiliated, at one point or another, with the University of Chicago.

As they entered the study of crime, Shaw and McKay were well aware of rival theories, sometimes called "neo-Lombrosian" (Sutherland, 1947, p. 103), that sought to locate the causes of crime in individual pathology. In this view, slums were crime ridden because they were populated by the losers in the evolutionary sweepstakes—the defective members of the human species whose frailties led them to the bottom reaches of the social order. With social Darwinism as a guide, might it not be better to admit that these wicked souls constituted a dangerous class that we might hope to contain in their slums or, if necessary, behind high and sturdy prison walls?

In Shaw and McKay's view, however, such thinking ignored two important realities. First, slum residents—many recent arrivals to the shores of America—were placed into a community whose institutions were crumbling and where criminal traditions flourished. From their vantage point, lives in crime were produced not by individual traits but by residing in an environment that was *socially disorganized*. Second, as incoming groups became adjusted to American city life, they moved away from the slums and into more organized neighborhoods. If such peoples were marked by pathology, high involvement in crime should follow with them. But, alas, this did not occur: their crime rates fell as they made the transition into stable areas. Community context, not people, were criminogenic.

Thus, the image of the community as socially disorganized served both as a powerful antidote to neo-Lombrosian ideas and as a powerful explanation for why crime was concentrated in slums but not elsewhere. This image also was pregnant with the solution to crime: wait for racial/ethnic groups to move to organized communities and, in the interim, work diligently to bolster the organization of disorganized areas (e.g., through the Chicago Area Project).

Community as a System

As criminology moved into the 1960s, social disorganization theory did not vanish, but it lost most of its adherents and no longer shaped research. Although it was once seen as a defense against attempts to pathologize the disadvantaged, now it was criticized itself for being class-biased. The use of the term *disorganized* was seen as value laden and demeaning; it was argued that slum life was not disorganized but merely organized differ-

ently. Leftist scholars leveled another charge. In their view, social disorganization theory erred in ignoring the powerful interests that perpetuated urban ghettos. Slums were not produced by a natural process of the in- and out-migration of groups but were manufactured by political decisions that determined the allocation of state resources and the tolerance of residential segregation.

Finally, scholars moved away from social disorganization theory because studying communities was difficult. For one thing, using communities as a unit of analysis meant that an "N" must involve tens of communities; for another thing, the information available to measure community-level processes was in short supply. Instead, following the strategy that Travis Hirschi (1969) employed in his classic *Causes of Delinquency*, these scholars increasingly relied on the new survey technology of the self-report questionnaire to test individual-level theories. Such surveys of high school students could, with relative ease, produce data sets that had an N exceeding one thousand respondents and that could yield numerous publications—and in so doing earn authors tenure, among other academic rewards.

In 1978, however, Ruth Rosner Kornhauser published *Social Sources of Delinquency*. In this dense book, Kornhauser offered a withering critique of the major theoretical paradigms. But in so doing, she also highlighted the potential theoretical power of one version of Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory. Kornhauser had little use for their insights on how criminal traditions took hold in "delinquency areas" and were transmitted from one generation to the next (e.g., from older siblings, gangs, neighborhood criminal networks). Instead, she made a persuasive case that neighborhood variations in crime rates could be linked to the capacity of residents to realize their collective goals—such as a safe environment. Close organization permitted goals to be achieved; disorganization meant that neighbors would lack the trust and cohesion to exercise informal control over disruptive youths and other criminal influences.

Inspired by Kornhauser, a number of scholars soon attempted to revive disorganization theory under a new label: "the systemic model." For them, the community was now imagined as a system of social networks and associational ties. Using this framework, social disorganization was seen as the inability of a community to regulate itself through effective networks and ties. Work in this tradition showed how community disadvantage, heterogeneity, and population turnover affect the breadth and depth of various associational ties and social networks presumed necessary for effective informal social control. These ties and networks, in turn, were posited to influence community rates of crime.

Importantly, in the original social disorganization theory, Shaw and McKay focused mainly on the lives of delinquent youths—what they experienced

in the slums, including adults' inability to control them and their exposure to flourishing criminal traditions. In the systemic model, however, the focus shifted away from the offender to the presumably good people of the community. Crime would be prevented if community conditions allowed the nonoffenders to interact with, like, and trust one another. In crime-ridden neighborhoods, the systemic model offered the image of residents staying home at night rather than venturing out to community meetings, locking doors rather than chatting with those close by, and "not getting involved" when trouble arose.

Community as the Truly Disadvantaged

In 1987, another classic work appeared that shaped how criminologists came to understand inner-city communities—William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Wilson was not a criminologist, and this volume touched on crime mostly in passing. But it nonetheless conveyed a reality about the urban core that resonated with a number of scholars.

Wilson was writing at a time when the United States was moving into a postindustrial era, which included competition across the globe. When he looked into slum areas, he was not reluctant to document the breakdown of core social institutions and to call these areas "disorganized." If he was taking a value-laden stand, so be it. But Wilson did not take the next step of blaming inner-city residents for their plight; he did not pathologize them. Something else was at work.

Thus, he carefully illuminated how the prevailing community fabric was frayed, if not torn asunder, by the collapse of the economy—by deindustrialization. He showed how urban communities had lost tens of thousands of well-paying jobs, as factories closed for good or moved to low-wage states or foreign lands. With employment in short supply, those who could escape the community typically did. Those staying behind were left without work and the means to marry and support a family. The slum increasingly became much like a prison, with its populace isolated from the rest of society. Life became harsh, with these disadvantaged people subjected, to use Jonathan Kozol's (1991) words, to "savage inequalities."

This image of the inner-city neighborhood as a receptacle for the truly disadvantaged sparked an important line of research. Scholars began to probe how poverty, inequality, resource deprivation, and concentrated disadvantage were the underlying sources of cultural and structural conditions in communities that nourished crime. This image also led to calls for social policies that would protect the truly disadvantaged from the kind of extreme market economy that privileges economic interests over human needs.

Community as a Criminal Culture

The ascendance of the systemic model and of deprivation theories relegated interest in criminal culture to a secondary status. Advocates of the systemic model implied—or directly argued—that traditions supportive of crime either did not exist or, if they could be documented, had little impact on behavior. For them, if beliefs mattered at all, it was because conventional values had been attenuated and thus had lost their power to regulate conduct. Other scholars recognized the existence of criminal cultures (or subcultures) but saw them as an intervening variable between structural inequalities and criminal conduct. That is, if individuals believed that breaking the law was a good thing, these attitudes would encourage such behavior. But this proximate cause of crime was ultimately controlled by the more distal root causes. Without the underlying presence of resource deprivation, antisocial definitions would cease to exist.

It should be noted, again, that culture played a central role in the social disorganization theory of Shaw and McKay. Social disorganization and the breakdown of control might have allowed criminal traditions to arise in slum neighborhoods. But once in existence, Shaw and McKay believed, these traditions took on a life of their own and became a powerful source of sustained criminal activity in a community. Again, subsequent theorists downplayed the independent, crime-generation effects of culture.

In 1999, however, interest in culture was dramatically increased with the publication of Elijah Anderson's ethnographic study, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. Anderson certainly noted that structural disadvantage was the prime source of cultural values. But having confessed that much, he spent the bulk of his book detailing how a set of beliefs—which he termed the "code of the street"—powerfully shaped how youths and others acted in public spaces. In particular, this code called for the use of violence when an individual faced status degradation and a loss of respect. Even for youngsters from so-called decent families, the code ruled how they must act in order to avoid being seen as weak and as an attractive target for victimization.

In Anderson's theory, criminal culture is not treated as epiphenomenal or as being of minor causal significance. In the inner city, residents' moral lives were often dictated by the code and its mandates. To ignore this reality was to misunderstand why crime—especially violence—flourishes in these neighborhoods.

Community as a Broken Window

In a famous essay, James Q. Wilson and George Kelling (1982) introduced their "broken windows theory." They asked what would happen if a house

had a broken window that was never fixed. Soon, they hypothesized, passersby would conclude that this was a house that nobody cared about. The broken window thus sent a message to onlookers that no consequences would befall those who tossed a rock and broke another window. Not long thereafter, the house would be in complete disrepair. If only that original broken window had been replaced, then this descent into decline would not have occurred.

In a way, this is a variant of social disorganization theory in that the breakdown of order—often called "incivility" in this perspective—is held to breed fear and crime. However, a key difference must be noted. For Wilson and Kelling, the chief source of incivility or disorganization is not macro-level change or structural inequality. Instead, it is a failure of will and prudence on the part of criminal justice officials to crack down on minor forms of deviance—"broken windows"—that sends the message that more serious forms of lawlessness are permissible. In this perspective, formal social control is the basis for informal social control.

The image of the inner-city community as a broken window earned allegiance at a time in the 1980s and early 1990s when urban violence—especially involving drug markets selling substances such as crack cocaine—spiked and seemed intractable. How would it be possible to make city streets safe again? Wilson and Kelling had an attractive answer. They did not call for massive social welfare expenditures or even massive imprisonment of criminals. Instead, they argued that if police would do their job, the tide could be turned, and the good people could retake their community from the bad people. Thus, they were part of a policy movement that asked police to have "zero tolerance" for minor incivilities such as jaywalking, defacing walls with graffiti, littering, loitering, and public intoxication. With no broken windows left in disrepair, the public space in neighborhoods would become inviting to law-abiding citizens and uninviting to the criminal crowd. The return of a critical mass of good people to the streets would thus increase informal social control. Crime, as a result, would spiral downward.

Community as Criminal Opportunity

Community theories are primarily interested in why offenders are drawn disproportionately from neighborhoods marked by certain social conditions. The challenge is to discover what these residents experience that creates within them the motivation or propensity to break the law. Another group of scholars, however, argued that an alternative question is equally, if not more, important: Where do *crime events* occur within communities?

This inquiry was important because it caused scholars' attention to change from *people* to *places*. Of course, no crime will transpire if there is no

motivated offender. But it is equally true that no crime will transpire is there is no criminal opportunity available. Places where crime events concentrate—often called "hot spots"—thus must be geographical locations that motivated offenders can easily access and locations where opportunities for predatory acts exist.

What, then, is an opportunity? As advanced by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979) in their routine activity theory, opportunity consists of two components. "Target attractiveness" is the first component. When burglarizing a house, for example, jewelry or a computer will be more attractive than a refrigerator, which is harder to transport and harder to fence. "Guardianship" is the second component. An empty house with no security system can be burglarized, but a house filled with family members and perhaps a barking dog and whose entry points are locked and alarmed is too protected to victimize.

Hot spots for crime thus tend to be places that contain attractive targets and lack capable guardianship. Only the presence of motivated offenders is needed to make crime events a regular occurrence. Still, more than this is involved. For example, how do motivated offenders find opportunities and select their targets? What is it about certain environments that makes guardianship difficult? In particular, how does neighborhood context—including its physical features and the level of disorganization—contribute to the emergence and persistence of criminal opportunities (see Weisburd, Groff, and Yang, 2012; Wilcox, Land, and Hunt, 2003)?

Notably, this approach—sometimes called "environmental criminology" or "crime science" (Clarke, 2010)—holds important implications for reducing crime in communities. Because it is focused on crime events—the here and now of the criminal act—it focuses little on how to fix offenders. That task is best left to the correctional system. But it is possible to reduce crime meaningfully if the opportunity to victimize is knifed off—if targets can be made less attractive or if guardianship can be provided. Hot spots for crime offer inviting chances for intervention. Through careful problem-solving, it is possible to develop strategies to diminish the availability of criminal opportunity. This approach to making communities safer is typically called "situational crime prevention," and, as of this moment, it is growing in popularity as a means of controlling crime.

Community as Collective Efficacy

In 1997, Robert Sampson—joined by Stephen Raudenbush and Felton Earls—published an article in the prestigious journal *Science* showing that neighborhood conditions in Chicago were closely tied to rates of violent crime. At first glance, it seemed that Sampson and his colleagues were showing

once again that the social disorganization–systemic tradition retained explanatory relevance. On closer inspection, however, it became apparent that Sampson and his colleagues introduced a new conception of urban life: the city as "collective efficacy." Sampson (2012) would later articulate his theory more fully in his award-winning book, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*.

In his writings, Sampson recognized that the structural conditions that scholars reaching back to Shaw and McKay had identified intimately shaped inner-city areas. He grouped these under the conceptual umbrella of "concentrated disadvantage." But at this point, he reoriented criminological thinking in two important ways. First, he argued that the modern, post-industrial American city no longer consisted of tight-knit urban villages free from crime and disorganized areas racked by crime. The key to community safety thus was not whether people were friends who dined at one another's houses, bowled together, and participated in the same civic association. As Robert Putnam (2000) has shown, these kinds of interactions are in decline in the United States. Rather, the key to solving any problem—including a spike in crime—is the capacity of the community residents to come together and use their human, social, and political capital to secure appropriate interventions. Sampson called this capacity "collective efficacy." To act as a collective, residents had to be socially cohesive. To be effective, they had to have the shared expectation that they could rely on one another to act in concert. With regard to crime, this entailed the willingness to exert informal social control over disruptive and criminal elements.

Second, Sampson was suggesting that communities should not be seen simply as containers of good and bad conditions that then led ineluctably to low or high rates of crime. Again, he was mindful that concentrated disadvantage had a large impact on residents and on their ability to develop collective efficacy. Still, Sampson proposed that communities should not be seen as passive agents but as having the capacity to act on their own behalf. Just as self-efficacy allows for human agency, collective efficacy allows for community agency. The challenge is how to build collective efficacy within neighborhoods marked by concentrated disadvantage.

Overall, Sampson was offering a realistic but optimistic view of the contemporary American city. Enduring structural inequalities still existed and were the first link in a causal chain that resulted in high rates of crime in impoverished areas. But lowering crime no longer seemed to depend on re-creating ethnic urban villages where residents were closely tied by their heritage, religion, and institutional involvements. Rather, as is the case in many upscale urban neighborhoods, residents could live in relative anonymity but, when a problem such as crime emerged, could access their underlying collective efficacy to come together to achieve a solution. In this view, crime

presents difficult challenges, but it is not immune to neighbors' collective efforts to make their community safe.

An Enduring American Challenge

American cities are places where predatory crimes disproportionately occur. A not-so-hidden cost of residing in less-affluent neighborhoods is that street crime exists not at a distance but close enough to foster trepidation and potentially impose a life-changing harm. In this very real sense, crime is an enduring challenge for those living in urban America.

In this regard, we were tempted to subtitle our book *An Enduring Urban Challenge*. But we did not because what occurs within the confines of the slums is not detached from what occurs outside these areas. For one thing, the quality of urban life—how inner cities are imagined—can affect the quality of life in an entire metropolitan region. Is the "downtown" area to be feared or avoided? Is the city a source of pride and entertainment or a decaying symbol for the decline of the whole region? For another thing, what goes on inside high-crime communities is not fully determined by their residents. Social welfare and criminal justice policies are often imposed by "us" on "them." Thus, in the political process, do we ignore these neighborhoods, or do we allocate resources to improve living conditions and reduce crime?

The images we hold about inner-city communities shape how we choose to address the enduring challenge of crime in these neighborhoods. In the time ahead, therefore, it is important what images will direct these efforts. It is possible that older images—or a mixture of them—will rival one another, with no clear winner emerging. But it is also possible that fresh images will emerge. This possibility becomes more likely because the social context of urban America is not static but dynamic. In particular, so-called slum neighborhoods are experiencing divergent crime trends. Overall, rates of predatory offenses have declined so much that criminologists are unable to explain why. At the same time, some places within these communities seem resistant to this global trend and remain dangerous. In Chapter 9, we have much more to say about the future of communities and crime and about the enduring challenge this relationship poses for the nation.