Introduction

In this chapter we examine the roots of the Chicago School and their studies into ecological explanations for crime and delinquency. Although the scientific influences lead us back to the classic structural-functionalism of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), with its focus on the independent study of social facts or collective behaviors, it can be stated that the classic Chicago School was the cradle from which contemporary urban criminology sprang by contributing to the development of the theory of social disorganization. The pace with which Chicago developed from the end of the 18th century from a small place on Lake Michigan into a metropolis was vital for the systematic study of urbanization and its consequences. The ideas of one of the most prominent figures within this movement, former journalist and Sociology Professor, Robert Ezra Park (1864–1944), gave urban sociology/criminology an important boost. Park considered geographical areas as urban mosaics, each with their own spatial density. He was interested in the consequences of urbanization on collective behavior. Alongside Park, William Isaac Thomas (1863–1947) also played an important role in the development of a theoretical line of thought that later became known as “social disorganization theory.” These early scholars were genuinely interested and socially concerned with the consequences of what was happening in this historical timeframe. Rapid changes brought about dramatic consequences, both for public health, and crime. This general kind of social engagement can be said to be a major characteristic of the first generation of Chicago School researchers, and looking back, we can say that a similar kind of social concern also characterizes the scholars who were responsible for the major revival of the social disorganization perspective in the 1980s.

The chapter starts with a description of the early developments toward an urban sociology. Second, the concept of social disorganization and its popularity within the early Chicago School is discussed. Third, we illustrate the decline in the social ecological research tradition of the Chicago School by defining some important theoretical and methodological shortcomings. Finally, we explain the revival of the social disorganization theory by the theoretical refinements and methodological developments of the contemporary Chicago School.
Early Developments

19th-Century European Studies as Pathfinders for Early Urban Sociology

Some European studies concerning the effects of area characteristics on delinquent behavior had already been carried out before the emergence of the Chicago School. In this period, Western Europe was rapidly transformed from a pre-industrial agrarian society to an urbanized and industrialized one. These developments resulted in radical changes and attracted the attention of scientists and policy-makers on a significant scale. Guided by the principles of positivism, researchers collected spatial data and tried to map it systematically. Apart from a belief in the possibility of intervening in social processes, what motivated them was to increase knowledge on the social causes and consequences of rapid change in urban areas. One of the first visible negative consequences of rapid urban change was the social phenomenon of criminality. It comes as no surprise that the social study of crime and delinquency was a theme that was of primary interest to them. This intellectual tradition is still referred to as the 'Cartographic School' (Pauwels, Hardyns, & Van de Velde, 2010).

In Western Europe, Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) and André-Michel Guerry (1802–1866) were the first to concern themselves with a systematic study of convicts in French judicial districts. Their findings were innovative: they showed that crime was not distributed equally across differing districts. In industrialized and strongly urbanized areas mostly property offenses were committed whereas in the rural districts offenses were especially characterized by their violent nature (Morris, 1957). These geographical differences in crime patterns provided the first fuel for a discussion on the role of urban surroundings on the normative behavior of inhabitants.

Parallel work was also done in the United Kingdom. Noteworthy in this respect are the studies of Henry Mayhew (1812–1887) and Rawson (1812–1899) (Morris, 1957). Through Mayhew, London neighborhoods became the subject of thorough analysis. Mayhew was interested in, among other things, the specific characteristics of “criminal neighborhoods.” His work concentrated on impoverished inner city districts around London's urban center. It is important to understand the eye that Mayhew had for the social conditions in impoverished London neighborhoods. In this respect he was not purely a moral statistician, as some of his contemporaries were called, but a social reformer avant la lettre, who was effectively worried about the social situation and conditions in these districts, just as Clifford Shaw was several decades after him. Rawson's work was unique in the way he focused on different units of analysis, other than political administrative units, to study the unequal distribution of crime.

The Influence of Durkheim's Theory of Anomie on the Chicago School

The structural functionalism of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) stands in stark contrast to the a-theoretical elaborations of moral statisticians such as Quetelet. Where the moral statisticians derived patterns from descriptive analyses, Durkheim developed a method whereby causal patterns could be tested by means of studying the consistency between social facts as variables. Durkheim’s reputation is built upon his work concerning the division of labor, suicide, and anomie. The associated empirical analyses of time series of social facts show that Durkheim can be regarded as one of the founders of
modern sociology. The Chicago School further elaborated the ideas of Durkheim. Durkheim was the founding father of the structuralist vision that structural relationships do not exist independently of each other, but instead have a substantial impact on diverse aspects of collective living. The method that Durkheim used, aggregated analysis, became in this way one of the most important resources of urban sociology.

The Influence of Wirth’s “Pessimistic” Model of Urbanization

The urbanization model was developed during the Industrial Revolution. Urbanization was seen as detrimental to the preservation of social cohesion because of the perceived rigid distinction between urban and rural areas with regards to crime and social exclusion. Scholars like Louis Wirth were concerned by this development and were utterly pessimistic in their views. The city was seen as vicious whereas the countryside was thought of as ideal. The source of this strong polarization between “Gemeinschaft” and “Gesellschaft” can be found in the Romantic view scholars had about the strong rural family life and rural local social life in pre-industrial times (Tönnies, 1887; Wirth, 1938). This pessimistic view of the negative consequences of urbanization is also known as the linear development model, referring to the fact that urbanization itself would inevitably lead to social disintegration. The model presupposes a proportional increase in crime according to the level of urbanization.

From this point of view, it was assumed that the urban way of life was characterized by competition, secondary contact, depersonalization of relationships, formal control, and passivity. The opposites of these characteristics (e.g., solidarity bonds, primary contact, identity, informal control, and a sense of participation) can be seen as indicators of social cohesion (Wirth, 1938). In the urbanization model, social cohesion refers to the presence of strong and local social ties. It was thought that these social ties are less strong in urban areas (in contrast to the rural areas). This would inevitably lead to more crime and insecurity in urban communities.

The Urban Sociology of Robert Park

Robert Park was one of the most influential sociologists of the Chicago School. Park worked for some time (1887–1898) as a journalist for several newspapers in Minnesota, Denver, Detroit, New York, and Chicago and it was then he became fascinated by the diversity of social living in urban neighborhoods. He strongly focused on the poor living conditions of immigrants in urban areas. Park considered an in-depth scientific study of social problems in urban neighborhoods was necessary to bring about social improvements (Coser, 1977).

After his studies at the University of Michigan, he retained his links to the sociological and ethnographic fabric of Chicago as a research assistant and teacher and put his students to work analyzing all facets of urban living. Park’s approach marks the introduction of human ecology to the field of sociology. This human ecology can be compared to the botanical and animal ecology that studies the relationship between plants or animals and their natural surroundings or habitat. The natural habitat of people is the city. Park saw social life in urban areas as the result of a range of Darwinian natural processes, specifically competition, conflict, assimilation, and integration. These processes were hypothesized to be strongly influenced by the social structure of urban areas.
Focus on Social Processes and Collective Behavior

Inspired by Charles Darwin (1809–1882), Park saw the struggle for life as a constant in human existence. The scarcity of space in urban areas would inevitably lead to mutual competition for the best places, in the same way as it does in the world of animals and plants. Park ([1921] 1929) wrote about this:

The processes of competition, segregation, and accommodation brought out in the description of the plant community are quite comparable with the same processes in animal and human communities. A village, town, city or nation may be studied from the standpoint of adaptation, struggle for existence and survival of its individual members in the environment created by the community as a whole.

For Parks, the consequences of the struggle for space became visible in area social structures, particularly in the spatial distribution of unemployment, population density and residential stability. Crucial for further theorizing on the relationship between spatial structures and the consequences thereof on human behavior, was Park's emphasis on the spatial density of moral beliefs. Park considered accommodation and assimilation (integration) of value patterns as basic ecological processes to establish the moral order of local communities. The attention given to the relationship between area social structures and shared moral values meant that less attention was paid to the subcultural dynamics that could also play a role in the development of crime and delinquency patterns in urban areas. The latter was given second-class status in Park's theorizing (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). The issue of cultural dynamics would remain a weakness in Park's early urban sociology.

Local Neighborhoods as the Seed of Integration

According to Park, local communities are a primary socialization mechanism which enables the individual to integrate into society. These communities were distinguished from broader society by their geographically defined character (Park, [1921] 1929). In the analysis of the geographical distribution of social phenomena and their covariates (the core of what afterwards was referred to as ecological research), Park found empirical reflections of natural processes that were continuously taking place in several urban local areas. Undoubtedly motivated by the conviction that behind ecological covariates were hidden a variety of social processes, these geographical studies were completed with abundant, qualitative descriptions of urban phenomena. This complementary qualitative approach found a response in several studies by his students. There can be little doubt that social cohesion was an issue as a mechanism by which the social structure of an area impacted on social problems and crime. Park feared the destruction of conventional morals as a side-effect of rapid industrialization and urbanization. According to Park, conventional values were especially passed on via primary groups and relational networks. In large cities, where populations are unstable and unemployment is high, intimate networks between primary groups were at risk of being undermined, thereby weakening collective morality (Park, [1921] 1929). The declining forces of traditional institutions such as the family and school would eventually result in an increase in crime. Park ([1921] 1929) formulated this as follows:

It is probably the breaking down of local attachments and the weakening of the restraints and inhibitions of the primary group, under the influence of the urban environment, which are largely responsible for the increase of vice and crime in great cities.
Park hypothesized that the weakening of local institutions and the disintegration of solidarity between inhabitants of urban communities would mediate the relationship between neighborhood structure and crime (and other vices). The notion that such detrimental influences could be countered by strengthening local links led to Park unequivocally concluding “that all social problems turn out to be problems of social control” (p. 785). Social control hereby became synonymous with self-regulation (Kolb, 1948), in a similar manner to the classic macro-sociologist interpretation of another well-known sociologist of the Chicago School, Edward Alsworth Ross (1866–1951). The concept of self-regulation must be understood here in the Durkheimian sense: as collective conscience. Typical for Park were his attempts to link the Durkheimian meaning of social control to his previously described ecological processes of conflict and competition (Kurtz, 1984).

The Concept of Social Disorganization in the Chicago School

Park adopted the concept of social disorganization from his mentor W.I. Thomas. Social disorganization was his own interpretation of reduced self-regulation as developed by Durkheim and Ross. The term disorganization was, however, used for the first time by Thomas and Znaniecki ([1920] 1996]) in a study of Polish immigrants in European and American cities. According to these authors, the concept refers in the first resort to social disorganization at levels of institutional organization and only secondarily to the organization of social relations between people. For them, it refers, to "group organization embodied in socially systematized schemes or behavior" (Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, [1925] 1967, cited in Kurtz, 1984, p. 47).

Because the authors themselves gave a broad, theoretical interpretation to the concept of disorganization, it comes as no surprise that later studies were characterized by conceptual confusion. This is why it is necessary to return to the original statements in the early theoretical writings. The core of the traditional argument is that social organization of a local community will become conceptually disconnected from the individual organization of a person. Social disorganization is in this way ultimately equated to poor self-regulation of a community: a reduction in the influence of existing conventional rules of behavior on the individual group members (Thomas & Znaniecki, [1920] 1996]). Social disorganization in districts is studied as a collective property or social phenomenon (an aggregate). Weak self-regulation in a local community is considered as the context within which the overriding of prevailing rules becomes possible for the individual. Emulating Thomas, Park saw in social disorganization the structural counterpart of individualization.

Toward an Embryonic Model of Collective Processes

The spatial analyses of the Chicago School revealed an additional systematic. Based on analyses of demographic and socio-economic characteristics of urban neighborhoods, Park, Burgess and McKenzie ([1925] 1967) were able to describe situations of environmental disorganization localized in very specific areas of the city. These were the economically deprived areas adjoining the financial heart of the city with a concentration of immigrants, people on low incomes, and strikingly high levels of population mobility. For many inhabitants, these neighborhoods fulfilled a "transit function" in their fight to acquire more living space. The high mobility rate resulting from the "transit function" of these neighborhoods was considered to impede the ability of self-regulation. These ideas are
the core of Burgess’ concentric area theory (Park et al., [1925] 1967). The model concentrated on urban development and stressed outward processes, hence the “zonal development model.” According to the zonal development model, urban areas grow as a result of an expanding city center. Expansion brings about social problems in areas that are spatially adjacent to the expanding city center. In these adjacent areas, urban decline soon sets in. Social disorganization theory became in its early days more strongly connected to the zonal model of urban development than to theories about the relationship between neighborhood characteristics, informal controls, and crime. Burgess's influence led to the fact that social disorganization came to be seen as a process that was ultimately situated in the impoverished areas around the urban center. Even today, contemporary social disorganization models are very strongly associated with the concentric area model of Burgess (1886–1966). The result is that the theoretical complexity and richness of this research tradition were not fully appreciated. This is clear from the way in which the theory is treated in some overview works (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Kubrin, 2009; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; van Ham et al., 2012; Walker, 2009).

The Lifework of Shaw and McKay

In the current era, characterized by strong mobility and in which neighborhoods have lost their influence as a means of socialization, the urban sociology of the Chicago School may be seen by some as naive. This is, however, not the case when viewed in the context of the time in which it was written. Urban sociology arose during a period in which thinking about crime was dominated by individual biological and psychological positivism. In the light of the dominant concept of that time, this theoretical approach must have been innovative and revitalizing. The idea that crime and juvenile delinquency were characterized by a spatial dimension was articulated clearly in the work of Shaw and McKay ([1942] 1969).

Shaw and his colleagues were the first to empirically illustrate the zonal model developed by Park and Burgess (Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, [1925] 1967) based on data that referred to the places where delinquents lived. They worked with several large fact files in which the coding and analysis, in an era before computers and statistical processing packages, were not at all straightforward. The authors’ theoretical interpretation of the spatial patterns of where juvenile delinquents lived was very rudimentary and tentative. Shaw, Zorbaugh, McKay and Cotrell (1929) consistently claimed that the geographical concentration of delinquent young people decreased proportionally the further one moved from the central business district and that this concentration was highest in the deteriorated areas around the city center, the so-called “transition area” in Burgess's zonal model of metropolitan development, characterized by strong residential mobility. Furthermore, the geographical concentration of the homes of truants, juvenile and adult delinquents, and recidivists appeared to very strongly coincide. The most important observation was perhaps that this relationship was characterized by a fascinating degree of stability during the years in which they conducted their research.

For the authors, this observation provided empirical evidence for their assumption that delinquency was linked to the social environment of the place of residence and was not to be found within the offender’s genetic constitution, as Lombroso's adherents claimed. This observation was one of the most vital and controversial findings in a time when individual psychological and biological positivism was in its heyday.
Structural Neighborhood Characteristics and the Spatial Distribution of Offenders

The strong empirical documentation of ecological correlations between neighborhood characteristics and the juvenile delinquency rate puzzled Shaw and McKay. Shaw and McKay distinguished between three groups of neighborhood characteristics. The first group falls under the general heading of “economic deprivation” or “disadvantage.” The proportion of low rents, low incomes, unemployment levels, the number of households receiving government support, etc. all showed a strong and stable consistency with the juvenile delinquency rate. The second group of neighborhood characteristics refers to the geographical concentration of “minority groups”: the presence of different groups of immigrants. The third group of characteristics referred to “population turnover” (or the absence of residential stability). Not only were these correlations stable throughout the period of Shaw’s research, the findings were also replicated in other cities, which led to enthusiasm regarding theoretical generalization. From the 1960s, it would become clear that a large number of exceptions to the patterns uncovered by Shaw and McKay existed. This would lead to the early abandoning of the research tradition and a strong revival at the end of the 1970s.

Social Disorganization as the Key Explanatory Mechanism

Shaw and McKay’s theoretical model has undergone some development and refinement over the years, which testifies to the attempts undertaken by the authors to develop and refine their explanation for the observed patterns. Let us illustrate the first theoretical explanation, tentatively formulated in 1929:

Under the pressure of the disintegrative forces which act when business and industry invade a community, the community thus invaded ceases to function as a means of social control. Traditional norms and standards of the conventional community weaken and disappear. Resistance on the part of the community to delinquent and criminal behaviour is low, and such behaviour is tolerated and may become accepted and approved. Moreover, many of the people who come to the deteriorating section are European immigrants or southern Negroes. All of them come from cultural backgrounds which differ widely from the situations in the city. In the conflict of the old with the new, the former cultural and social controls in these groups tend to break down. This, together with the fact that there are few constructive forces at work to re-establish a conventional order, makes for continued social disorganisation … In this state of social disorganisation, community resistance is low. Delinquent and criminal patterns arise and are transmitted socially just as any other cultural and social pattern is transmitted. (Shaw et al., 1929)

In these first tentative statements several hypotheses are formulated. On the one hand, it is postulated that neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization also have mechanisms of self-regulation that function less efficiently. We can see clear continuity with the Durkheimian concept of self-regulation as a collective process. On the other hand, it was postulated that patterns of delinquent behavior are liable to a process of “cultural transmission” over time. These ideas originated from discussions between Shaw and Edwin H. Sutherland (1883–1950), the originator of differential association theory and differential social organization theory. Social disorganization is a permanent state arising
as a consequence of the breakdown in self-regulation in a neighborhood and reinforced by cultural transmission in a temporary perspective. The concept of cultural transmission extended the concept of social disorganization. The concept of cultural transmission was less developed as the concept of self-regulation in Shaw et al.’s early version of the theory (1929).

The book, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas* (Shaw & McKay, [1942] 1969) marks the refinement of the previous attempts to develop a consistent theoretical model of juvenile delinquency. This edition was published too late because in the period between 1929 and 1942, Sutherland’s differential association theory became increasingly important while symbolic interactionism also gained in influence. The increasing influence of other perspectives can be noticed in the theoretical reflections of Shaw and McKay. Nevertheless, the theoretical explanation is somewhat restricted because the authors make few efforts to make more explicit the different relationships between structural neighborhood characteristics and the mechanisms of cultural transmission and informal control.

In the 1969 edition, a theoretical link is found between neighborhood contextual characteristics and the role of social control in the family as the most important informal control system. It is asserted that "family organisations in high crime-rate areas are affected in different ways by the divergent systems of values encountered” (Shaw & McKay, [1942] 1969, p. 183). In this edition, the theoretical formulations are more concise and precise than in the previous edition. It is clearly stated that it is especially the family as an institution of socialization that experiences more difficulty in maintaining conventional societal standards, specifically when confronted by the powerful counter-narratives of delinquent belief systems that are present in disorganized neighborhoods.

Alongside this, the possibility for solving social problems is lacking in disorganized areas and as a consequence, there is little common control over the behavior of young people. Interestingly, Shaw and McKay also point to the absence of services related to organized leisure activities for young people (Shaw & McKay, [1942] 1969). In their model, economic deprivation and ethnic heterogeneity in neighborhoods were at the beginning of a complex causal chain that set the stage for an increasing tolerance of subcultural and delinquent belief systems.

The merit of these cautiously formulated explanations is to be found in the identification of indicators of the organizational (i.e. self-regulating) capacity of a community. These are especially anchored in family structures. Shaw and McKay’s focus on the organization of family life cannot be seen separately from the religious background of both sociologists.

**The Nostalgic Community Attachment Model**

In the early 1950s, Kasarda and Janowitz developed the community attachment model, also known as the "systemic model" of community organization. This model can be seen as the structural counterpart of the pessimistic urbanization model (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). The systemic model pays attention to the whole local social spectrum and was especially stimulating for community research because it questioned the structural conditions under which urbanization would, or rather would not, lead to a breakdown in informal control. Thus, the community attachment model strongly opposed a one-dimensional view of the glaring contrasts between the urban areas and the countryside, with its strong family bonds and local social life. The simplistic urban-rural debate had thus been abandoned. The community attachment model was actually a theoretical model with almost exclusive
application in the field of general sociology. Nevertheless it is worthwhile mentioning this theoretical framework, mainly because it is the precursor of social capital theories in the 1980s and because it abandoned the focus on dense local ties. Granovetter in particular underlined the value of weak social ties (Granovetter, 1973; Wilson, 1987). The theory especially underlines the importance of residential stability in communities as a key structural condition under which local social ties can be fostered.

The community attachment theory is also worth mentioning because it focused on social cohesion as a characteristic of individuals (micro) and of communities (macro). The theory made predictions about individual differences in network density by using both individual and community characteristics. Micro-macro discussions would only later arise within the field of criminological theory. In brief, the stress is no longer exclusively on the “strength” of these ties, but still on the “locality.” Scholars working in this tradition interpreted social cohesion as network density. In this view, urbanization only indirectly leads to low community levels of network density. Residential stability is seen as a major structural intermediate condition that preserves social cohesion. Other structural conditions, such as economic disadvantage (deprivation) and ethnic heterogeneity, are less stressed in this theoretical model.

**Shortcomings in the Ecological School of Criminology**

There are plenty of reasons why the ecological tradition has been declining in importance. The rise and the success of other theoretical traditions are only partially responsible for the temporary decline of social disorganization theory. Theoretical and methodological shortcomings within the tradition itself played a larger role. These shortcomings have been described in detail elsewhere (Bottoms & Wiles, 1997; Bursik, 1988; Byrne & Sampson, 1986; Morris, 1957). Nevertheless, it is important to summarize the criticisms to understand current developments.

The traditional Chicago School overemphasized urban development as a consequence of natural processes (e.g., the struggle for space). The role of political decision-making in creating unequal spatial patterns of deprivation was ignored. The possible role of the historical, cultural, and political context was thus overlooked (Morris, 1957). Later, it became apparent that this was a mistake because of the impact of urban planning and housing on the social ecology of crime (Bottoms & Wiles, 1992; Wikström, 1991). Further studies also demonstrated the role of economic restructuring of the ghetto in shaping American big city neighborhoods (Sampson, 2012; Wilson, 1987).

The extent to which census tract boundaries coincided with local communities was hardly explored. Studies on land use revealed that a person’s definition of neighborhood varies according to the background of the local resident (Weisburd, Bernasco, & Bruinsma, 2008). The increased levels of mobility that became apparent since World War II have further undermined the idea that administrative areas could be seen as valid indicators of local communities. Living, working, and free time are less likely to be organized within the geographical setting of the residential neighborhood.

Early ecological studies were not sufficiently skeptical about using registered data. Thus, while Shaw et al. (1929) made the observation that crime statistics of the police and judicial agencies could not entirely account for delinquent behavior, they also noted that “there is no evidence to show that children living in areas of low rates are involved in such serious behavior difficulties as larceny, burglary, ….” However, the hypothesis was formulated that
parents of young people in richer neighborhoods could keep their children from the
criminal chain by using financial rewards. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, ecological cor-
relations between offender rates and neighborhood characteristics were almost exclusively
explained by a bias in official recording systems that reflected social inequality in the
criminal law system (Byrne & Sampson, 1986).

Shaw and McKay’s study led to some important conceptual misunderstandings regarding
the dependent variable in ecological crime studies. This conceptual misunderstanding
arose partly from the imprudence of the authors, who themselves stated that ecological
studies should start with an analysis of the places where “delinquency occurs.” It is there-
fore not surprising that in the first empirical tests of the findings of Shaw and McKay it
seemed that the concepts “place of residence” and “place of commission” were mutually
interchangeable. Whoever reads the studies of Shaw et al. closely will rapidly gain the
impression that the authors saw the geographical concentration of offenders by their resi-
dential area as an expression of the inhabitants’ propensity to offend. Therefore, they were
consequently interested in an explanatory model for the geographical distribution of
delinquent young people’s homes and did not pay attention to the places where offenses
were committed. The seeds for future confusion were irrevocably sown (Morris, 1957).
Delinquents’ places of residence and the places where they committed their offenses are not
mutually interchangeable.

An additional and equally important substantial problem is that Shaw and McKay’s
explanation implicitly has a contextual character. It is hard to imagine that reading the
original manuscripts of the ecological theory could lead to another conclusion than the
conclusion that “neighbourhoods being hotbeds where delinquency slumbered as a
consequence of social disorganization.” This contextual interpretation is premature and
cannot be assumed from aggregated studies. This criticism is the consequence of the eco-
logical fallacy, a problem that was early recognized by Robinson (1950), which has fasci-
nated scholars for many years ever since the publication of the ecological fallacy. Therefore
ecological studies became very unpopular in the 1950s. Back then, many sociologists
focusing on contextual questions were concerned with these problems, but no-one had a
satisfactory solution to the problem. Multilevel modeling only became popular and more
common in the 1990s.

Ecological fallacies occur when a relationship found at the aggregate level is assumed to
exist at an individual level. In his methodological contribution, Robinson (1950) explicitly
referred to the working method of Shaw and McKay. Contextual fallacies occur when eco-
logical correlations are mistaken for contextual effects, for instance, when the ecological
correlation between the offender rate and economic deprivation at the neighborhood level
is interpreted as follows: deprivation in the neighborhood influences the behavior of the
young people who live there.

Baldwin (1975) correctly questioned whether ecological research was the best method to
study contextual effects. Ecologists have been interested in the contextual influence of the
surroundings on human behavior. And it is precisely the latter question that could not be
answered by the early ecological studies. Therefore, Baldwin suggested that scholars should
avoid the concept of ecological studies. He coined the term “area studies.”

Shaw and McKay’s findings were highly suggestive of the existence of ecological stability.
In their analyses of official data, the “high crime areas” appeared to be relatively stable over
a long period. According to Morris (1957), this finding paved the way for ecological deter-
minist interpretations. Belina (2000) wrongfully accused ecological studies of spatial
fetishism in an article that has been heavily criticized. Processes of suburbanization that
were already going on during the 1950s ultimately led to a more dynamic picture of the geographical distribution of crime and delinquency (Bursik, 1984; Bursik & Webb, 1982; Oberwittler, Rabold, & Baier, 2013).

A major criticism is the fact that the traditional ecological studies failed to empirically distinguish social disorganization from the structural characteristics that caused disorganization (Bursik, 1988). Looking back at the empirical studies conducted by scholars in the ecological research tradition, we can only confirm the criticism that social disorganization was an unmeasured mechanism rather than a real variable in empirical studies. For example, the best structural proxy for poor informal control that was available at that time was population turnover. Nowadays it has become common to actually measure neighborhood social processes, but at that time such methods did not exist.

Finally, the ecological school was also criticized because of the pejorative overtone of the disorganization concept. Sutherland, therefore, argued that the concept of disorganization should be modified to differential social organization (Cressey, 1964): in the latter concept, the accent is placed on differences in values between the social groups who share a geographically delimited area. Barely one year after the appearance of *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*, Whyte ([1943] 1969) showed that social organization was also present in disadvantaged areas.

**Toward a Renewed Interest in Social Disorganization**

Several developments placed the social disorganization theory back on the research agenda during the 1980s. We cannot escape the empirical observation that crime levels in the period between 1950 and 1980 rose significantly in the industrialized world. This development was of concern to both criminologists and policy-makers. The strong concentrations of crime, victimization, and fear of crime in large cities, particularly in inner city areas and adjacent neighborhoods, combined with a significant urban flight, redirected attention to urban inequality and insecurity. Criminologists became increasingly interested in “dangerous places,” and these places were no longer defined as the areas where offenders lived but as areas where crime occurs. Some cautious steps in that direction had already been taken by Jacobs (1961), Jeffery (1971), and Newman (1972) with their writings on the role played by the physical characteristics of buildings in improving social control in public places. For a lot of ecologically oriented criminologists who started their scientific career in this period, social disorganization theory became a frame within which informal control, opportunities and geographical concentrations of criminal acts were studied.

The renewed interest in geographically-orientated criminological research forced scholars to formulate a solution for the long-standing criticisms of the early ecological tradition that was dominant at the time when Shaw and McKay conducted their landmark studies. One could not simply ignore the methodological issues of the conditions under which ecological research could be conducted in a meaningful way, and without making contextual fallacies. Bearing in mind the ecological fallacy, a solution needed to be found. A key question that arose at that time was the question whether ecological research could still be meaningful in its own right. Sampson and Lauritsen (1994, p. 3) stated: “The most definite way to establish the nature of macro level relations is to conduct macro level research.” Ecological research is thus only meaningful if one does not interpret the results at the individual level. Thanks to an increase in the use of self-report studies and victim surveys, criminologists started to obtain more detailed insights into social processes at
different levels. In this period it became increasingly clear that complementary sources were absolutely necessary in order to offer a balanced answer to complex ecological (and later contextual) questions.

Sampson and Lauritsen (1994) highlighted five major differences between the area studies conducted since the 1980s and the early studies. First of all, at the start of the 1980s, ecological studies into the geographical distribution of delinquent young people’s residences had become marginal within the broader research tradition that became known as environmental criminology. After some initial attempts by Schmid (1960a; 1960b), Brantingham and Brantingham (1981), Roncek (1981), and Crutchfield, Geerken and Gove (1982) convincingly argued that ecological studies should focus on crime and victimization rates instead of offender rates.

A second difference with the traditional ecological approach is that research is not restricted to the study of neighborhoods in cities but also extends to studies conducted at the aggregation level of the city (or municipality) (Blau & Blau, 1982; Messner, 1982; Messner & Tardiff, 1986). In studies conducted at the city level, the city itself became the unit of analysis, rather than the neighborhood. Nowadays the focus is on crime places (micro-places) rather than cities.

Third, social disorganization theory has been influenced somewhat by Cohen and Felson’s (1979) routine activity approach and later the Broken Windows Model as developed by Wesley Skogan (1992). We do not have the space to discuss the relation between broken windows models and collective efficacy models, readers are directed to Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) or Steenbeek and Hipp (2011) to learn about this discussion. The point made here is that the attempt to integrate the disorganization perspective of the Chicago School with other perspectives was the start of an intriguing area of research. Studies started to look at the relative effects of opportunity characteristics independent of measures of the structural antecedents of disorganization (Miethe & Meier, 1994).

Fourth, studies are no longer restricted to the explanation of geographical differences in crime. They also attempt to examine changes in crime concentrations and the development of “neighborhood criminal careers,” analogous to the individual criminal careers (Kubrin, 2009; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). Bob Bursik played a major role in the implementation of longitudinal studies (Bursik, 1984; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Bursik & Webb, 1982; Schuerman & Kobrin, 1986; Steenbeek & Hipp, 2011). These longitudinal studies show clearly that neighborhoods are constantly changing and that unicausal theories and models do not adequately capture the complex relationship between crime and structural characteristics.

Fifth, social disorganization theory has evolved from an aggregate level theory to a theory that accounts for the aggregate and contextual effects of area concentrations of disadvantage on a variety of outcomes, ranging from offender and crime rates to a wide array of individual level attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as offending behavior, violent victimization, fear of crime, legal cynicism, and perceptions of neighborhood problems. We must acknowledge the role that methodological innovations have played in this theoretical evolution. The introduction to the field of criminology of advanced statistical techniques, such as the multilevel analysis of clustered data, has made this evolution possible (Oberwittler, 2004; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). This evolution can now be seen in an increasing number of studies (Pauwels, Hardyns, & Van de Velde 2010).

These methodological innovations made it possible that scholars retested the idea that always was implicitly present in the early versions of social disorganization theory, namely,
the breeding ground hypothesis: the idea that disadvantaged neighborhoods spawn juvenile delinquency. Results of studies of contextual effects vary widely and it is far too early to draw conclusions. Support for studies of contextual effect varies by dependent variable. Results clearly differ depending on the number of individual factors that are controlled (Oberwittler, 2004; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rawley, 2002; Thorlindsson & Bernburg, 2004). Few studies demonstrate strong direct effects of neighborhood characteristics on offending (Brännström, 2006). However, it seems most plausible that neighborhood conditions interact with individual-level predictors of offending (Lober & Wikström, 1993; Peeples & Loeber, 1994; Wikström & Loeber, 2000). Stronger effects are reported for contextual effects of neighborhood characteristics on fear of crime and within-area victimization.

Recent Developments: Introducing Social Capital and Collective Efficacy Theory

Between 1980 and 2000, the literature on the social ecology of crime was significantly influenced by the works of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001). These scholars can be seen as pioneers of a “social capital theoretical framework,” emphasizing the importance of different kinds of social ties as sources of human capital for both individuals, and the communities that are made up of individuals. According to this view, social capital is a community characteristic that is defined as a collective good that fosters both informal (trust and reciprocal values) and more formal (civic engagement) aspects. Therefore, social capital theory is also rooted in the Chicago School tradition of social disorganization theory. Social capital at the macro-level refers to “shared norms and values” (and co-determines a community’s social climate), which are beneficial for a community, while social capital at the micro level refers to “social relationships” which are beneficial for the individual.

Sampson’s theory of community collective efficacy has been a major influence on area study of crime, fear, victimization, and so many other outcomes (Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls 1999). Robert Sampson has been involved in neighborhood studies of crime and criminal victimization and its structural determinants since the early 1980s (Byrne & Sampson, 1986; Sampson, 1983). He contributed much to the theorizing and empirical literature on social capital, and empirically developed measures to tap components of social cohesion, such as trust, reciprocity, and generational change and focused on selection mechanisms (see Sampson, 2012, for an overview). Collective efficacy theory stresses the importance of a community being able to solve its commonly identified problems, such as crime and safety.

While the founding fathers of the social disorganization theory were preoccupied with the structural conditions under which processes of control and disorganization could prosper, the next generation of studies clearly has shifted attention toward the measurement of the actual social processes at work (Sun, Triplett, & Gainey, 2004; Triplett, Sun, & Gainey, 2005).

One common criticism of both social capital theory and collective efficacy theory is that these frameworks over-emphasize the role of informal control processes and neglect the causal role of subcultural processes. This is due to a one-sided interpretation of social disorganization theory of Kornhauser. Her criticism on social learning approaches was devastating, and may have prevented theoretical integration between control and learning approaches. We are strongly convinced that this discussion has not been very fruitful in
further developing theoretical models. The one-sided interpretation needs to be framed. The separate development of control and learning perspectives was a very common approach to theorizing at that time. The attitude of critical testing of theories against each other is a remnant of critical rationalism. While many of the principles of critical rationalism are still useful as a guide to testing hypotheses, few scholars are willing to apply research paradigms in a literary way. Empirical research often is able to document that a unicausal approach is not fruitful, but it should be remembered how difficult it is to conduct ecological research over time and to test for cross-lagged effects.

A final criticism remains applicable to ecological studies and that problems relates to the conception of ecological settings: scholars have gradually found out that small areas are better than larger areas and therefore it is better to study contextual effects of ecological setting characteristics (Wikström et al., 2012). But the magnitude of the setting (and its boundaries) is just half of the problem in ecological research: additionally, it remains to be seen what kind of settings that are most important. It is clear that the area where one lives is no longer the only ecological setting. Depending on the research problem (offending, fear of crime, etc.), one will have to look at different settings by which the individual may be affected. Different processes may play a significant role in different ecological settings.

Conclusion

Social disorganization theory has undergone major developments since its early days of its conception. Scholars who are interested in ecological research and theories need to take notice of the history of this theoretical framework to fully understand the problems that have plagued the theory, the solutions, and new developments. Both theoretical and empirical innovations have led to improved insights into social disorganization. In this chapter, we identified different successive theoretical elaborations of social disorganization theory. Contemporary criminologists have translated the classic concepts of strong and local ties and social disorganization into social processes such as network density, social capital, and collective efficacy, thereby stressing dimensions of organization rather than disorganization.

The study of crime in local areas has benefited from the introduction of new methods, namely, the study of social processes that were hypothesized to play a role ever since the beginning of the disorganization tradition of the Chicago School. Much progress has been made since the first scholars of the Chicago School began to pay attention to the spatial context of crime. The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (Sampson, 2012), and the Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study (PADS+), conducted at Cambridge University (Wikström et al., 2012), are two examples of large-scale contemporary research projects that have given rise to theoretical refinement in the study of ecological effects.

Scholars who want to seriously engage in ecological research are strongly recommended to do so after having studied the historical context in which this research tradition came into existence. Contemporary discussions can only be meaningful if one truly understands the historical development of the research tradition and the surrounding context in which the tradition emerged. The historical view is not only necessary to understand the long view, but also to understand why some time frames were more than other time frames characterized by the study of area concentrations of offenders (the breeding ground hypothesis), neighborhoods and crime, and contextual effect studies. For most of the time, criminologists
working in the area of ecology and crime have been obliged to base their research on secondary data, largely official statistics. While scholars nowadays can make use of a multitude of data, use complex statistical analyses and test models that include feedback loops and interactions (within and between levels), our contemporary studies still start from the idea that context matters, and it took us a long time to empirically understand which elements of the context mattered for whom, for what outcome and under what circumstances. We are still learning by adding new elements to old theories and by reformulating and thereby adjusting old theories to the context of the 21st century.

**References**


