

**DO COMMUNITY STRUCTURE AND  
ORGANISATION  
INFLUENCE CRIME RATES?**

**Essay for the Criminological Theories course**

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## I. Do community structure and organisation influence area crime rates? If so, by what mechanisms?

*“The theory of social disorganisation speaks not only to the ability of a community to achieve common values,..., but also to community processes that produce offenders.”<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

The influence of communities and their structures on crime and delinquency has been a major approach within criminology in the last two centuries<sup>2</sup>. The wide scale of empirical and theoretical evidences about the role of community influences on crime (e.g. Shaw and McKay<sup>3</sup>, Sampson and Groves<sup>4</sup>, Wikström<sup>5</sup>, Wikström and Loeber<sup>6</sup>) raise the questions whether it is possible to create a general theory of crime based on the community approach. If yes, then the issue remains how the different mechanisms should be summarized. In this essay, I argue that instead of focusing on the creation of *one* general theory describing the phenomena of crime according to a post-modern approach, we rather should work *only* on identifying as many aspects, their influences, and roles as possible relating to community influences on delinquency and find links among them. The number of factors which have to be mentioned while we are analysing the influence of the community in relation to crime symbolises how complex not only the phenomena of crime is but also the ‘institute’ of community. Hence, in order to provide the most thorough analyses of crime, the best we can do is to list as many factors as possible that influence

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<sup>1</sup> Sampson, R. J. and Groves, W.B. (1989), ‘Community structure and crime: testing social disorganisation theory’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: 785-786.

<sup>2</sup> Wikström, P-O. (1998), ‘Communities and Crime’, In. M. Tonry (ed.). *The Handbook of Crime and Punishment*, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw, C.R. and McKay, H.D. (1942), *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>4</sup> Sampson, R.J. and Groves, W.B. (n. 1 above)

<sup>5</sup> Wikström, P-O. (1991), *Urban Crime, Criminals and Victims: The Swedish Experience in an Anglo-American Comparative Perspective*, New York: Springer-Verlag.

<sup>6</sup> Wikström, P-O. and Loeber, R. (2000), ‘Do Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Cause Well-adjusted Children to Become Adolescent Delinquents?: A Study of Male Serious Juvenile Offending, Individual Risk and Protective Factors, and Neighborhood Context’, *Criminology*, 38: 1109-1142.

delinquency and map the differences that result in various models when we focus on different specific factors. Therefore, this essay's primary goal is also *only* to list some of the most relevant factors relating to the relationship between community structure and crime. The essay emphasizes how different theoretical models can be created depending on the factors and levels of focus, while I also examine the basic mechanisms of communities and crime.

The structure of the essay travels from the micro dimensions to the macro level (see Figure 1). After summarising the main theoretical models which emphasize the community effects on crime and delinquency, I intend to collect some of those factors which also need to be considered while analysing the community effects on crime rates, such as the main individual, family (micro level), housing, neighbourhood, local community, land use (meso level), and global sociological (macro level) approaches.

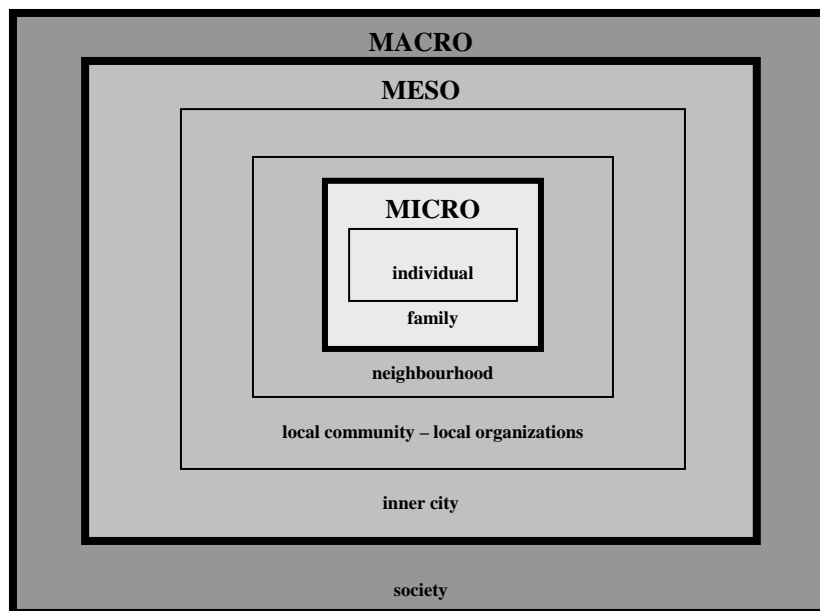


Figure 1: The structure of summarising the influence of community on crime (original diagram created by myself)

## 2. Main criminological theories focusing on the influences of communities

### *A theoretical 'arena'*

Although the analysis of the effects of communities on delinquency seems to be a very concrete approach to crime, we can easily recognise how complex the role of the community approach is by **integrating the main criminological theories**. Even if studying the mechanisms of the community could be considered as an 'inductive' way of explanation, which creates abstract and theoretical models based on practical findings, one can conclude that community aspects have significant role in most of the other deductively developed theories as well.

The first basic theory emphasizing the influence of the community on crime was created by Shaw and McKay<sup>7</sup> who concluded that the high rates of crime observed by their research in Chicago must be a result of the neighbourhood collective and not of the characteristics of individual residents. Hence, crime cannot be explained by "kinds of people" theories but must be explained by a collective force (Durkheim 1938)<sup>8</sup>. The Chicago studies in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concluded that the rates of delinquency in the lower class neighbourhoods were highest the inner city and decreased toward the more affluent areas<sup>9</sup>. Urban ecological theories also summarized that the residential, commercial, and industrial pattern of urban settlement – as an ecological pattern of concentric zones spreading from the centre toward the edge of the city – explain the different crime rates as well, and the 'zones in transition' changing from residential to commercial produced the highest rates of delinquency (Park et al., 1928 reference!)<sup>10</sup> According to the Chicago sociologists, the industrialization, urbanization, and other social changes in modern society caused **social disorganization** by

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<sup>7</sup> Shaw, C.R. and McKay, H.D. (n. 3)

<sup>8</sup> cited by Warner B.D. and Rountree P.W. (1997), 'Local social ties in a community and crime model: questioning the systemic nature of informal social control', *Social Problems*, 44: 520.

<sup>9</sup> cited by Akers R.L. (2000), '*Criminological Theories: Introduction and Evaluation*', Los Angeles: Roxbury: 116, p:116.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

undermining the social control of traditional social order and values. Through this processes, the most disadvantaged areas were characterized by physical decay, poor housing, incomplete and broken families, unstable and heterogeneous population with low income, education and occupations. The high rates of crimes, drugs, alcoholism, prostitution and mental illness of these areas were *simply* the normal responses of normal people to abnormal social conditions.<sup>11</sup> The concept of social disorganization plays a significant role in some contemporary theories as well, in which it is described as the result of a process during which ‘the structure and culture of a community are incapable of implementing and expressing the values of its own residents’ resulting in the lack of ‘structure through which common values can be realized and common problems solved.’(Kornhauser, 1978)<sup>12</sup>.

While examining the physical, economic, population, or family conditions which constitute social disorganization, Sutherland concluded by his theory of ‘*differential association*’ that these neighbourhoods may not be so much disorganized as simply organized around different values and concerns, and the crime might be explained as behaviour learned through an exposure to different conforming and criminal patterns (Sutherland, 1947)<sup>13</sup>. Bursik, Sampson and Groves criticized, or rather complemented, the theory of Shaw and McKay by arguing that social disorganization undermines social controls within communities, resulting in high rates of crime in specific neighbourhood. While Bursik’s theory leads to the modern **social control** and to the **ecological theories** by emphasizing the significant role of the distribution of crime opportunities and **routine activities**<sup>14</sup>, Sampson and Groves mainly focus on measuring the ‘external’ factors affecting social disorganization, such as social class,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kornhauser, R.R. (1978), *Social Sources of Delinquency: an appraisal of analytic models*, Chicago, III.: University of Chicago Press

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p: 118

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

residential mobility, and family disruption. They argue, firstly, that the three main components behind social disorganization are the community supervision of teenage gangs, the informal friendship networks, and the participation in formal organizations; secondly, that high crime neighbourhoods differ from others because of the lack of **collective efficacy**, which is defined as the 'linkage of mutual trust and the willingness to intervene for the common good'<sup>15</sup>. In this theory the key mechanisms behind the high crime rate of disorganized communities is resulted by the lack of social capital to express the common values, define collective goals, to organize to achieve them and enforce them against deviant threats in the neighbourhoods.<sup>16</sup>

**Cultural theories** (e.g. Cohen 1955, Cloward and Ohlin 1961) focus on the 'status frustration' produced by 'status deprivation', which results from lower-class youths being less likely to meet the standards and expectations imposed by middle-class teachers, administrators, than middle class adolescents. As a result of this status frustration, lower-class boys create a delinquent subculture, where they can be accepted and gain status by adhering to 'malicious' and 'negativistic' values in opposition to conventional standards. Contrary to Cohen, who defined only one subculture, Cloward and Ohlin argued that there are several subcultures ('criminals', 'conflict' 'retreatist', 'double failures'), resulting from 'learning environments' that allow one to learn and perform the requisite skills and abilities.<sup>17</sup> These cultural approaches have also been criticized by other theoreticians:

"The "culture" thus constructed is not an authentic subculture, **a=nor are its values'(LIBRARY!!!)** objects of genuine commitment. It neither commands allegiance nor guides to behavior; rather, follows behaviour. It is a response to the conditions of lower-class black life, not a cause of them'. (Liebow 1967)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sampson, R.J., Raudenbush. S.W., Earls, F. (1997). 'Neighbourhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy', *Science*, 277: 918-924

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Akers (n. 4 above, p: 118)

<sup>18</sup> cited by Kornhauser (n. 6 above p: 20)

in addition Kornhauser argues that

“The belief that cultures or subcultures vary substantially in the content of their definitions of theft and violence is unsupported by any evidence. There is no culture known to man in which those actions enjoined in the core of the criminal law are or can be collectively endowed with value, for they have no value for human beings whose existence depends upon their safe association with one another.”<sup>19</sup>

In **Wikström’s integrative theory**, the social mechanisms of community influences on offending behaviour are summarized in terms of community variation and changes in rules, resources, and routines. His general framework for outlining the relations among communities, individuals and social action is built on aspects of the **control theory**, **deterrence theory**, **routine activity theory** and **rational choice theory**.<sup>20</sup>

This overview section described how broad the scale is for those criminological theories which should be considered while one generally examines community influences on delinquency. In the following section, I will summarize the main findings and theories that map the relation between community structure and crime on micro, meso and macro level.

### **3. From the individual to the global aspects – What are the main influences of the community on crime?**

The hypothetical and proved mechanisms between community and crime create a complex matrix that is very difficult to describe linearly. Instead of the usual structures – summarizing the arguments of the main theories or authors – in the following section I try to map some of the main community mechanisms that have been mentioned while analyzing the phenomena of crime on different levels.

#### **3.1. Micro level: issues on the level of the individual and the family**

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. (p: 244)

<sup>20</sup> Wikström (n. 2 above p: 269)

By examining the basic mechanisms of community influence on crime, one might think there is no sense to ‘step back’ to the level of the individual. Based on the literature, the **individualistic approaches** affect the findings mainly in two contexts:

1. by theories that are based on **environmental effects**

Based on Moss’s theory, rooting from the rational decision-making theory and the routine activity theory, which consider individuals as purposive agents making decision by their actions, decisions take place in ‘behavioural settings’ (such as supermarkets, homes, classrooms, etc.) that are physical milieus surrounding or enclosing the behaviour (Moss, 1976).<sup>21</sup> The individual’s disposition (skills, temperament, moral conscience) and social situation (economic, family, job, network) together with the behavioural setting guide and constrain the actions taken. Communities vary in the behavioural settings they generate according to the degree in which they create temptations or provocations that may turn into acts of crime. Additionally, the frequency and the ways in which one expresses his/her propensity is likely to be influenced by the types of behavioural settings experienced in his/her daily life. Based on the concept of ‘opportunity’; crimes result from the intersection of individuals, targets and the conditions under which this intersection takes place<sup>22</sup>. This supports Rengert’s argument - an opportunity ‘is dependent not only on its specific objective site characteristics, but also on the existence of an individual who can take advantage of these characteristics’ (Rengert 1981 p: 193).<sup>23</sup>

2. Studies that are **skeptical towards** the importance of community influences in offending (Wilson and Herrnstein 1985, Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz 1986, Gottfredson, McNeill and Gottfredson 1991, Lizotte et al. 1994) basically argue that criminal careers

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<sup>21</sup> cited by Wikström (n. 4 above, p: 286)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. (p: 281)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

research has uncovered a number of key ‘risk factors’ that are individually-based in nature.

In fact, persistent offenders typically begin to offend early in life, well before communal factors come into play.<sup>24</sup>

As in the other micro context, the **family** factor is more often mentioned in relation to community influences. This aspect is most emphasized in the social-disorganization theory of Sampson and Groves, who argue that marital and **family disruption may decrease informal social controls** at the community level. The lack of two parent households may decrease the supervision and guardianship not only for their own children but also for general activities in the community. Hence the supervision of peer-group and gang activity is not simply dependent on one’s own family but also on a network of collective family control. From this aspect, family disruption – leading to unsupervised teenage peer groups - is one the key variables causing crime and delinquency. In Sampson and Groves’ argument, the community context plays a crucial role for family management and child development, since one key reason of socially disorganized communities is that families don’t have supportive social networks. Therefore, they are not able to supervise and control their children effectively.<sup>25</sup>

### **3.2. Meso level: the aspect of housing, neighbourhood, local community, local organizations, and inner city**

As the current essay is focusing on the community’s influences on delinquency, which is a meso level approach in itself, evidentially the main findings can naturally be described on this level.

Analogous to a day of a potential offender, if we ‘walk out’ from the system of the family, the first we see is the housing around us. According to Baldwin and Bottoms (1976)

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<sup>24</sup> Bottoms, A., Wiles, P. (2002), ‘Environmental Criminology’, in Maguire, M., Morgan, R., Reiner, R. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p: 633

<sup>25</sup> Sampson and Groves (n.1 above)

and Wikström (1991), **local housing markets** play an important mediating role in residential segregation<sup>26</sup>. The ‘mechanisms of allocation between and within tenure types must be critical part of any explanation of offender rate distribution’ (Bottoms and Wiles 1986)<sup>27</sup>. More crime-prone social groups may be segregated in certain types of neighbourhoods, and area contextual characteristics may influence residents’ propensities and motivations to commit crime. For instance, **nonprofit housing** areas are of particular importance since they are producers of high rates of offenders.<sup>28</sup> Together with other structural indicators, the highest rates of offending - in both participation and frequency - were found for juvenile, lower-working-class subjects living in nonprofit housing, where families were on welfare.<sup>29</sup> According to Sampson and Groves, **low economic status**, the area’s **ethnic heterogeneity** and **residential mobility** together with the above mentioned family disruption lead mainly to community social disorganisation (measured by the **lack of local friendship network**, **control** of street-corner teenage peer groups and prevalence of **organisational participation**), which increases crime and delinquency rates.<sup>30</sup>

On this level of defining the community, we have to mention the systemic model, which views community ‘as a complex system of **friendship and kinship networks** and formal and informal associational ties rooted in family life and ongoing socialization processes’.<sup>31</sup> Modern social disorganisation theorists explain the effects of community structural variables on crime rates through local social ties by emphasizing that communities with high rates of poverty, residential mobility and racial or ethnical heterogeneity are less able

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<sup>26</sup> Wikström (n. 2 above p: 271)

<sup>27</sup> cited by Wikström (n. 2 above p: 272)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p: 272

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p: 274, 278

<sup>30</sup> Sampson and Groves (n. 1 above p: 774)

<sup>31</sup> Kasarda, J., Janowitz, M. (1974) ‘Community attachment in mass society’, *American Sociological Review*, 39: 328-339.

to support lasting and wide-ranging friendship networks.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to those, focusing on the negative influence due to the lack of informal networks on social disorganisation (e.g. Simmel and Wirth arguing that the loss of community control over its members is a result of the erosion in informal networks, leading to social disorganisation<sup>33</sup> or similar arguments by Sampson and Groves<sup>34</sup>), Sutherland and Cressey (1966) argue that primary groups' influence on their members can be either conforming or deviant<sup>35</sup>. In fact, while adult-dominated primary groups tend to reinforce conventional orientations, peer-dominated groups tend to influence unconventional orientations resulting higher rates in delinquency.<sup>36</sup> Considering the network characteristics of communities having in high rates of delinquent behaviour, J. Figueira-McDonough argues in her typology that 'communities without **internal** or **external networks**, formal or informal, are expected to have the highest rates of delinquent behaviour' and that 'communities only with informal controls will have lower delinquency rates than communities with only formal controls'.<sup>37</sup> This typology leads us from the level of the informal and internal networks to the formal and external networks - the level of **organisations**, authorities, and social services. According to Sampson and Groves, the third component of social disorganisation is the lack of local participation in organizations.<sup>38</sup> Kornhauser also emphasizes that institutional instability and the isolation of community institutions are key factors underlying the structural dimension of social disorganisation because the capacity of a

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<sup>32</sup> Warner B.D. and Rountree P.W. (n. 3 above)

<sup>33</sup> Simmel, G., (1950), 'The Stranger, the Metropolis and Mental Health', in. Wolff, K. (ed), *The Sociology of George Simmel*, New York: Free Press, p: 402-426 and Wirth, L., 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', *American Sociological Review* 44, 1:1-24.

<sup>34</sup> Sampson and Groves (n. 1 above)

<sup>35</sup> cited by Figueira-McDonough, J., 'Community Structure and Delinquency: A Typology', *Social Science Review* 65: 65-91.

<sup>36</sup> Elliot, D., Ageton, S., Canter, R.J. 'An integrated Theoretical Perspective on Delinquent Behavior', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 16: 3-27.

<sup>37</sup> Figueira-McDonough, J. (n. 27 above)

<sup>38</sup> Sampson and Groves (n. 1 above)

community to defend its local interests is weakened.<sup>39</sup> The disadvantageous situation of these institutions is often influenced by two main mechanisms: 1) in several administration systems their income relies on the local taxes, investments that are significantly lower in areas with low socio-economic status (SES), than in other areas. As a result of these financial difficulties, these institutions tend to employ undereducated (contra-selected) professionals with less skills and resources even though 2) these institutions deal with the most difficult and numerous situations due to the areas they cover. The highly limited resources of these institutions and the increased number of social and criminological problems of the area make it even more difficult to reduce crime rates in disadvantageous neighbourhoods.

Arriving at the local **area** level, it is mostly the ecological and routine activity theories that emphasize the processes by which the number of crimes tends to decrease with the distance from the offender's residence (distance decay function)<sup>40</sup>, or as Burgess concludes in his zonal theory that the highest rates of juvenile delinquency is in the 'zone in transition' with its high residential mobility, heterogeneous population, which declines with the distance from city centre.<sup>41</sup>

As a 'spiral of decay' (Skogan, 1986) and '**broken windows**' (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) (signs of disorder in an area) might reduce the responsibility of local residents in keeping informal social controls in the area and decrease residential satisfaction, thus resulting in a selective out-migration process of the more 'committed' residents.<sup>42</sup>

**3.3. On the macro level, the postmodern approaches** emphasize what effects of the transnationally flowing capital can have on the decline of **state power** and 'how the modern

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<sup>39</sup> Korhauser (n. 6 above p: 79)

<sup>40</sup> Wikström (n. 2 above p: 280)

<sup>41</sup> cited by Bottom s, A., Wiles, P. (2002), 'Environmental Criminology', in Maguire, M., Morgan, R., Reiner, R. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p: 622.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p: 645-646

period will cede this power' – the **making of law against crime, and the control and policing of crime** -'both upwards,..., and to **downwards** (to local areas)' and to **communities**.<sup>43</sup> But this issue would be a topic of another essay.

#### 4. Conclusion

After mapping some of the main mechanisms by which communities structure can influence crime rates, let me just very pragmatically list all those structural indicators which are mentioned most often in the academic literature related to community effects on delinquency:

##### **Structural factors:**

- poverty, low-SES
- family disruption
- residential segregation
- lack of financial, human, social, institutional capital on individual, family, organisational, and area level
- environmental 'motivations', layout of urban areas

##### **Social psychological factors:**

- lack of integrative internal, external and informal and formal networks
- heterogeneity – ethnicity
- migration
- segregation, isolation
- stereotypes, labelling
- lack of informal social control
- low level of collective efficacy
- lack of loyalty to common values and rules
- lack of participation in the process of creating rules
- lack of trust
- lack of acceptance in the conventional society

The statistical effects of these variables on delinquency have been proved by several empirical research, which lead us to believe that it's not a question whether community structure influences crime rates. The main argument is about identifying the direct and indirect variables, especially those having the strongest influence on delinquency, and considering that this examination, after all, should contribute to a more effective crime prevention strategy.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p: 648-652

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