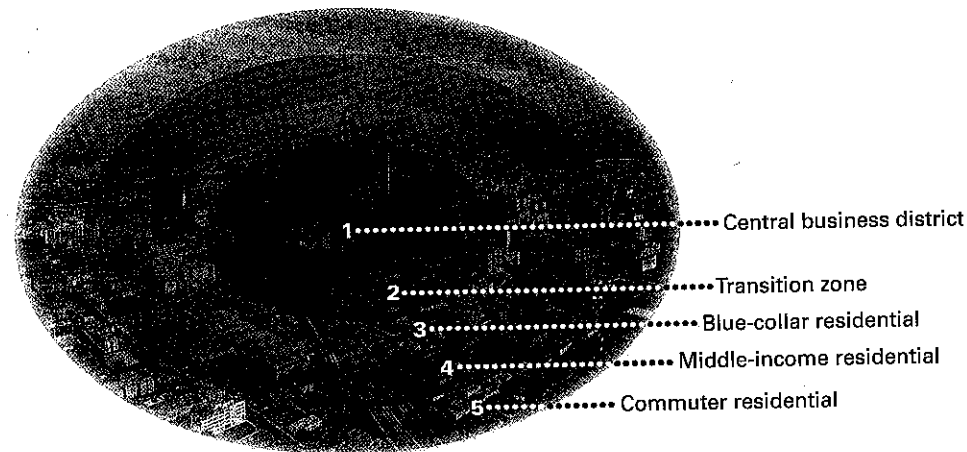


FIGURE 8.1
A Concentric Zone Model

Source: <http://www.crimetheory.com/Soc1/Chic1.htm>



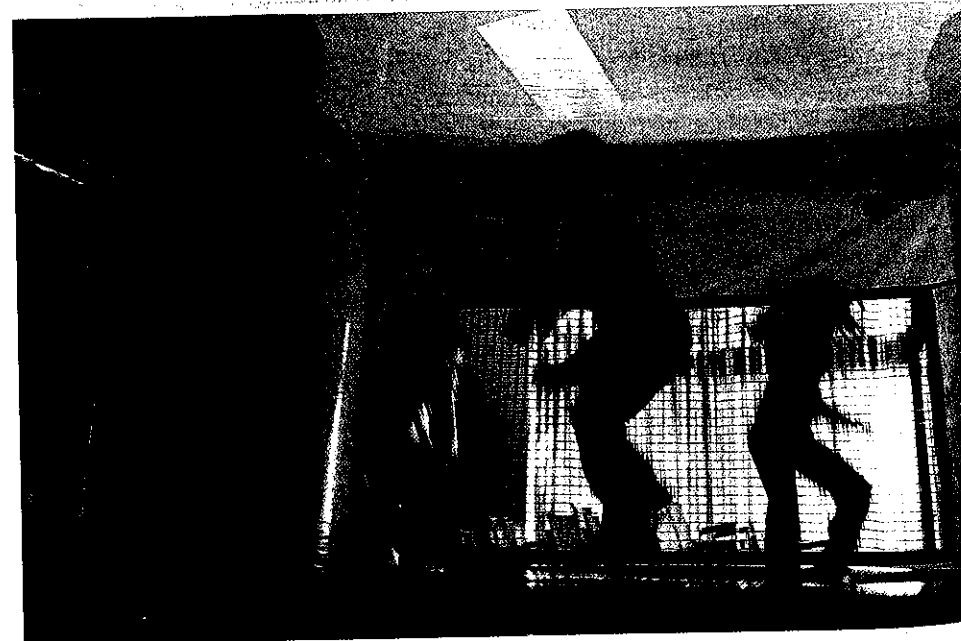
city where deviant norms and values, impoverished lifestyles, unemployment, cultural conflict—all the elements of social disorganization—perpetuate criminal behavior.

Shaw and McKay laid the foundation for the development of social disorganization theory in a theoretical movement that spanned over seven decades of research. We turn now to a brief look at the legacy of the Chicago School in the field of environmental criminology.

Environmental Criminology

Are certain places more prone to criminal activity than others? If so, what is it about these places that make them crime magnets? These questions are the subject of contemporary criminological research, which draws a link between criminal behavior and the geographic location and physical features of specific neighborhoods.¹⁷ (See Connecting Research to Practice for a study of crime, disorder, and the impact of collective efficacy.)

When we observe children playing in a bounce house, we can see that this type of environment makes them more hyper, playful, and active. But consider the effect of the children's playing on the bounce house itself. How many children can this structure hold before it collapses? If they do not remove their shoes, will the fabric tear? The effect of various interactions on the social structure is considered by social ecologists.



CONNECTING

TO PRACTICE

Crime, Disorder, and Collective Efficacy

Social disorganization theory has focused on location and neighborhood-specific aspects as they relate to criminal activity. Structurally disorganized neighborhoods lack the formal and informal controls needed to prevent crime and delinquency. Public order crimes such as public intoxication, graffiti, and vandalism are an invitation to potential offenders; these crimes signal that residents in the neighborhood are apathetic about their community and will not intervene on the behalf of victims, question strangers, or call the police when suspecting a crime.¹⁸

In a long-term National Institute of Justice study, researchers repeatedly examined the effect of neighborhood disorder in Chicago communities as a pathway to predatory criminal behavior.¹⁹ The study proposed that both crime and disorder stem from structural characteristics specific to certain neighborhoods. These include concentrated poverty, unemployment, residential mobility, high population density, and the absence of social resources. Using a method known as *systematic social observation*, researchers videotaped blocks of over 23,000 streets in 196 neighborhoods with different racial, ethnic, social, and economic compositions. What were they looking for? Signs

of disorder, recorded and measured by visual cues such as trash and litter on the streets, graffiti, abandoned cars, syringes, loitering, people intoxicated or consuming alcohol on the street, evidence of gang membership such as young people in groups, and observed drug transactions.

Findings suggest that disorder and crime both stem from similar structural characteristics of certain neighborhoods. While bearing no direct causal link, disorder and crime are inherently connected in that they both reduce *collective efficacy*, which is the cohesion among neighborhood residents in combination with shared expectations for informal social control of public space.²⁰ Collective efficacy is a significant deterrent to crime and disorder in neighborhoods and communities. When there is no collective efficacy, rates of violence and the amounts of disorder are high, even after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics.

These findings suggest that policies aimed at reducing community disorder *indirectly* reduce crime by increasing neighborhood stability and enhancing collective efficacy. Tough law enforcement practices and procedures to "clean up the streets" by eliminating violence and disorder are often insufficient without a comprehensive understanding of the link between crime, disorder, and collective efficacy.

How the victims interact.

During the mid-1980s, studies in **environmental criminology** emerged to highlight the importance of deteriorated conditions within communities as contributing to high rates of criminal activity.²¹ Environmental criminologists analyze the immediate context within which criminal behavior occurs in order to understand how environmental variables, potential offenders, and targeted victims interact. Within this approach, there are three basic premises:²²

- Criminal behavior is significantly influenced by the immediate nature of the environment in which it occurs.
- The distribution and pattern of criminal activity is not random but vary according to time, place, and situation. Certain times, places, and situations facilitate criminal opportunities.²³
- Understanding the role of environmental variables in the pattern and distribution of criminal activity is essential to controlling and preventing crime.

The basic premise behind the study of crime and environmental variables is that disorganized neighborhoods send a message to would-be criminals that this is a vulnerable target for crime because we, as a community, either do not care, are afraid, or also are involved in criminal activity.²⁴ Researchers have identified five components that help to predict the likelihood of a criminal event—space, time, the offender, the victim, and social control (Table 8.2).

environmental criminology
Analysis of the immediate context within which criminal behavior occurs in order to understand how environmental variables, potential offenders, and targeted victims interact.