



Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay: The Social Disorganization Theory By Carlin Wong

Background The mapping of crime and delinquency has been around for many years and the idea that delinquency is caused by environmental factors has long been debated. A significant characteristic of early research into criminality was the use of charts and maps to show spatial distributions of delinquency and crime. These research methods were known as the "Cartographic School" approach. Research conducted within this approach supported environmental explanations of criminality, but could not provide a fundamental theory that contributed to the explanation of these results. Instead, the findings were often used to point out the lack of morality in specific population groups or ethnicities (Shoemaker, 1996).

The lack of control by traditional institutions over individuals initiated social change known as Social Disorganization. The social disorganization theory comes from the Chicago school of sociology in the early 1920s and can be defined as the decline of influence of existing social rules of behavior upon individuals within a group. In essence, social disorganization is the consequence of a community's inability to realize common values and to solve the problems of its residents, resulting in the breakdown of effective social control within that community. This theory claimed that delinquency was not caused at the individual level, but was considered to be the normal response of normal individuals to abnormal social conditions. Consequently, there was an indirect loss in the ability to act communally and individuals exhibited unrestricted freedom to express their dispositions and desires, often resulting in delinquent behavior (Short, 1972).

The link between social disorganization and delinquency was associated with the work of two sociologists, Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay. Affiliated with the University of Chicago and the Illinois Institute for Social Research, Shaw and McKay were primarily interested in crime and delinquency. They wanted to demonstrate how crime was a normal response to social, structural, and cultural characteristics of a community and to explain how deviant behavior

was produced among lower class, urban males. Using official delinquency data, Shaw and McKay made rate, zone, spot, and pin maps. Their finished work presented detailed discussions of delinquency rates in Chicago over three time periods: 1900–1906, 1917–1923, and 1927–1933. Together they produced a collection of books and reports that illustrated the distribution of delinquency rates in Chicago and that discussed the processes associated with delinquent values and traditions. Shaw and McKay's work was influenced by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, in which the *Concentric Zone Model* was applied in an analysis of urban growth. Five concentric zones were identified characterizing growth in Chicago, and in at least 20 other American cities in the 1920s. Specifically, Shaw and McKay used this analysis to describe the distribution of juvenile delinquency in detail and to explain why it was already dispersed in urban areas (Shoemaker, 1996). Shaw and McKay believed strongly that triumphing over social disorganization was manifested in the ability of immigrant groups to relocate to more desirable residential areas (Short, 1972). Indeed, Shaw and McKay's work played a part in merging fact with theory in this area of delinquency research. Their explanations represent the earliest modern sociological and social psychological explanations of delinquency and crime. In fact, the concepts, hypothesis, and research produced from these theories have influenced the analysis of delinquency and crime for most of the 20th century.

Innovation Shaw and McKay believed that the social disorganization concept could be applied to the passage of nationality groups through a spatial grid of the city. Discovering a strong association between crime rates and census tracts, Shaw and McKay explored the delinquency problem in inner-city areas in Chicago within the setting of traditional institutional efforts to control the behavior of the younger generation and the generations to come (Short, 1972). Their dependent variables were delinquency rates from the city of Chicago, which were measured by arrests, court appearances, and court adjudications of institutional commitment. Their independent variables were economic conditions by square-mile areas, ethnic heterogeneity, and population turnover. These variables were based on where delinquents lived and consisted of 10 to 16 year-old males who were petitioned to juvenile court (Shoemaker, 1996).

There were four specific assumptions of social disorganization as an explanation of delinquency. First, delinquency is mainly the consequence of a collapse of institutional, community-based controls. The people who live in these situations are not personally disoriented; instead, they are viewed as responding naturally to disorganized environmental conditions. Second, the disorganization of community-based institutions is often a result of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration processes that occur primarily in urban areas. Third, the effectiveness of social institutions and the desirability of residential and business locations correspond closely to natural, ecological principles that

are influenced by the concepts of competition and dominance. This assumption associates the term "ecological approach" with the social disorganization explanation of delinquency. The fourth assumption is that socially disorganized areas lead to the development of criminal values and traditions that replace conventional ones and that are self-perpetuating (Shoemaker, 1996).

Four distinct conclusions resulted from Shaw and McKay's research. First, the rates of juvenile delinquency were consistent with an ordered spatial pattern. The highest rates were found in the inner-city areas and declined with distance from the center of the city. Second, there was an identical spatial pattern revealed by various other indexes of social problems. Third, the spatial pattern of delinquency rates showed significant long-term stability even though the nationality structure of the population in the inner-city areas changed greatly throughout the decades. Lastly, within inner-city areas the course of becoming delinquent occurred through a network of interpersonal relationships involving family, gangs, and the neighborhood. Seeing that the same neighborhoods had practically the same delinquency rates in spite of which ethnic group moved in, Shaw and McKay established "that all nationality groups evidence the same rate of juvenile delinquency in the same urban areas and that nationality is not vitally related to juvenile delinquency" (Shaw, 1969). They determined that delinquency was tied to the neighborhoods and was not the result of the personal characteristics of the people who lived in them, but the result of a strong neighborhood effect.

There have been some noteworthy criticisms about Shaw and McKay's work. First of all, social disorganization as an explanation of delinquency downplays the significance of ethnic and cultural factors. Some ethnicities may encourage criminal activity where the crimes would not be considered criminal or wrong within the cultural environment that such activities are committed. In addition, the duplication of Shaw and McKay's work in different countries has usually supported their argument that delinquent rates are highest in areas with economic decline and instability. However, such research has not reproduced the findings of decreasing rates from the center of the city outward. In fact, in some countries the wealthy are often near the center of the city, while the poorer zones of the city are found near its fringes. Not to mention, Shaw and McKay's work does not address nondelinquency in delinquency areas. The large percentage of nondelinquents in delinquent areas should be addressed if this theory is to be considered a major explanation of delinquency. When compared to unofficial measures of delinquency, the use of official court records lowers the percentage of recognized delinquency in Shaw and McKay's research. It is unrealistic to expect a theory to explain all cases of delinquency. In summary, the social disorganization theory developed by Shaw and McKay has pointed to social causes of delinquency that seem to be located in specific geographical areas. Indeed, the theory contributed to the understanding of delinquency, but

the lack of specification of why delinquent rates are concentrated in certain areas of a city reduces the value of the theory (Shoemaker, 1996).

The Concentric Zone Model:

1. Central Business District

2. Transitional Zone

***Recent Immigrant Groups*

—Deteriorated Housing

—Factories

—Abandoned Buildings

3. Working Class Zone

—Single Family Tenements

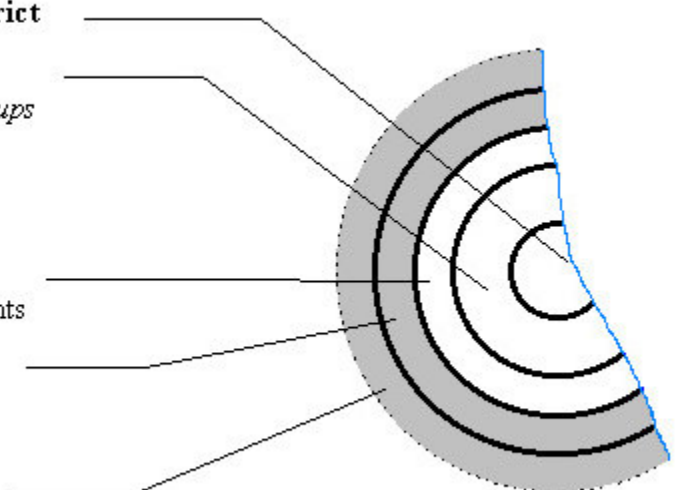
4. Residential Zone

—Single Family Homes

—Yards/Garages

5. Commuter Zone

—Suburbs



Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess introduced an ecological analysis of general social problems and examined area characteristics instead of criminals for their explanations of high crime. They developed the idea of natural urban areas, which consisted of concentric zones, each with its own structure, organization, characteristics, and unique inhabitants. The zones extended out from downtown central business district to the commuter zone at the fringes of the city and came to be known as the Concentric Zone Theory. Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay based much of their work on this model.

This image is from the Criminal Justice Program of [Calvin College](#).

Publications

Shaw, Clifford R. *Brothers in Crime*. Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1952.

Shaw, Clifford R. and McKay, Henry D. *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Related Works

[Shoemaker, Donald J. *Theories of Delinquency*. New York: Oxford University](#)

Press, 1996.

Short, James F. *Delinquency, Crime, and Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.

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