

Figure 7.1

The Three Branches of Social Structure Theory

Social disorganization theory focuses on conditions in the environment:

- Deteriorated neighbourhoods
- Inadequate social control
- Law-violating gangs and groups
- Conflicting social values

Strain theory focuses on conflict between goals and means:

- Unequal distribution of wealth and power
- Frustration
- Alternative methods of achievement

Cultural deviance theory combines the other two:

- Development of subcultures as a result of disorganization and stress
- Subcultural values in opposition to conventional values

CRIME

Social disorganization theory, the first branch, focuses on conditions within the urban environment that affect crime rates. A disorganized area is one in which institutions of social control, such as the family, commercial establishments, and schools can no longer carry out their functions. Indicators include high unemployment and school dropout rates, deteriorated housing, low income levels, and large numbers of single-parent households. Residents in these areas experience conflict and despair, and antisocial behaviour flourishes.

Strain theory, the second branch of social structure theory, holds that crime is a product of conflict between goals and means. Although social and economic goals are common, the ability to obtain these goals is class-dependent. Most people desire wealth, material possessions, power, and prestige; however, the lower class is less able to achieve these symbols of success through conventional means. Consequently, they feel anger, frustration, and resentment: "strain." Either they can accept their condition as socially responsible citizens, or they can choose an alternative means of achieving success, such as theft, violence, or drug trafficking.

social disorganization theory An approach that looks at how neighbourhoods or areas are marked by culture conflict, lack of cohesiveness, transient population, insufficient social organizations, and anomie.

strain theory An approach that looks at the conflict caused when people cannot achieve their desires and goals through legitimate means, and are denied access to adequate educational opportunities and social support.

Cultural deviance theory, the third variation of structural theory, combines elements of both strain and social disorganization. According to this view, unique lower-class cultures develop in disorganized neighbourhoods, creating a unique set of values in conflict with conventional social norms. Criminal behaviour is an expression of conformity to lower-class subcultural values and traditions and not a rebellion against conventional society.

Each of these separate theories supports the view that socially isolated people, living in disorganized neighbourhoods, are the ones most likely to experience crime-producing social forces. We will now examine each branch of social structure theory in some detail.

Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization theory links crime rates to neighbourhood ecological characteristics. Crime rates are elevated in highly transient, mixed-use neighbourhoods (residential and commercial properties exist side by side) or changing neighbourhoods, in which the fabric of social life has become frayed. These localities are unable to provide essential services, such as education, health care, and proper housing, and experience significant levels of unemployment, single-parent families, and families on welfare (see Figure 7.2).

cultural deviance theory Criminal behaviour is in conformity to lower-class subcultural values that develop in disorganized neighbourhoods due to strain, values in conflict with conventional social norms.

Figure 7.2

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Figure 7.2 Social Disorganization Theory**Poverty**

- Development of isolated slums
- Lack of conventional social opportunities
- Racial and ethnic discrimination

Social disorganization

- Breakdown of social institutions and organizations, such as school and family
- Lack of informal social control

Breakdown of social control

- Development of gangs, groups
- Peer group replaces family and social institutions

Criminal areas

- Neighbourhood becomes crime-prone
- Stable pockets of delinquency develop
- Lack of external support and investment

Cultural transmission

Older youths pass norms (focal concerns) to younger generation, creating stable slum culture

Criminal careers

Most youths "age out" of delinquency, marry, and raise families, but some remain in a life of crime

Social disorganization theory views crime-ridden neighbourhoods as ones in which residents are trying to leave at the earliest opportunity. Common sources of control, such as the family, school, business community, and social service agencies, are weak and disorganized. Personal relationships are strained because neighbours are constantly moving. Constant resident

turnover weakens communications and blocks attempts at solving neighbourhood problems or establishing common goals.²⁰

Concentric Zone Theory

Social disorganization theory was popularized by the work of two Chicago sociologists, Shaw and McKay, who linked life in transitional slum areas to crime. They began their research during the 1920s while working for a state-supported social service agency.²¹

During this time, Chicago was experiencing a transition that was also taking place in many other urban areas: a mid-19th-century population expansion, fuelled by a dramatic influx of foreign-born immigrants. Congregating in the central city, the newcomers occupied the oldest housing.

As the city core began to deteriorate, the city's wealthy, established citizens became concerned about the moral fabric of society. The belief was widespread that immigrants from Europe were crime-prone and morally dissolute, and local groups were created for the purpose of "saving" the children of poor families from moral decadence.²² It was popular to view crime as the province of inferior racial and ethnic groups, but this belief was rooted in the anxiety over social changes altering the face of 20th-century society: industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and increased geographic and social mobility.

Transitional Neighbourhoods. Shaw and McKay explained crime and delinquency within the context of the changing urban environment and ecological development of the city. They said Chicago had developed into distinct "natural areas," some affluent and others wracked by extreme poverty. So-called transitional areas had high rates of population turnover and were incapable of inducing residents to remain and defend the neighbourhood against criminal groups.

Low rents in these areas attracted newly arrived immigrants from Europe who congregated in these **transitional neighbourhoods**. Their children were torn between being assimilated into a new culture and abiding by the traditional values of their parents. Informal social control mechanisms that had restrained behaviour in the "old country" or in rural areas were disrupted in the city.

In transitional slum areas, successive changes in the composition of the population, the disintegration of traditional cultures, the divergent cultural standards, and the gradual industrialization of the area resulted in

transitional neighbourhood An area undergoing a shift in population and structure, usually from middle-class residential to lower-class mixed use.



Comparative Criminology

Bridging the Racial Divide in America

William Julius Wilson, one of the most prominent sociologists in the U.S., has produced an impressive body of work that details racial problems and racial politics in American society. In 1987, he provided a description of the plight of the lowest levels of the underclass, which he labelled the **truly disadvantaged**. Wilson portrayed members of this group as socially isolated people who dwell in urban inner cities, occupy the bottom rung of the social ladder, and are the victims of discrimination. They live in areas in which the basic institutions of society—family, school, housing—have long since declined. Their decline triggers similar breakdowns in the strengths of inner-city areas, including the loss of community cohesion and the ability of people living in the area to control the flow of drugs and criminal activity. For example, in a more affluent area, neighbours might complain to parents that their children were acting out. In distressed areas, this element of informal social control may be absent because parents are under stress or all too often absent. These effects magnify the isolation of the underclass from mainstream society and promote a ghetto culture and behaviour.

Because the truly disadvantaged rarely come into contact

with the actual source of their oppression, they direct their anger and aggression at those with whom they are in close and intimate contact, such as neighbours, business-people, and landlords. Members of this group, plagued by under- or unemployment, begin to lose self-confidence, a feeling supported by the plight of kin and friendship groups who also experience extreme economic marginality. Self-doubt is a neighbourhood norm, overwhelming those forced to live in areas of concentrated poverty.

In his important book *When Work Disappears*, Wilson assesses the effect of joblessness and underemployment on residents in poor neighbourhoods on Chicago's south side. He argues that for the first time in the 20th century, most adults in inner-city ghetto neighbourhoods are not working during a typical week. He finds that inner-city life is only marginally affected by the surge in the nation's economy, which has been brought about by new industrial growth connected with technological development. Poverty in these inner-city areas is eternal and unchanging and, if anything, worsening as residents are further shut out of the economic mainstream.

Wilson focuses on the plight of the African-American community, which had enjoyed periods of relative prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s. He suggests that as

difficult as life was in the 1940s and 1950s for African-Americans, they at least had a reasonable hope of steady work. Now, because of the globalization of the economy, those opportunities have evaporated. Though in the past racial segregation had limited opportunity, growth in the manufacturing sector fuelled upward mobility and provided the foundation of today's African-American middle class. Those opportunities no longer exist as manufacturing plants have moved to inaccessible rural and overseas locations where the cost of doing business is lower. With manufacturing opportunities all but obsolete in the United States, service and retail establishments, which depend on blue-collar spending, have similarly disappeared, leaving behind an economy based on welfare and government supports. In less than 20 years, formerly active African-American communities have become crime-infested slums.

The hardships faced by residents in Chicago's south side are not unique to that community. Beyond sustaining inner-city poverty, the absence of employment opportunities has torn at the social fabric of the nation's inner-city neighbourhoods. Work helps socialize young people into the wider society, instilling in them such desirable values as hard work, caring, and respect for others. When work becomes scarce,

dissolution of neighbourhood culture and organization. The effectiveness of the neighbourhood as a unit of control and as a medium for the transmission of the moral standards of society was greatly diminished. High population turnover impeded the establishment of common values, and children had little access to the cultural

heritages of conventional society, leaving them more susceptible to the organized gangs that developed in these areas. Subcultural values developed, which were then passed down through succeeding generations through **cultural transmission**. Frederic Thrasher documents this well in his 1927 classic *The Gang*.

however, the discipline and structure it provides are absent. Community-wide underemployment destroys social cohesion, increasing the presence of neighbourhood social problems ranging from drug use to educational failure. Schools in these areas are unable to teach basic skills, and because desirable employment is lacking, there are few adults to serve as role models. In contrast to more affluent suburban households where daily life is organized around job and career demands, children in inner-city areas are not socialized in the workings of the mainstream economy.

In *The Bridge over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics*, Wilson expands on his views of race in contemporary society. He argues that despite economic gains, there is a growing inequality in American society, and ordinary families, of all races and ethnic origins, are suffering. Whites, Latinos, African-Americans, Asians, and Native-Americans must therefore begin to put aside their differences and concentrate more on what they have in common—their aspirations, problems, and hopes. There needs to be mutual cooperation across racial lines.

One reason for this set of mutual problems is that the government tends to aggravate rather than ease the financial stress being placed on ordinary families.

Monetary policy, trade policy, and tax policy are harmful to working-class families. A multiracial citizen's coalition could pressure national public officials to focus on the interests of ordinary people. As long as middle- and working-class groups are fragmented along racial lines, such pressure is impossible.

Wilson finds that racism is becoming more subtle and harder to detect. Whites believe that blacks are responsible for their inferior economic status because of their cultural traits. Because even affluent whites fear corporate downsizing, they are unwilling to vote for governmental assistance to the poor. Whites are continuing to be suburban dwellers, further isolating poor minorities in central cities and making their problems distant and unimportant. He continues to believe that the changing marketplace, with its reliance on sophisticated computer technologies, is continually decreasing demand for low-skilled workers, which impacts African-Americans more negatively than other better educated and affluent groups.

Wilson argues for a cross-race, class-based alliance of working- and middle-class Americans to pursue policies that will benefit them rather than the affluent. These include full employment, programs to help families and workers in their private lives, and a reconstructed "affirmative opportunity" program that benefits

African-Americans without antagonizing whites.

Critical Thinking

1. Is it unrealistic to assume that a government-sponsored public works program can provide needed jobs in this era of budget cutbacks?
2. What are some of the hidden costs of unemployment in a community setting?
3. How would a biocriminologist explain Wilson's findings?

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For more detail on Wilson's view of poverty, unemployment, and crime, check out Gunnar Almgren, Avery Guest, George Immerwahr, and Michael Spittel, "Joblessness, Family Disruption, and Violent Death in Chicago, 1970–90," *Social Forces* 76 (June 1998): 1,465; William Julius Wilson, "Inner-City Dislocations," *Society* 35 (January/February 1998): 270.

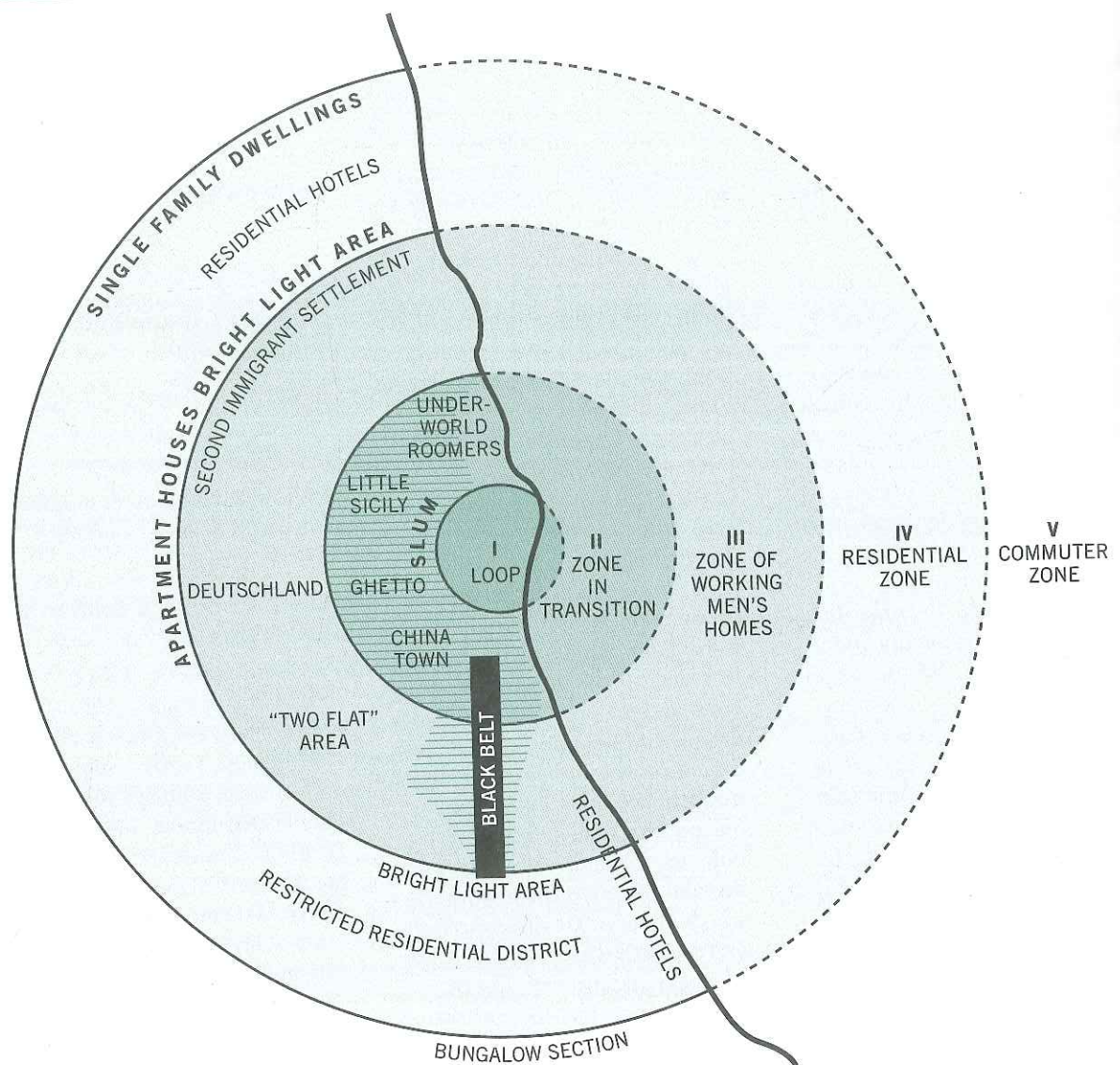
Sources: William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *When Work Disappears, The World of the Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996); *The Bridge over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (Wildavsky Forum Series, 2) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

cultural transmission Conduct norms are passed down from one generation to the next, becoming stable and predictable within the boundaries of a culture.

Concentric Zones. Shaw and McKay noted that distinct ecological areas had developed in the city, composing a series of five concentric circles or zones, which had significant differences in crime rates (see Figure 7.3). The heaviest concentration of crime appeared to be in the transitional inner-city zones, where large

Figure 7.3

Thrasher's Concentric Zone Map of Chicago Gangland



Source: Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), p. 24.

numbers of foreign-born citizens had recently settled. The zones farthest from the city's centre had correspondingly lower crime rates. Analysis of these data indicated a surprisingly stable pattern of criminal activity in the five ecological zones over a 65-year period.

Shaw and McKay concluded that in transitional neighbourhoods, multiple cultures and diverse values, both conventional and deviant, coexist. Kids growing up in the street culture often find that adults who have adopted a deviant lifestyle, such as the gambler, the pimp, or the drug dealer, are the most financially successful people in the neighbourhood. They join with

like-minded youths and form law-violating gangs and cliques, but because of their deviant values, slum youths come into conflict with middle-class norms, which are more in line with the legal code. Consequently, a **value conflict** occurs, and the result is a fuller acceptance

value conflict Deviant values of teenage law-violating groups, an element of youthful misbehaviour, conflict with middle-class norms which demand obedience to the law.

of deviant goals and behaviour. Shut out of conventional society, neighbourhood street gangs become fixed institutions, recruiting new members and passing on delinquent traditions from one generation to the next.

Shaw and McKay's analysis found that even though crime rates changed, the highest rates were always in zones I and II (central city and transitional areas). The areas with the highest crime rates retained high rates even when, over time, families moved out to the suburbs and the ethnic composition changed (in this case, from German and Irish to Italian and Polish).

The Legacy of Shaw and McKay. Social disorganization concepts originally articulated by Shaw and McKay have remained prominent within criminology for more than 75 years. The most important is that crime is a result of the destructive ecological conditions in urban slums. Criminals are not, as some criminologists of the time believed, biologically inferior, intellectually impaired, or psychologically damaged. Crime is a constant fixture in a slum area regardless of the racial or ethnic identity of its residents.

Because the basis of their theory was that neighbourhood disintegration and slum conditions are the primary causes of criminal behaviour, Shaw and McKay paved the way for the many community action and treatment programs developed in the past half-century. For example, Shaw was the founder of a very influential community-based treatment program, the Chicago Area Project.

Another important feature of this theory is that it depicted criminality as a normal response to adverse social conditions. However, some have faulted Shaw and McKay's assumption that neighbourhoods are essentially stable, while others have found their definition of social disorganization confusing.²³ The most important criticism is that the researchers used police records to calculate neighbourhood crime rates. Research indicates that police use discretion when arresting people and that social status is one factor that influences their decisions. Middle-class people might commit criminal acts that never show up in official statistics, while people in lower-class areas face a far greater chance of arrest and court adjudication.²⁴ Thus, the relationship between environment and crime rates may reflect police enforcement.

These criticisms aside, the theory provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of the causes of criminal behaviour. By introducing a new variable—the ecology of the city—into the study of crime, the authors paved the way for succeeding generations of criminologists to focus on the social influences on criminal and delinquent behaviour.

Connections

If social disorganization causes crime, why are the majority of low-income people law abiding? To explain this anomaly, some sociologists have devised theoretical models suggesting that individual socialization experiences mediate the effect of environmental influences. These theories will be discussed in Chapter 9.

The Social Ecology School

During the 1970s, theories with a more social psychological orientation developed critiques of social disorganization theory. However, the social disorganization tradition was kept alive by area studies showing that ecological conditions, such as substandard housing, low income, and unrelated people living together, predicted a high incidence of delinquency.²⁵

In the 1980s, criminologists revived concern about the effects of social disorganization,²⁶ and social ecologists developed an approach that stressed the relation of community deterioration and economic decline to criminality while placing less emphasis on value conflict. Sampson and Groves produced a study using data from the 1982 British Crime Survey, and the social disorganization theory seemed to be vindicated.²⁷

In the following sections, some of the more recent social ecological research is discussed in some detail.

Community Deterioration. Crime rates are associated with community-level indicators of social disorganization, including disorder, poverty, alienation, disassociation, and fear of crime. Neighbourhoods with deserted houses and apartments experience high crime rates, as abandoned buildings serve as a magnet for crime.²⁸ Areas in which houses are in poor repair, boarded up, and burned out are also sites of the highest violence rates and gun crime.²⁹ In his now-classic research, Messner found that the percentage of people living in poverty and the percentage of single-parent homes are strongly related to neighbourhood crime rates.³⁰

In their update on this research almost 20 years later, Pratt and Godsey found that social support, institutional anomie, and general strain perspectives are important explanations of aggregate levels of crime. They show

social ecologists A modern variant of disorganization theory that looks at community-level indicators of social disorganization, including disorder, poverty, alienation, disassociation, and fear of crime.

that the level of available social support is inversely related to homicide rates, that economic inequality has a direct relationship with homicide rates, and that low social support and high economic inequality interact together to influence homicide rates.³¹

As well, gangs flourish in deteriorated neighbourhoods, adding to the crime rate. Curry and Spergel found that gang homicide rates were associated with the percentage of the neighbourhood living below the poverty line, the lack of mortgage investment in a neighbourhood, the unemployment rate, and the influx of new immigrant groups, factors usually found in disorganized areas.³²

Furthermore, in a study of police charging practices in 447 Canadian communities, Schulenberg found that social disorganization theory was a strong predictor of crime rates.³³

Research conducted in Scandinavia and Great Britain also found that socially disorganized neighbourhoods experienced the highest amounts of crime and victimization.³⁴ Communities characterized by sparse friendship networks, unsupervised teenage peer groups, and low organizational participation had the greatest amounts of criminality.

This model, then, has the power to explain crime rates in countries with similar socio-economic conditions.³⁵

Employment Opportunities. The relationship between unemployment and crime is unsettled: crime rates sometimes rise during periods of economic prosperity and fall during periods of economic decline.³⁶ Yet high unemployment rates may have crime-producing effects in particular neighbourhoods or in areas wracked by poverty and social disorganization. Even though short-term economic trends may have little effect on crime, it is possible that long-term unemployment rates will eventually produce higher levels of anti-social behaviours.³⁷

Neighbourhoods with few employment opportunities are the most vulnerable to predatory crime. Unemployment helps destabilize households, and unstable families are the ones most likely to contain children who put a premium on violence and aggression as a means of dealing with limited opportunity. Crime rates increase when large groups or cohorts of people of the same age compete for relatively scant resources.³⁸

Limited employment opportunities also reduce the stabilizing influence of parents and other adults, who once counteracted the allure of youth gangs.³⁹ Even the most deteriorated neighbourhoods have a surprising degree of familial and kinship strength. Yet the consistent pattern of crime and neighbourhood disorganization that follows periods of high unemployment can neutralize their social control capability.



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For an article on the relationship between unemployment rates and crime in New Zealand, look at Kerry Papps and Rainer Winkelmann, "Unemployment and Crime: New Evidence for an Old Question," *New Zealand Economic Papers* 34, no. 1 (2000): 53.

Community Fear. Disorganized neighbourhoods suffer social and physical incivilities—rowdy youth, trash and litter, graffiti, abandoned storefronts, burned-out buildings, littered lots, strangers, drunks, vagabonds, loiterers, prostitutes, noise, congestion, angry words, dirt, and stench. The presence of such incivilities helps convince residents of disorganized areas that their neighbourhood is dangerous and that they face a considerable chance of becoming crime victims. Not surprisingly, when crime rates are actually high in these disorganized areas, fear levels undergo a dramatic increase.⁴⁰ Perceptions of crime and victimization produce neighbourhood fear.⁴¹ People who report living in neighbourhoods that have high levels of crime and civil disorder become suspicious and mistrusting.⁴² The Criminology Research box details the groundbreaking study of one Canadian city's neighbourhoods.

Fear becomes most pronounced in areas undergoing rapid and unexpected racial and age-composition changes.⁴³ Fear can become contagious, as people talk of their personal involvement with victimization, spreading the word that the neighbourhood is getting dangerous and that the chance of future victimization is high.⁴⁴ People dread leaving their homes at night and withdraw from community life. Not surprisingly, people who have already been victimized are more fearful of the future than those who have escaped crime.⁴⁵

When fear grips a neighbourhood, business conditions begin to deteriorate, population mobility increases, and a criminal element begins to drift into the area. Fear helps produce more crime, as people decrease their level of ownership and stay off the street, increasing the chances of victimization, producing even more fear, in a never-ending loop.

Connections

The discussion in Chapter 5 about choice theory mentioned that communities characterized by broken windows had higher crime rates.



Criminology Research

Carl Dawson and the McGill School

Carl Addington Dawson was born in 1887 in Augustine Cove, Prince Edward Island. He studied sociology at Acadia University in the 1890s and then served as pastor of a Baptist church in Lockeport, Nova Scotia. Acadia was one of the first universities to offer courses in sociology, which was seen by urban reformers, settlement-house workers, and social-gospel ministers as a way to deal with the problems of urbanization and industrialization.

Dawson did not think that social reform was the best way to improve social conditions, but he believed that research and investigation of urban communities and their institutions would provide the insight to create a better society. Many churches were convinced that sin was not so much a product of an individual's shortcomings as it was a condition forced on that person by his or her position in society. The Baptists, for example, talked about improving the social environment as a way of preventing the production of criminals; they advocated prison reform, prohibition, and justice for Native Canadians. They argued for inner-city missions, protection for children, and women's rights. Prohibitionists in Nova Scotia were motivated by a desire to eliminate the roots of human unhappiness and to create a society in which crime, disease, and social injustice would not exist.

Dawson had studied at Chicago and was brought to

McGill University to research the problems of postwar Montreal. He was hired as the director of the School of Social Work and then became head of the first Canadian department of sociology in 1924. The new science of sociology gave the observer the opportunity to understand the forces that led to social fragmentation and social cohesion. Human ecology combined ideas borrowed from plant and animal ecology, physiology, and cultural anthropology. This became the framework within which all McGill sociology courses were taught and the frame of reference for all research projects undertaken by Dawson and his students throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Sociologists turned to biology for guidelines because they found suggestions for explaining the flux that characterized human society. Existence was a struggle for survival, yet all beings were bound up in a web of relations with other beings and not because they were bound to the physical environment alone. Higher life forms succeeded the lower ones by "invading" an area and forcing the inhabitants to settle in a zone on the rim of their original habitat, which created instability.

Dawson saw society as an order that transcended its individual members, and the ultimate end of the evolutionary process was to establish an equilibrium and a harmonious social order. In keeping with his training, he chose not to focus on social pathology but rather to investigate the broader structure of the city and the way in which it moulded the behaviour and institutions of its inhabitants. His research was

in ordinary areas to ascertain through careful observation the social changes that were caused by advances in communication and transportation.

The city, he said, was an organism, with a centre of dominance—the business sector—around which were arranged a number of zones in concentric circles, their use and occupants varying with the value of the land and the distance from the centre. Each zone was divided into "natural areas," marked off from each other by natural or artificial boundaries and distinguished by their own characteristic institutions and populations. Inhabitants were "sifted" to these areas by a selective process, and their attitudes and behaviour were shaped by the areas. Dawson and his students looked at industrial development, transportation innovations, immigration, housing, labour organization, crime, juvenile delinquency, family disorganization, welfare work, and child labour. They plotted railroad property, industrial and commercial frontage, parks, boulevards, and physiographic barriers on maps of the city.

At the turn of the 20th century, only about one-third of the province's population were urban

social injustice In communities where the poor and wealthy live in close proximity, and people can see how poorly off they are, the consequent perception of injustice leads to a state of disorganization and anger; see *income inequality*.

dwellers, but by 1928, Montreal had become the fifth-largest city in North America. Its port, industries, and services drew immigrants by the thousands every year. Electric streetcars, first introduced in 1892, contributed to the expansion of the city and enabled thousands of workers to move out of the city's inner core into the numerous residential neighbourhoods and suburbs that were springing up all around the city. Although the main tendencies of expansion radially from the centre held true for Montreal, its topographic

features distorted the concentric circles in a kidney shape around Mont Royal, as shown in Figure 7.4.

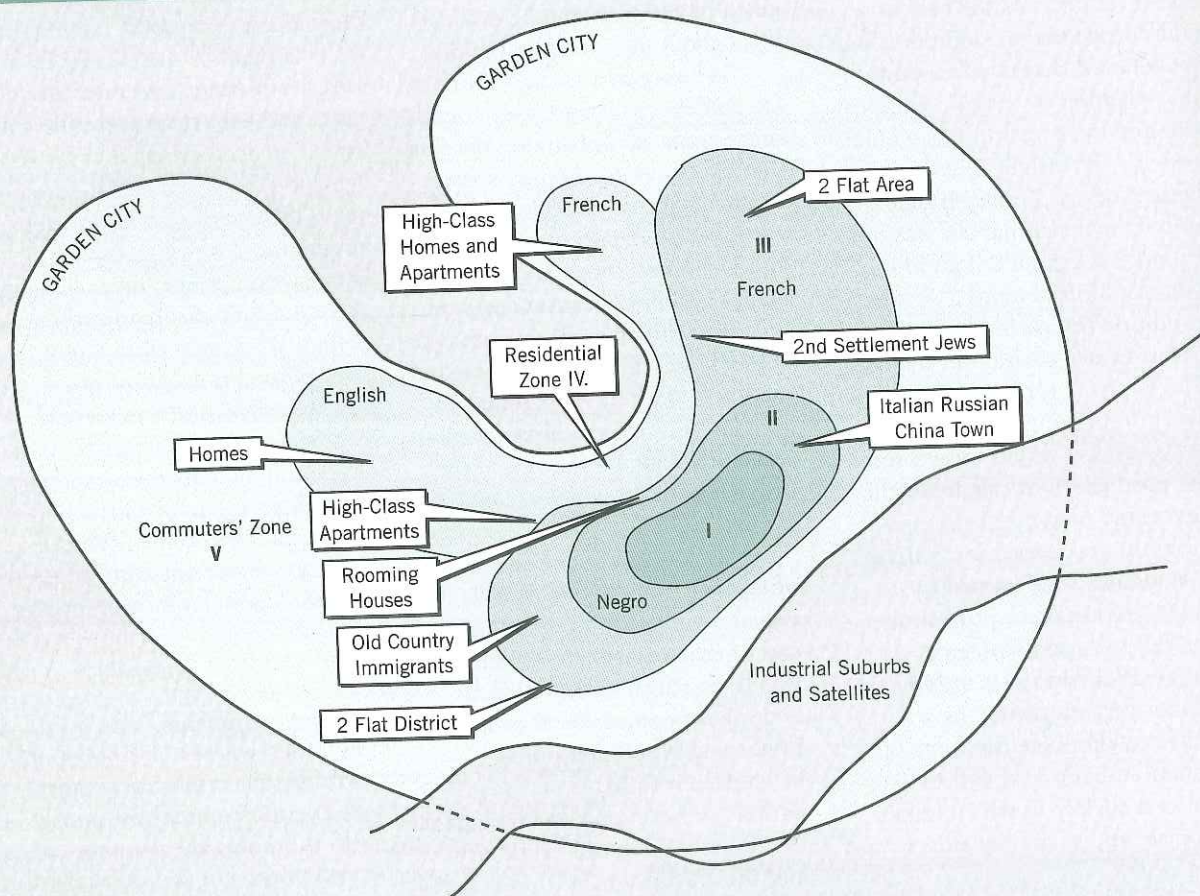
As the city grew, business institutions that had been located near the river encroached on the residential district, where the old walled town of Ville Marie had once stood. The St. Antoine district, on the verge of becoming a slum in the 1920s, had been created by the expansion of the business section. The area's more successful residents had already moved above the hill and to the west. The part of Montreal that

experienced the most disruption as the business centre expanded was Dufferin district, a neighbourhood that lay in the city's transitional zone.

Robert Percy, an M.A. student who studied the area, found that the Dufferin district became a slum at the turn of the 20th century, when the commercial sector of Montreal expanded and a flood of Asian and European immigrants poured into the city. Its boundaries were invaded by machine shops, warehouses, and light manufacturing. The more successful among the English,

Figure 7.4

A Kidney-Zone Map of Social Differentiation in Montreal



Source: Adapted from C.A. Dawson and W.E. Gettys, *An Introduction to Sociology* (New York: Ronald Press, 1929, 1935), p. 130.

Irish, Scottish, and French families who lived in the district departed, and their vacated homes were remodelled into flats and occupied by the less prosperous.

Although stable residential neighbourhoods were well equipped with churches and schools, Dufferin district did not have many such institutions, and rescue missions first made their appearance in Dufferin district in the 1890s. Constant noise, dirt, stimulation, vice, and despair characterized this disorganized physical environment.

Although the work of Carl Dawson and his students has been largely overlooked, it represents an important period in Canadian criminology: an attempt to apply scientific principles to the study of the natural organization of crime.

Muriel Bernice McCall and the Study of Social Disorganization

Muriel McCall was one of the first people to graduate with an M.A. in sociology from McGill. In her 1928 thesis, McCall says that the population of any great city is heterogeneous. In the area of transition, "they are crowded together for the most part in cheap boarding houses under

most unsatisfactory conditions. They are casual by nature and by choice preferring work as lackeys and porters or even bootblacks to employment of a more permanent nature. Their sense of moral right and wrong is practically lacking. When they do enter into any legal marriage relationship they regard it very lightly. They are ready to air their troubles on the slightest provocation and therefore contribute a great deal of disintegration. . . . [However,] the fourth zone is the habitat of the upper middle and professional classes. Private ownership of a home and restrictions upon how and where it shall be built appear here for the first time. The homes in Westmount and in Notre Dame de Grace are homes of this kind. Small lawns appear in front of the house and some attempt is made to have the exterior of the home as attractive as the interior. There are children but the families tend to be small and the care of them is often left to nurse maids hired for the purpose. Husband and wife are on an equality of footing. Father has his club and mother has hers. If they find it impossible to get any enjoyment out of being together there are always a multiplicity of other activities ready to claim them."

Critical Question

1. How are the research questions of the Chicago School adapted to suit the particular circumstances of Montreal?
2. How is the study of crime rooted in the social conditions of the time?

Sources: I am indebted to Marlene Shore for her excellent overview to this neglected period in Canadian criminological history, in *The Science of Social Redemption: McGill, the Chicago School, and the Origins of Social Research in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). Carl Dawson, "Research and Social Action," *Social Welfare* 5 (1923): 93-5; S.D. Clark, "Sociology in Canada: An Historical Overview," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 1, 1975; V.A. Tomovic, "Sociology in Canada: An Analysis of Its Growth in English Language Universities, 1908-1972," Ph.D. thesis, University of Waterloo, 1975; E.R. Forbes, "Prohibition and the Social Gospel in Nova Scotia," *Acadiensis* 1 (1971); John S. Moir, "The Canadian Baptist and the Social Gospel Movement, 1879-1914," in *Baptists in Canada: A Search for Identity Amidst Diversity*, ed. Jarold K. Zeman (Burlington: G.R. Welsh, 1980); C.A. Dawson, "Human Ecology," in *The Fields and Methods of Sociology*, ed. L.L. Bernard (New York: Ray Lang and Richard Smith, 1934); C.A. Dawson, "The City as an Organism. With Special Reference to Montreal," in *McGill University Publications* 13 (1926); Muriel Bernice McCall, "A Study of Family Disorganization in Canada," M.A. thesis, McGill, 1928; Wilfrid Emmerson Israel, "The Montreal Negro Community," M.A. thesis, McGill, 1928; Margaret Millicent Wade, "A Sociological Study of the Dependent Child," M.A. thesis, McGill, 1931.

Siege Mentality. One unique aspect of community fear is the development of a **siege mentality**.⁴⁶ This mindset results in mistrust of critical social institutions, including business, government, and schools. When police ignore crime in poor areas, or when police are

violent and corrupt, anger flares and people take to the streets and react in violent ways.

In 1992, after the Rodney King verdict acquitting four police officers in Los Angeles, California, people rioted as far away as Toronto, a city with certainly less conflict between minority and police. There has long been tension between the police and ethnic minorities in large Canadian cities, where immigration has swelled the numbers of the non-white population.

siege mentality A consequence and symptom of community disorganization, where fear causes the belief that the outside world is an enemy out to destroy the neighbourhood.

Population Turnover. In our industrial society, urban areas undergoing rapid structural changes in racial

and economic composition also seem to experience the greatest change in crime rates. Change, not stability, is the hallmark of inner-city areas. A neighbourhood's residents, wealth, and density are constantly changing. Some neighbourhoods may become multiracial, while others become racially homogeneous; some areas become stable and family-oriented, while in others, mobile, never-married people predominate.

As areas decline, residents flee to safer, more stable localities. Those who can't leave face an even greater risk of victimization. Because of racial differences, those left behind are all too often members of minority groups, who find themselves surrounded by an influx of new residents. High population turnover affects community culture because it interrupts communication and information flow.⁴⁷ A culture may develop that dictates standards of dress, language, and behaviour to neighbourhood youth that are in opposition to those of conventional society. All these factors are likely to produce increasing crime rates.

Community Change. Social ecologists have charted the life cycles of urban areas, which begin with the building of residential dwellings, followed by a period of decline with marked decreases in socio-economic status and increases in population density. Later stages in this life cycle include changing racial or ethnic makeup, population thinning, and, finally, a renewal stage in which obsolete housing is replaced or upgraded (gentrification). Areas undergoing such change experience increases in their crime rates.⁴⁸

Communities go through cycles in which neighbourhood deterioration precedes increasing rates of crime and delinquency.⁴⁹ Those communities most likely to experience a rapid increase in antisocial behaviour contain large numbers of single-parent families and unrelated people living together. These areas have gone from having owner-occupied units to having renter-occupied units and have an economic base that has lost semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. These ecological disruptions strain existing social control mechanisms and inhibit their ability to control crime and delinquency.

Research shows that changing lifestyles in urban neighbourhoods, including declining economic status, increasing population, and racial shifts, are associated with increased neighbourhood crime rates, and even areas adjoining neighbourhoods undergoing racial change will experience corresponding increases in their own crime rates.⁵⁰ This phenomenon may reflect community reaction to perceived racial and class conflict. In changing neighbourhoods, adults support the law-violating behaviour of youths and encourage them to protect their property and way of life by violently resisting newcomers.

In his adaptation of Shaw and McKay's (1942) social disorganization theory, Sui Wong of Brandon University examined the role of family disorganization as a

mediator of the effects of poverty, mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity on crime. Using Canadian municipal data from 1991, 1996, and 2001, he found that poverty influenced crime through an indirect effect through family disorganization. The link between poverty, family disorganization, and crime shows how important it is to provide community supports to the family, especially through programs targeting families in poverty.⁵¹

Poverty Concentration. One aspect of community change is the concentration of poverty in deteriorated neighbourhoods. Although poverty rates or unemployment may not be direct causes of crime, the most deteriorated areas have much higher crime rates than more stable lower-class environments. Working and middle-class families flee inner-city poverty areas, resulting in a **concentration effect** in which elements of the most disadvantaged population are consolidated in urban ghettos. As the working and middle classes move out, they take with them their financial and institutional resources and support. Businesses are disinclined to locate in poverty areas; banks become reluctant to lend money for new housing or businesses.⁵² Minorities living in these areas suffer race-based inequality, such as **income inequality** and institutional racism.⁵³

Areas marked by concentrated poverty become isolated from the social mainstream and more prone to the criminal activity of gangs.⁵⁴ The concentration effect contradicts Shaw and McKay's assumption that crime rates increase in transitional neighbourhoods. Today, the most crime-prone areas may be stable, homogeneous areas whose residents are "trapped" in public housing and urban ghettos.⁵⁵

In his recent study, Marc Ouimet of the University of Ottawa compared social disorganization and opportunity theory for their ability to predict juvenile crime rates. He found that social disorganization predicted where delinquents lived, while the opportunity helped explain where juvenile crimes are committed. Using neighbourhood level data, he says, is ideal for social disorganization research.⁵⁶

What this sort of research shows us is that individuals work within constraints and conditions that they do not choose, may not understand, and certainly find it difficult to control.

concentration effect When middle-class families flee inner-city poverty areas, taking with them institutional resources and support, the most disadvantaged are consolidated in urban ghettos.

income inequality Differences in personal income create structural inequalities in society, that might be at the root of crime.

Weak Social Controls. Most neighbourhood residents share the common goal of living in a crime-free area. Some communities can regulate the behaviour of residents through the influence of community institutions, such as family and school. Other neighbourhoods, experiencing social disorganization, find that efforts at social control are weak. When community social control efforts are blunted, crime rates increase, further weakening neighbourhood cohesiveness in a never-ending cycle.

Neighbourhood agencies of social control operate on the primary level, with peers, families, and relatives exerting informal control through awarding approval and respect. Informal control mechanisms include criticism and ridicule.⁵⁷ Businesses, schools, churches, and organizations are part of the larger, secondary networks that communities can use to control crime.

Stable neighbourhoods are able to arrange for external sources of social control, such as additional law enforcement. The presence of police sends a message that the area will not tolerate deviant behaviour. Criminals and drug dealers avoid such areas and relocate to easier and more appealing targets.⁵⁸

As neighbourhood disadvantage increases, however, its level of informal social control decreases.⁵⁹ Because the population is transient in disorganized areas, interpersonal relationships remain superficial; social institutions, such as schools and churches, cannot work effectively in a climate of alienation and mistrust. In these areas, the absence of local political power limits access to external funding and police protection. Neighbourhoods need an injection of funds from the outside to rebuild properly.⁶⁰

Social control is also weakened because unsupervised peer groups and gangs, which flourish in disorganized areas, disrupt the influence of neighbourhood control agents. Children who live in these neighbourhoods may want to attend school and other programs, but they may instead find themselves drafted into those gangs.⁶¹



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To learn more about making better, safer communities, look at Julian E. Barnes, "Reclaiming Our Cities, Block by Block: How a Little Rock Program Offers Hope for Countering Urban Decay," *Washington Monthly* 28, no. 4 (1996): 42-45.

Collective Efficacy. Communities that are cohesive and maintain high levels of social control develop collective efficacy—mutual trust and a willingness to intervene in the supervision of children and the maintenance

of public order.⁶² Cohesion among neighbourhood residents combined with shared expectations for informal social control of public space promotes collective efficacy.⁶³ Communities with high collective efficacy experience low violence rates and low levels of physical and social disorder (for example, drinking in the street, spray-painting graffiti, and breaking windows).

In contrast, neighbourhoods with low collective efficacy suffer high rates of violence and significant physical and social disorder. Local organizations designed to control crime, such as neighbourhood associations, may only be effective if they promote a sense of collective efficacy.⁶⁴ Moreover, spillover effects can extend beyond the geographic boundaries of a single neighbourhood. There are three forms of collective efficacy:

1. *Informal social control:* This form of social control works on the primary level and involves peers, families, and relatives exerting informal control through positive and negative reinforcement.⁶⁵ For example, families may exert control by awarding privileges or ridiculing lazy or disrespectful children.

In some neighbourhoods, neighbours practise informal social control through surveillance practices: for example, by keeping an eye out for intruders when their neighbours go out of town. This vigilance initially reduces the levels of such crimes as street robberies; however, if robbery rates remain high, people become fearful for their safety and reduce surveillance.⁶⁶

2. *Institutional social control:* Social institutions, such as schools and churches, cannot work effectively in a climate of alienation and mistrust. As noted, the positive impact that neighbourhood control agents can have is easily disturbed by the gangs that are often found in disorganized areas. Children who reside in these neighbourhoods find that involvement with conventional social institutions, such as schools and afternoon programs, is blocked; they are instead at risk for recruitment into gangs and law-violating groups.⁶⁷ As crime flourishes, neighbourhood fear increases, which in turn decreases a community's cohesion and thwarts the ability of its institutions to exert social control over its residents.⁶⁸

Communities that have collective efficacy attempt to use their local institutions to control crime. Sources of institutional social control include businesses, stores, schools, churches, and social service and volunteer organizations.⁶⁹ Some institutions, such as recreation centres for teens, have been found to lower crime rates because they exert a positive effect; others, such as taverns and bars, can destabilize neighbourhoods and increase the rate of violent crimes, such as rape and robbery.⁷⁰

3. *Public social control*: Stable neighbourhoods are also able to secure external resources and are better able to reduce the effects of disorganization and maintain lower levels of crime and victimization.⁷¹ The police presence is typically greatest when community organizations and local leaders have sufficient political clout to get funding for additional law enforcement personnel,⁷² and offenders relocate to other areas.⁷³

In more disorganized areas, the absence of political power limits access to external funding and protection. Without money from the outside, the neighbourhood lacks the ability to get back on its feet.⁷⁴ In these areas, fewer police are on patrol and those who do patrol the area are less motivated and their resources are stretched more tightly. These communities cannot mount an effective social control effort because, as neighbourhood disadvantage increases, the level of informal social control decreases.⁷⁵

In areas where collective efficacy is sufficient, children are less likely to become involved with deviant peers and engage in problem behaviours. When social control is weak, there may be an overreliance on formal punishment, such as arrest and prosecution, to control offenders, a situation that helps destabilize neighbourhoods by putting many of its residents behind bars.

In an important extension of this research, Walter Dekeseredy (of Ontario's Institute of Technology) and his colleagues apply the collective efficacy model to domestic violence in Canadian public housing. Using data from the Quality of Neighborhood Life Survey, they show that people who live in areas characterized by poverty and joblessness report higher rates of intimate partner violence than those living in more affluent communities. Community concerns about street crime in disorganized neighbourhoods and informal means of social control are not able to alleviate intimate partner violence in public housing.⁷⁶

Social Altruism. The inverse of communities that provide weak social controls are those that provide strong social supports for their members. Residents teach one another that they have moral and social obligations to their fellow citizens; children learn to be sensitive to the rights of others and respect differences.

People living in disorganized areas may also be able to draw on resources from their neighbours in more affluent surrounding communities, helping to keep crime rates down.⁷⁷ This phenomenon may explain, in part, why violence rates are high in poor neighbourhoods that are cut off from outside areas for support.⁷⁸

Areas that place a greater stress on caring for fellow citizens seem, not surprisingly, less crime-prone.

In an important survey, Chamlin and Cochran found that social altruism, defined as contributing to charity, is inversely related to crime rates.⁷⁹ Their findings can be interpreted in two ways: (1) crime rates are lower in altruistic areas; (2) well-funded charities help lower crime rates by providing a secure safety net for "at-risk" families.

The importance of social support, or altruism, can be illustrated in several ways. For example, recent research shows that social support is inversely related to aggregate rates of violent crime such as homicide.⁸⁰

Or in another study, Vincent Sacco of Queen's University used data from the Canadian National Survey of Children and Youth to investigate the level of social capital found in students' relationship with parents, friends, and teachers. They conclude that the relationship between students' social connections and their feelings of vulnerability to criminal danger is important is an important one.⁸¹

In one final example, Carla Cesaroni, then of the University of Toronto, looked at how the Mennonite Central Committee created a program entitled Circles of Support, which helps reintegrate sex offenders back into the community. While ex-offenders join a circle as a means of self-protection because of the controversy that often attends the release of a high-profile sex offender, volunteers participate in the circles because of the perceived benefit to the community. She found that volunteers felt that benefit to the community was enhanced safety, which seems to be borne out by the fact that ex-offenders said they would have been much more likely to re-offend had it not been for the help of the circles.⁸²

Taken in sum, the writings of the social ecology school show that (1) social disorganization produces criminality, and (2) the quality of community life, including change, fear, incivility, poverty, and deterioration, has a direct influence on an area's crime rate. It is not some individual property or trait that causes some people to commit crime but the quality and ambiance of the community in which they reside.

Concept Summary 7.1 provides an overview of social disorganization theory. But perhaps just as importantly, just as disorganization can produce crime, altruism and efficacy can work to prevent it.

at-risk Oscar Lewis argued that the lifestyle of slum areas produces a "culture of poverty" passed from one generation to the next, marked by apathy, cynicism, helplessness, and mistrust of social institutions, making each generation more prone to criminality.