

Final Report
173824

THE INFORMAL CONTROL OF CRIME THROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORKS

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August, 1997

(95-15-CX-0036)

This work was supported in part by Grant # ~~95-7858-OK-B~~, awarded by the National Institute of Justice.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary systemic reformulations of the traditional social disorganization model of Shaw and McKay (1931; 1942) assume that the degree to which neighborhoods informally can control the nature and amount of local illegal activity is a function of the structure of the networks that integrate residents into the primary and secondary groups of the community, and of those that link the area as a whole to the broader social, economic and political institutions of a city. While a growing body of research has presented evidence consistent with this proposition (Sampson and Groves, 1989, Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz, 1986, Smith and Jarjoura, 1989, Taylor et al., 1984, Taylor, 1997; see the review essay of Sampson, 1995), the focus to date has been on the network characteristics that are conducive to effective social control, and not the mechanisms of control per se that may be exercised through these structures. In this paper, the effectiveness of one such process--the potential withdrawal of personal respect due to criminal involvement--is examined within the context of the relational networks of a sample of Oklahoma City residents.

THE SYSTEMIC MODEL OF NEIGHBORHOOD CRIME

The classic formulation of the social disorganization theory of crime has its roots in Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay's landmark studies of juvenile delinquency in Chicago. On the basis of the geographic distribution of the residences of youths who had been

referred to the Cook County Juvenile Court over an extended period of time, Shaw and McKay concluded that an ongoing set of neighborhood dynamics gave rise to persistent differences in the delinquency rates found in Chicago's local communities. Drawing from the human ecology model of Burgess (1925) and Park and Burgess (1924), as well as the social disorganization thesis of Thomas and Znaniecki (1920), Shaw and McKay argued that it was especially difficult for neighborhood residents to regulate the behavior of local juveniles in communities characterized by compositional heterogeneity and high levels of population turnover. Those neighborhoods in which this regulatory capacity was especially limited were referred to as "socially disorganized." Later work in this tradition expanded the focus of the model from delinquency to crime in general.

Although this framework was a central component of American criminology for many years, a number of important shortcomings led to its demise (see Bursik, 1988; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). Most notably, Shaw and McKay failed to discuss the regulatory implications of social disorganization in any kind of logically consistent manner and did not always clearly differentiate the presumed outcome of social disorganization (i.e. relatively high rates of crime) from disorganization itself. This tendency led to some critical, albeit understandable, misunderstandings of the central assumptions and dynamics of the model (Bursik, 1988).

One of the hallmarks of the contemporary reformulation of this perspective has been the formal definition of social disorganization as the regulatory capacity of a neighborhood that is imbedded in the structure of that community's affiliational, interactional and communication ties among the residents. To date, research has focused on the effects on

crime of structural variation in three basic types of networks (see Hunter, 1985; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Bursik and Grasmick, 1995): the private (intimate friendship and kinship relationships), the parochial (less intimate and secondary group relationships), and the public (linkages to groups and institutions located outside of the neighborhood). Since the general systemic model of urban structure has had a great influence on the development of this new orientation (see Berry and Kasarda, 1977), the reformulated version of social disorganization often is referred to as the "systemic" theory of neighborhoods and crime (see, for example, Bursik, 1988; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Sampson, 1988; Sampson and Groves, 1989; Taylor, 1997).

A systemic approach to community crime rates makes it much easier to conceptually differentiate social disorganization from the ecological processes that make internal self-regulation problematic and from the rates of crime and delinquency that may be a result. For example, since it is assumed that relational networks are difficult to establish and maintain when a neighborhood is characterized by rapid population turnover, high levels of residential instability are assumed to lead to low capacities for neighborhood regulation (see Bursik and Grasmick, 1993: 33). Likewise, Granovetter (1973: 1373-1374) has argued that when members of one subgroup in a community are not connected relationally to any members of other subgroups, social control activities have to develop independently within each discrete network to ensure the successful control of crime. Greenberg et al. (1985), for example, present evidence that urban residents are not likely to intercede in criminal events that involve strangers and are reluctant to assume responsibility for the welfare of property of people whom they barely know. In particular,

the work of Merry (1981) suggests that racial and ethnic heterogeneity can significantly decrease the degree to which relational networks span the various subgroups residing in a community since mutual distrust often exists among these groups (see Merry, 1981).

Therefore, the systemic model predicts that regulatory capacity is especially low in areas characterized by high levels of racial and ethnic heterogeneity.

In sum, the systemic model argues that rapid residential turnover and population heterogeneity make it difficult to establish relational network structures that can serve as the source of effective social control. Thus, the nature of a community's structures is assumed to be a primary determinant of the capacity of an area to regulate itself. Those neighborhoods with relatively low levels of such regulatory ability are predicted to be those with relatively high rates of crime.

EXERCISING SOCIAL CONTROL THROUGH NETWORK STRUCTURES

It has been noted elsewhere (Bursik, 1988; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993) that the focus on relational structures makes the systemic framework a group level analog of Hirschi's (1969) control theory, where each tie among neighborhood residents represents a relationship through which informal sanctions may be imposed to achieve social control. However, while systemic models assume that the existence of relational networks is a necessary condition for the exercise of such control, it is not a sufficient one. Rather, as Janowitz has noted (1976: 9-10), nonconforming behavior may be tolerated by the members of a network as long as it does not interfere with the attainment of some common goal. Therefore, relational networks will only serve as an effective source of social control if group members perceive that these ties may be used by the other members

to administer negative sanctions in response to illegal behavior. Unfortunately, the systemic research tradition generally has not focused on how these processes unfold within relational structures (for a notable exception, see Taylor, 1997).

There are a wide variety of informal negative sanctions at the disposal of network members, such as avoidance, physical harm, gossip, and so forth (see Black, 1989). However, the potential loss of respect from others that may occur if illegal behavior becomes public knowledge has been shown to be an especially significant consideration in the criminal decision-making process (Grasmick and Bursik, 1990). While it is a basic and generally uncontested assumption of control theory that such a sensitivity to the opinion of significant others acts as a powerful constraint on criminal behavior, the critical question for the systemic model is the degree to which this form of social control is shaped by the neighborhood context of a potential offender.

Janowitz (1951) has pointed out that a resident's identification with a particular neighborhood can be partial, limited, and dependent on the current salience of the issues being raised within the boundaries of those communities. This is an especially important consideration given Huckfeldt's (1983) finding that less than twenty percent of the residents of Detroit report that three or more close friends lived in their neighborhood, and almost thirty percent had no close friends at all in the area. Thus, while a resident may in fact be highly sensitive to the opinions of significant others, those relevant others may not be fellow neighbors with whom s/he interacts.

Therefore, a critical test of the systemic model of crime entails the degree to which local relational structures foster social control by heightening a sensitivity to the potential

loss of respect. Since informal social control has been assumed to be most effective when applied by significant others, the fear of a loss of public respect should be related most strongly to the degree to which a resident is tied into the private (i.e. intimate) structure of a neighborhood. Likewise, since the primary function of public structures is to serve as a conduit of resources into a neighborhood and not as a source of self esteem, it is logical to expect that these networks may be associated only weakly with a sensitivity to the loss of respect. Finally, the magnitude of the association between involvement in less intimate, parochial structures and sensitivity should fall between those for the private and public levels.

Figure 1 summarizes the systemic model that is tested in this paper. The respondents' reports of their involvement in private, parochial and public networks are

(Figure 1 about here)

assumed to be a function of their perceived similarity to fellow residents and the length of time that they have lived in the neighborhood. In turn, it is assumed that levels of participation in these structures are at least partial determinants of the degree to which the respondents are sensitive to the potential loss of respect that may result from public awareness of involvement in illegal behavior. Finally, as noted in the preceding paragraph, the magnitude of these relationships should be strongest for the private networks and weakest for the public structures.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The data used to test the propositions developed in the preceding section are drawn from a simple random survey of 368 Oklahoma City adults (aged 18 and above) drawn

from the **R.L. Polk Directory** for the city in the Spring of 1995. Respondents initially were contacted by a letter describing the survey and announcing that a researcher would soon be visiting in order to set up an appointment for a personal interview. Members of the target sample who could not be reached or refused to participate in the survey were replaced by random selection.

Table 1 presents the indicators used to represent the ecological dynamics that are assumed to “drive” the systemic model. While the measure of residential Stability is very

(Table 1 about here)

straightforward, the Homogeneity variable warrants some discussion due to its incomparability with the indicators of racial and/or ethnic composition that traditionally have been used in such models. Shaw and McKay’s original social disorganization model was developed at a time when many urban sociologists considered neighborhoods to arise from the selective settlement of populations into areas associated with particular economic, cultural or occupational groups (Burgess, 1925: 54). While most of the assumptions of this “natural area” approach have been soundly criticized since that time, it is clear that Shaw and McKay had a much broader image of neighborhood compositional variation than is the case in much contemporary work. In an effort to capture this broader sense of community composition, the respondents were asked to report the degree to which they considered themselves similar to the other residents in their neighborhood. Factor scores were used to create the final scale.

The survey items reported in Table 2 were used to create the measures of the three types of network participation under analysis in this paper. While the indicators of the

(Table 2 about here)

private structure are very straightforward and are very similar to those that have been used by other researchers, involvement in parochial structures can be approached in a variety of ways, such as through measures of the level of participation in local formal organizations (Sampson and Groves, 1989). Unfortunately, while it would have been very desirable to have analyzed indicators representing a wide variety of such participation, the Oklahoma City data are limited to a single measure of local church or religious group membership. However, the survey also collected information on the frequency with which the respondents patronize local business establishments, and the work of Albert Hunter (1974; 1978) suggests that shopping within one's neighborhood often leads to the development of important networks that integrate a resident into the social life of the community. Therefore, a scale representing the level of such patronage is used as an alternative, economic operationalization of parochial participation.

The small correlations between the public network variable and the measures of private and parochial structures reported at the bottom of Table 2 are not totally unexpected, for it long has been recognized that highly organized neighborhoods can still be relatively dislocated from the workings of municipal government (see Bursik and Grasmick, 1995). However, it was expected that the correlation between the private and parochial structures would at least be moderate. While a full test of the proposition is beyond the focus of this paper, the relatively small correlations may represent the degree to which the neighborhoods in which the respondents reside represent communities of

limited liability. That is, participation in the local economic and religious life of an area is not automatically an outcome of extensive primary ties, and vice versa.

Finally, the social control processes assumed to operate through these ties are reflected in the two indicators of sensitivity to the opinions of others shown in Table 3, one pertaining to the respect that would be lost if the respondent were arrested for assault, and the other if the arrest were made for stealing an item of minor value.

(Table 3 about here)

The results of the formal test of the systemic model are presented in Table 4. As expected, those respondents who have lived in their neighborhood a relatively long time and who perceive the neighborhood as relatively homogenous report that they are more extensively imbedded in local private networks. However, although perceived community homogeneity also is related to the degree of imbeddedness in parochial networks and the degree to which the respondents perceive that the city government is responsive to the needs of the neighborhood, these two dimensions of systemic control are not related to the length of residence. In addition, the percentage of the variation in these two networks that is associated with the two ecological dynamics is much lower than it is for private networks.

(Table 4 about here)

For the purpose of this paper, the most important findings are reported in columns four and five of Table 4, which represent the degree to which participation in these systemic networks is related to the processes of informal social control. As expected,

the regression coefficients associated with the public networks are of the smallest magnitude and nonsignificant. In addition, the effects of both private and parochial network participation are significant for the assault indicator, and nearly so for the theft variable. On the other hand, while it was expected that participation in local religious organizations would be associated with social control, this does not appear to be the case. However, this finding is similar to that reported by Sampson and Groves concerning general organizational participation.

The most interesting aspect of Table 4 is the relative magnitudes of the coefficients associated with participation in private and parochial networks. As noted above, it was expected that involvement in private network structures would have the strongest association with a sensitivity to a loss of respect. However, the strength of this effect is nearly identical to that associated with the degree of patronage of local businesses. Since we are not aware of other neighborhood crime studies that have used a similar operationalization of parochial control, it is possible that this finding is unique to Oklahoma City, to this particular historical period, or to some combination of the two. Nevertheless, if future systemic studies replicate these relative magnitudes, the finding has important implications for our understanding of the systemic dynamics associated with local crime control.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have attempted to provide some insights concerning the dynamics through which systemic structures serve as a source of informal social control in urban neighborhoods. In general the findings have supported the predictions of this framework

in that the degree to which one is concerned about a loss of respect due to involvement in criminal behavior is in part a function of the degree to which one is imbedded in the private and parochial structures of local residential communities. However, two aspects of the analysis merit further consideration.

The first is the intriguing finding that the private and parochial participation measures have essentially equivalent effects on the sensitivity to a potential loss of respect.

Hirschi's formulation of control theory (1969) argues that constraints on illegal behavior are strongest when there are relatively high levels of attachment to others. Given that the nature of attachments that develop through interactions between residents and personnel working at local business establishments generally should be less intimate and intense than those developed within ongoing friendship networks, it is very counterintuitive to find this equivalence.

However, ever since the landmark 1973 paper of Mark Granovetter, network theorists have recognized the important role that relatively weak ties play in community integration and social control (Breiger and Pattison, 1978). For example, Granovetter (1973: 1366) notes that rumors circulated through strong ties tend to be limited to a relatively small group of people, while a much larger group of people are exposed to such information if the rumor is transmitted through the kind of weak ties that might develop on the basis of the patronage of local businesses. Likewise, Weimann (1980, cited in Granovetter, 1983: 219) finds that similar patterns characterize the circulation of gossip, which Black (1989) and others have highlighted as a very important form of informal control. Therefore, one

possible explanation for the surprisingly strong parochial network effect is that it reflects a sensitivity to the number of people who will become aware of the illegal behavior.

A related potential explanation for this pattern is that private network relationships entail fairly intimate and broad-based degrees of familiarity among the participants. Thus, while residents might expect to lose some degree of respect from their friends if they became aware of participation in illegal activities, this could be easily counterbalanced by the respect would be still forthcoming for the successful and normatively approved performance of other components of the offender's role set. However, when an intimate degree of familiarity with the offender is lacking, the knowledge of illegal involvement becomes the sole basis for the evaluation of that person. As a result, the illegality may result in the formation of a master status of criminal among non-intimate acquaintances, and the level of disapproval expressed by these people may be much more severe than that by close friends. While these possibilities can only remain in the realm of conjecture at this point, they represent some exciting avenues for future work in the systemic model of crime.

The second noteworthy finding is that while the associations reported in Table 4 between private and parochial networks and social control are statistically significant, there is no question that they account for only a very small proportion of the variation in the sensitivity to public opinion. It has long been noted that differences in neighborhood crime rates may simply represent the spatial distribution of individuals with particular social and demographic characteristics associated with crime (see Sampson, 1989; for a response see Bursik and Grasmick, 1993, pp. 24-29). For example, Simcha-Fagan and

Schwartz (1986) also report that the magnitudes of the neighborhood effects found in their study of New York City are very small. Therefore, there is a distinct possibility that while the effects of neighborhood dynamics are statistically significant, they are substantively trivial.

Before such a drastic conclusion is reached, it must be noted that despite the important advances that have been made in community studies of crime since the mid-1980s, significant measurement problems continue to plague systemic neighborhood research, including that reported in this paper. While the combination of self-reported data with official records of neighborhood crime rates represented a critical advance over traditional studies in this regard, the self-report technique has been limited by its ability to measure only a very restricted set of network characteristics, most typically size or frequency of interaction. However, these are only two of a number of structural features of networks that have may be centrally implicated in the control of crime. For example, Merry's (1981) ethnographic study of a public housing project suggests that an equally important consideration is the degree to which these networks represent closed homogenous systems or open heterogeneous systems that span the various residential subgroups in a neighborhood. Likewise, while networks may be of the same relative size, they may differ dramatically in their density (the number of actual ties, rather than people, represented in a network).

Recent developments in the area of "network sampling" (see Marsden, 1990) appear to make it a technique that is well-suited for the measurement of such complex network characteristics within a standard survey format, but it has yet to appear within the

criminological literature. Until richer network data become available, any conclusions that are drawn concerning the relative effect of individual and systemic processes are at best premature.

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TABLE 1

MEASUREMENT OF ECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS

STABILITY

	MEAN	S.D.
For how many years have you lived in this place?	11.05	12.02

HOMOGENEITY

(Variables coded 4=strongly agree, 3=agree somewhat, 2=disagree somewhat, 1=strongly disagree)

	LOADING	MEAN	S.D.
I have a lot in common with the people in the neighborhood.	.824	2.23	1.00
The people in my neighborhood are a lot like me.	.869	2.30	0.94
The people in my neighborhood are of the same social class I am.	.489	3.14	0.83

TABLE 2

MEASUREMENT OF KEY SYSTEMIC VARIABLES

PRIVATE NETWORKS

(Variables coded 4=strongly agree, 3=agree somewhat, 2=disagree somewhat, 1=strongly disagree)

	LOADING	MEAN	S.D.
I have a lot of friends in my neighborhood	.729	2.66	0.95
I know a lot of people in my neighborhood well enough to chat with them	.713	2.99	0.91
I often visit people in my neighborhood either in my home or in their homes	.649	2.18	0.95
If I needed help with a household chore, I could count on my neighbors	.639	2.73	1.08
If I needed \$20 really fast, I could borrow it from a neighbor	.647	2.60	1.15
My neighbors are careful to look out for my property when I am away	.689	3.38	0.85
My neighbors are considerate of me	.652	3.39	0.79
EIGENVALUE	3.73		

PAROCHIAL NETWORKS

(Variables coded 6=nearly always in neighborhood, 5=usually in my neighborhood, 4=about half and half, 3=don't do the activity, 2=usually outside the neighborhood, 1=almost always outside the neighborhood)

	LOADING	MEAN	S.D.
Where do you do your grocery shopping?	.648	4.69	1.37
When you go out to eat at a restaurant, where is the restaurant located?	.657	3.75	1.29
Where do you do your banking?	.633	3.98	1.65
When you receive help with a medical problem, where is the office located?	.506	3.27	1.40
Where do you buy clothing for yourself and other family members?	.617	3.46	1.32
Where do you take your car for repairs?	.427	3.42	1.62
EIGENVALUE	2.71		

CHURCH

Do you belong to a church or other religious group that is located in your neighborhood?

1. Yes 23.9%

2. No 76.1%

PUBLIC NETWORKS

(Variables coded 4=strongly disagree, 3=disagree somewhat, 2=agree somewhat, 1=strongly agree)

	LOADING	MEAN	S.D.
If there were problems...it would be a waste of time to complain to city officials	.761	2.23	1.00
City officials in this city do not care about the problems that people like me face	.761	2.30	0.94
EIGENVALUE	1.58		

CORRELATIONS

PRIVATE	1.000			
PAROCHIAL	0.149	1.000		
CHURCH	0.141	0.245	1.000	
PUBLIC	0.099	0.175	0.069	1.000

TABLE 3

MEASUREMENT OF SOCIAL CONTROL OUTCOMES

SENSITIVITY TO LOSS OF RESPECT

(Variables coded 4=definitely would, 3=probably would, 2=probably would not, 1=definitely would not)

	MEAN	S.D.
Would most of the people whose opinions you value lose respect for you if you were arrested for physically hurting another person on purpose? (Assault)	3.08	0.86
Would most of the people whose opinions you value lose respect for you if you were arrested for taking something from someplace worth less than \$20 that did not belong to you?	3.24	0/85

TABLE 4

THE SYSTEMIC DYNAMICS OF CRIME CONTROL

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

	PRIVATE	PAROCHIAL	PUBLIC	SC-ASSAULT	SC-THEFT
STABILITY	.223	-.031	-.082	-----	-----
	.017	-.002	-.006		
	5.232	-0.586	-1.535		
HOMOGENEITY	.529	.227	.126	-----	-----
	.530	.217	.116		
	12.421	4.297	2.339		
PRIVATE	-----	-----	-----	.120	.100
				.112	.084
				2.287	1.866
PAROCHIAL	-----	-----	-----	.123	.120
				.121	.108
				2.268	2.192
CHURCH	-----	-----	-----	.076	-.011
				.154	-.020
				1.422	-.204
PUBLIC	-----	-----	-----	.072	.047
				.073	.043
				1.367	0.879
R Squared	.38	.05	.02	.06	.03
F	108.85	9.28	3.31	5.42	2.94

The first entry is the standardized coefficient; the second entry is the unstandardized coefficient, and the third entry is the t value.

**ECOLOGICAL
DYNAMICS**

**SYSTEMIC
STRUCTURES**

**SOCIAL
CONTROL**

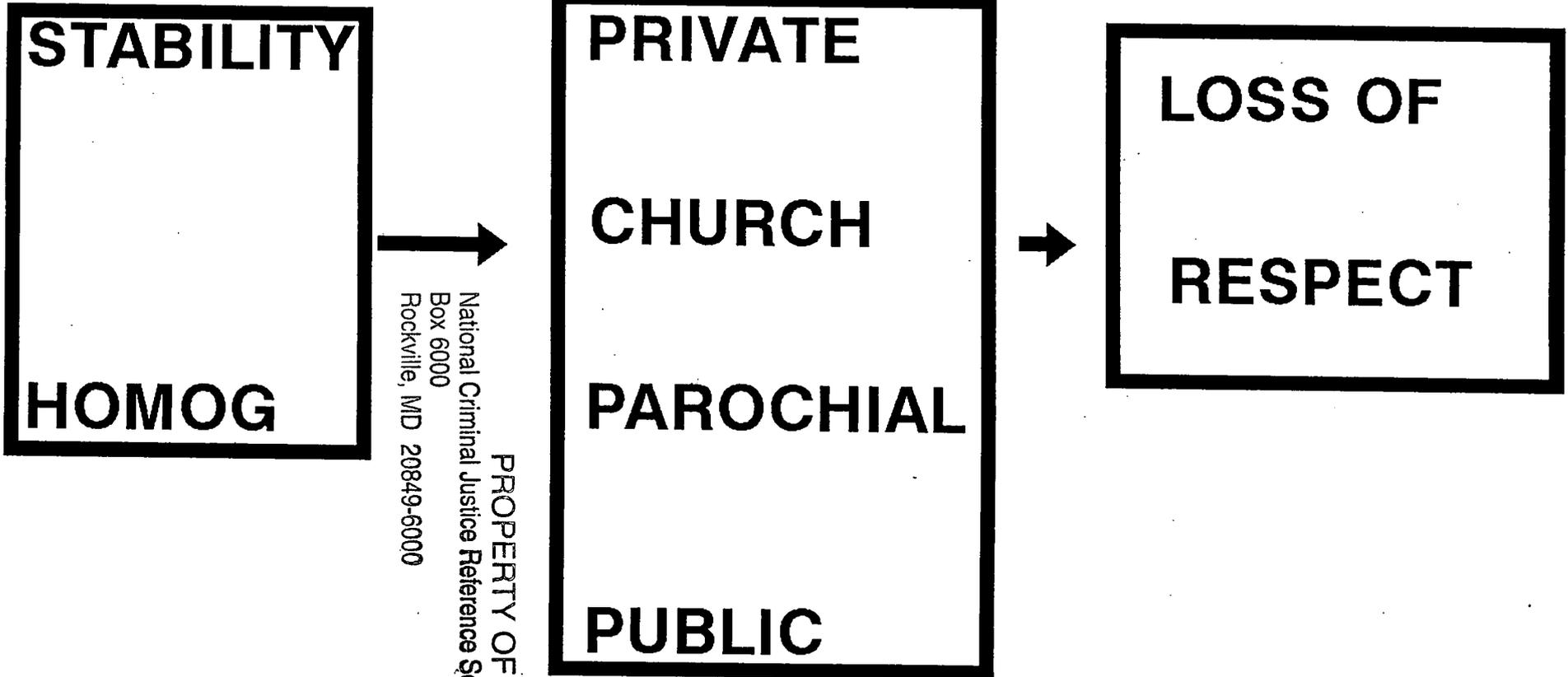


FIGURE 1