

social structure approach

An approach to criminology that looks for the origins of crime within the immediate environment.

The **social structure approach** looks for the origins of crime within the immediate environment. What holds society together and what breaks it apart? What social and economic conditions are people exposed to on a daily basis? The social structure approach examines conditions of life such as poverty, deprivation, frustration, lack of opportunity to succeed, and deviant cultural values and analyzes their influence on the development of criminal behavior.⁷ We will examine this perspective in more detail in this chapter.

The **social process approach** sees crime as the product of the various interactions that take place between individuals and the social environment.⁸ Problems within society do not alone cause crime: It is the way we react to and deal with these problems that forms the starting point for the study of criminal behavior. Crime is the outcome of inappropriate or faulty social processes that contribute to crime. We will examine this approach in greater detail in the next chapter.

Finally, the **social conflict approach** to the study of crime examines the fundamental distribution of wealth and power within society. It sees the law as a mechanism of social control in which society's dominant classes—those with the most wealth and political power—are able to coerce the rest into compliance. Power relationships in society determine who has the influence to create the law, which acts will be defined as crime, and which individuals will be treated as criminals.⁹ We will talk more about conflict theory in Chapter 10. For now, let's take a closer look at the social structure approach.

MAJOR PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE THEORIES

Social structure theories search for the cause of criminal behavior in the immediate conditions of society. With a quick glance at the world around us, we can easily see major differences in the people's environments: Some are poor, some are rich; some drop out of high school, and others have college educations; some live in the city, others in suburban neighborhoods; some have high-paying jobs, and others struggle to make ends meet. The social structure approach looks at these variations in the economic and social environments and highlights those that contribute to socioeconomic disadvantage.¹⁰ They include poverty, lack of educational opportunities, limited employment options, poor or deteriorated neighborhoods and housing, dysfunctional family conditions, social injustices, and exposure to conflicting value systems.

According to the social structure approach, the root cause of crime can be found in these formal and informal structures of society.¹¹ While individuals are responsible for their own actions and should be held accountable for them, in this view the social environment creates certain conditions of imbalance, discord, and chaos that provide the causal link from which criminal behavior occurs.¹²

Thus, in order to understand crime, we must direct our attention to the environmental forces driving individuals toward criminal activity. According to the social structure approach, crime is an acquired pattern of behavior: Individuals are a product of their social environment and the conditions that limit and impose upon their opportunities, experiences, choices, and ways of thinking.

social disorganization theory

An approach to criminology that links high rates of crime to the social and economic conditions of urban communities.

TABLE 8.1

Social Structure Theories of Criminal Behavior

SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION	STRAIN THEORY	CULTURE CONFLICT
Chicago School	Anomie	Subcultures
Environmental criminology	General strain	Differential opportunity
		Drift

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Within the social structure approach, there are three major theoretical perspectives: social disorganization, strain theory, and culture conflict (Table 8.1). While each offers a unique understanding of the specific aspects of the environment that contribute to crime and delinquency, they all share a common understanding of criminal behavior as largely a phenomena of the socially and economically disadvantaged members of society. We turn now to a discussion of these theories, beginning with social disorganization.

SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY

Some criminologists link high rates of crime to the social and economic conditions of urban communities. They point to the disordered nature of certain neighborhoods where overcrowding, increased transience, the presence of business and retail stores alongside residences, and lack of cohesion contribute to a deteriorating social life.¹³ This approach to the study of crime is known as **social disorganization theory**.

Under these conditions, the social structure begins to collapse. The environment is failing to provide the necessary elements of a healthy community, such as adequate education, proper housing, meaningful employment, access to healthcare, and a positive family life. Some of the groundbreaking studies of social disorganization theory are found in the tradition known as the **Chicago School**.

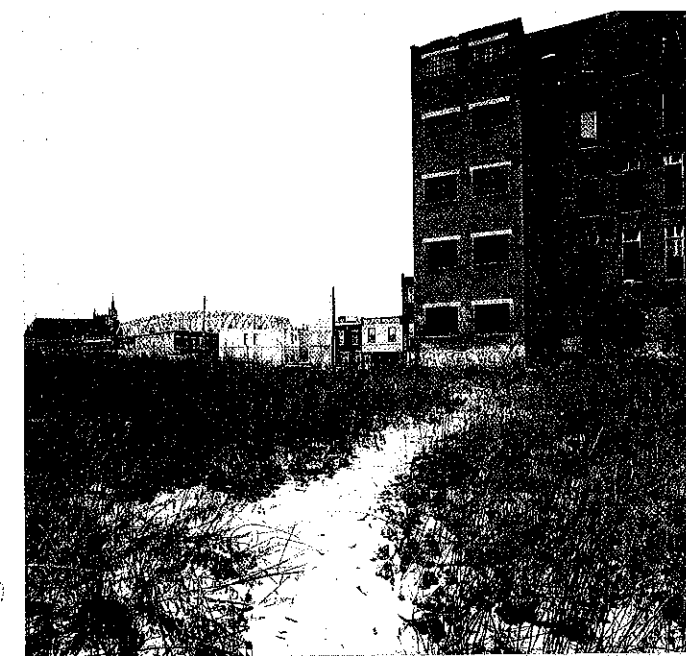
The Chicago School

Between the 1920s and 1940s, criminological research was dominated by the University of Chicago, where the works of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess began an ecological approach to the study of crime.¹⁴ **Social ecology** is a method of analysis that studies how the environment adapts to the human interactions and natural resources within it.

Park and Burgess aimed to explain the distribution of crime rates by thinking of cities as made up of **concentric zones**, identified by the rate and incidence of certain social characteristics within the city such as immigration, residential mobility, housing structure, and family income (Figure 8.1). Park and Burgess used this model to explain why crime was concentrated in certain parts of inner-city zones where the structure is weak and disorganized due to high rates of poverty and unemployment, rapid social change, competition for limited resources, and conflict between different cultural values.¹⁵ These conditions produce personal and group interactions marked by strained relationships, deteriorating values, lack of family solidarity, and community fear. Individuals living under such conditions, which become a breeding ground for criminal activity, are exposed to **social pathology** and turn to deviant behavior and crime.

The concentric zone model was used by researchers Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay to study juvenile arrest rates in Chicago.¹⁶ Shaw and McKay were interested in studying how crime and delinquency were normal responses to social, economic, and cultural characteristics of certain communities. Using official data spanning three distinct time periods marked by high rates of immigration (1900–1906, 1917–1923, and 1927–1933), they illustrated the distribution of delinquency rates among juveniles within different ecological environments. Rates of juvenile delinquency remained stable over time and corresponded to certain inner-city urban zones, despite changes in immigrant populations (for example, from German to Italian). Areas farther from these zones had lower rates of crime and delinquency.

These findings support the theory that crime is a characteristic of ecological conditions within the social environment of urban communities, rather than a consequence of individuals' characteristics. It is in the structure of neighborhoods within the inner



What aspects of the social environment may contribute to the high rate of crime found in this urban community?

Chicago School

Groundbreaking studies of social disorganization theory coming out of the University of Chicago between the 1920s and the 1940s.

social ecology

A method of analysis that studies how the environment adapts to the human interactions and natural resources within it.

concentric zones

A concept within social ecology analysis that explains the distribution of crime rates by envisioning cities as being made up of areas of social characteristics, such as immigration, residential mobility, housing structure, and family income.

social pathology

Social conditions marked by strained relationships, deteriorating values, lack of family solidarity, and community fear; such conditions become a breeding ground for criminal activity.