



National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

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Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Brief: The link between disorder and crime; specifically, whether manifestations of social and physical disorder, such as public drunkenness, graffiti, and broken windows, lead directly to more serious offenses. The study, part of the long-range Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, assesses the “broken windows” thesis and its implications for crime control policy and practice.

Key issues: The assumption that social and physical disorder can escalate to serious crime has had a major influence on law enforcement in many urban areas, resulting in police crackdowns on even minor incivilities. The research, conducted in 196 Chicago neighborhoods, assesses this thesis, proposing that crime stems from the same sources as disorder—structural characteristics of certain neighborhoods, most notably concentrated poverty.

“Collective efficacy,” defined as cohesion among neighborhood residents combined with shared expectations for informal social control of public space, is proposed as a major social process inhibiting both crime and disorder. Disorder was measured by direct observation rather than through the subjective perceptions of neighborhood residents. The informal social control mechanism of collective efficacy (and the broken windows thesis as well) focuses on what is visible in public places.

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Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods— Does It Lead to Crime?

By Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush

According to a now-familiar thesis, social and physical disorder in urban neighborhoods can, if unchecked, lead to serious crime. The reasoning is that even such minor public incivilities as drinking in the street, spray-painting graffiti, and breaking windows can escalate into predatory crime because prospective offenders assume from these manifestations of disorder that area residents are indifferent to what happens in their neighborhood.¹ The “broken windows” thesis has greatly influenced crime control policy, with New York City best exemplifying the use of aggressive police tactics to stem disorder. Many other cities have adopted similar “zero tolerance” policies, cracking down on even the most minor offenses.

There is no doubt that understanding physical and social disorder in public spaces is fundamental to understanding urban neighborhoods. Certainly, visual signs of decay silently but forcefully convey messages about affected neighborhoods. Disorder triggers attributions and predictions in the minds of insiders and outsiders alike, changing the calculus of prospective homebuyers, real estate agents, insurance agents, and investors. The extent of disorder reflects the extent of residents’ effectiveness in improving their neighborhoods and may affect their willingness to sustain their activism.

Disorder is indeed related to crime. The broken windows metaphor is apt insofar as it asserts that physical signs of decay signal neighbors’ unwillingness to confront strangers, intervene when a crime is being committed, or ask the police to respond. Disorder may in fact be more useful than crime for understanding certain troubling urban processes, such as the abandonment of many of the Nation’s urban cores. That is because disorder can be observed, while crime, by contrast, is largely unobserved. But the contention that disorder is an essential cause in the pathway to predatory crime is open to question. Reported here are the results of research that revisits the assumption of disorder as providing cues that entice potential predators.

Rethinking disorder

The research was part of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, a long-term study of the antecedents of antisocial and criminal behavior being conducted among a large group of people in a number of Chicago neighborhoods. (For a description, see “The Roots of the Study: The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods.”) The major goal of this phase of the study was to rethink the consequences of disorder and examine its sources.

This publication summarizes the authors’ article, “Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces: A New Look at Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods,” which appeared in *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (3) (November 1999): 603–51. © 1999 by the University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. The summary is published with permission of the University of Chicago Press, publisher of the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Issues and Findings

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Key findings: The study suggests that disorder does not directly promote crime, although the two phenomena are related, and that collective efficacy is a significant factor in explaining levels of crime and disorder.

- Disorder and crime alike were found to stem from certain neighborhood structural characteristics, notably concentrated poverty.
- Homicide, arguably one of the best measures of violence, was among the offenses for which there was no direct relationship with disorder. Disorder was directly linked only to the level of robbery.
- In neighborhoods where collective efficacy was strong, rates of violence were low, regardless of sociodemographic composition and the amount of disorder observed. Collective efficacy also appears to deter disorder: Where it was strong, *observed* levels of physical and social disorder were low, after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and residents' *perceptions* of how much crime and disorder there was in the neighborhood.
- The findings imply that although reducing disorder may reduce crime, this happens indirectly, by stabilizing neighborhoods via collective efficacy.

Target audience: Local law enforcement officials and policy-makers, particularly those in urban areas; researchers, particularly those focused on violence prevention.

The research produced an alternative interpretation of the link between disorder and crime, one that sees many elements of disorder as part and parcel of crime itself. Typical activities categorized as social disorder, such as soliciting prostitutes and loitering, and incivilities like painting graffiti are evidence of either crime or ordinance violations. The forces producing these minor crimes may be the same as those that produce more serious crimes, with the difference only in the degree of seriousness. Viewed this way, disorder and crime are manifestations of the same phenomenon.

What lies behind crime and disorder?

The study proposes that both crime and disorder stem from structural characteristics specific to certain neighborhoods, most notably concentrated poverty and the associated absence of social resources. The concentration of disadvantage refers not only to low incomes but also to high unemployment, a high ratio of financial dependence of one part of the population on another, and lack of investment potential.²

Structural constraints are not necessarily or solely economic. Residential stability, typically measured by levels of home ownership and transience, has long been considered a key element of strong urban social organization³ and its absence a lost opportunity for residents to build a stake in the community. Still other social constraints, among them inordinate population density (which can overwhelm public services) and mixed land use, are also proposed as obstacles to overcoming public incivilities.

At the same time these social constraints may promote crime and disorder, there are forces working to inhibit them. Community residents are assumed to want to live in safe environments free of predatory crime and disorder, and they share

common standards that underlie any collective effort on their part to establish social order and safety. These efforts are initiated or otherwise pursued informally through relatively noncoercive means, and are an expression of the self-regulating capacity of a social unit. Thus, neighborhood residents might use these means—informal social control mechanisms—to intervene in preventing truancy, public drinking, vandalism, or other manifestations of disorder.

The degree of informal social control is not the same in all neighborhoods. Where the rules of comportment are unclear and people mistrust one another, they are unlikely to take action against disorder and crime. Where there is cohesion and mutual trust among neighbors, the likelihood is greater that they will share a willingness to intervene for the common good. This link of cohesion and trust with shared expectations for intervening in support of neighborhood social control has been termed “collective efficacy,” a key social process proposed in this research as an inhibitor of both crime and disorder.⁴

These two sets of forces—structural characteristics of neighborhoods and human intervention—are interrelated, working jointly and reciprocally to affect crime and disorder. Concentrated disadvantage and residential instability undermine collective efficacy, in turn fostering increased crime and, by implication, public disorder. If the broken windows thesis is correct, and disorder directly causes crime, then disorder should mediate the effects of neighborhood structural characteristics and collective efficacy on crime. By contrast, if disorder is a manifestation of the same forces that produce crime, then collective efficacy and structural characteristics should account for the relationship between disorder and crime. In other words, the disorder-crime link would be spurious.

Measuring disorder

The method of measuring disorder was different from the one used by the majority of studies that link signs of disorder with fear of crime and crime victimization. Because these studies rely on surveys conducted among residents, they tap subjective perceptions and they generally find that perceptions of disorder are associated with

fear of crime. The study reported here assessed visual cues independently of residents' perceptions—the amount of disorder in the neighborhoods studied was measured by directly observing what was happening on the streets during the day. This method of observation is consistent with the informal social control mechanism of collective efficacy, which also focuses on what is visible in public places.

In this type of measurement, named “systematic social observation” (SSO), the means of observation are independent of what is observed. The method is systematic in the sense that observation and recording are done in a way that permits replication. What is observed are “natural social phenomena”—events and their consequences, viewed more or less as they occur.⁵

The Roots of the Study: The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods

The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods is a long-range study of the way communities influence people's social development. As a study of crime in the context of community, the project examines not just the activities of people and their communities, but also the activities of people *in* their communities. Social scientists from a range of fields are conducting the study and NIJ has published several reports of the findings.

The study topics. The social, economic, organizational, political, and cultural structures of Chicago's neighborhoods are being examined, as are the changes taking place in them over time. The other component of the project is a series of long-range assessments of the personal characteristics and changing circumstances of children, adolescents, and their primary caregivers. Information has been collected from nearly 9,000 residents of 343 Chicago neighborhoods, more than 2,800 key community leaders, and a sample of more than 6,000 children and adolescents (ranging in age from birth to 18 years). The study aims to unravel processes working at the levels of the individual, family, and community that determine what makes some neighborhoods safe and law-abiding and others dangerous.

The National Institute of Justice is conducting the study in partnership with the Harvard School of Public Health. The project is cofunded by the John D. and

Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; the National Institute of Mental Health; the Administration on Children, Youth and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and the U.S. Department of Education.

The research team includes Felton J. Earls, principal investigator and director of the project, Harvard Medical School; Stephen L. Buka, coprincipal investigator, Harvard School of Public Health; Robert J. Sampson, scientific director for community design, University of Chicago; Stephen Raudenbush, scientific director for analysis, University of Michigan; Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, scientific director for longitudinal design, Columbia University Teachers College; Maya Carlson, policy analyst, Harvard Medical School; and Daniel Kindlon, research associate, Harvard Medical School.

NIJ reports on the project. To date, researchers have amassed a wealth of information that reveals significant ways in which the social environment of a neighborhood shapes and determines behavior and identifies the developmental pathways that lead individuals toward or away from a variety of antisocial behaviors. This knowledge should help practitioners and policymakers develop effective strategies for prevention, intervention, treatment, and rehabilitation, as well as sanctions. Among NIJ publications of project findings are the following:

- *Adolescent Girls: The Role of Depression in the Development of Delinquency*, by Dawn A. Obeidallah and Felton J. Earls (Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, July 1999, NCJ FS 000244).
- *Attitudes Toward Crime, Police, and the Law: Individual and Neighborhood Differences*, by Robert J. Sampson and D.J. Bartusch (Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, June 1999, FS 000240).
- *Linking Community Factors and Individual Development*, by Felton J. Earls (Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, September 1998, FS 000230).
- *Neighborhood Collective Efficacy—Does It Help Reduce Violence?* by Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush, and Felton Earls (Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, April 1998, FS 000203).
- *Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods: A Research Update*, by Felton J. Earls and Christy Visser (Research in Brief, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, February 1997, NCJ 163603).

To measure disorder, trained observers videotaped what was happening on the face blocks⁶ of more than 23,000 streets in 196 neighborhoods that varied by race/ethnicity and social class. As the observers drove and filmed, they produced a permanent visual record that would be accessible at any time. They also logged the observations they made on each face block. Counted as signs of physical disorder were such items as garbage on the streets, litter, graffiti, abandoned cars, and needles and syringes. Counted as signs of social disorder were such activities as loitering, public consumption of alcohol, public intoxication, presumed drug sales, and the presence of groups of young people manifesting signs of gang membership.

Obtaining information about neighborhoods

To find out the extent of neighborhood collective efficacy, some 3,800 residents of these neighborhoods were interviewed. From the interviews came information about how much informal social control was exercised to contain disorder and crime and how much cohesion residents saw in their neighborhoods. People were asked, for example, about the likelihood their neighbors would take action if they saw children misbehaving in public and whether the neighbors were willing to help each other. The information about social cohesion and informal social control was then combined to produce a measure of collective efficacy.

Five measures of the extent of crime were used. Neighborhood residents were asked whether they or a member of their household had recently been victimized either by violent crime or by a burglary or theft. (They were also asked separately how much of a problem they believed various social incivilities—for example, drinking in

public—to be.) Police records were examined for counts of three types of crime—homicide, robbery, and burglary. Neighborhood structural characteristics believed to be key to explaining the level of crime and disorder were measured by examining the extent of poverty, the concentration of immigrants, and residential stability.⁷

Residents' ability to act as "guardians" who exercise informal social control of their neighborhood may also be affected by population density and type of land use. Presumably, the more people per unit of space, the greater the anonymity and the more difficult for residents to identify wrongdoers. Similarly, the commercial traffic density accompanying mixed-use land use (in which residential and commercial development are combined) has been shown to be related to crime and disorder and may inhibit social interaction and surveillance. Because these two factors affect opportunities for crime, the study took them into account.

What explains disorder?

The analysis revealed that a neighborhood's structural characteristics matter greatly in affecting levels of disorder. Poverty was the single most important factor found to influence the level of disorder in the Chicago neighborhoods studied. Disorder tends to be high not only where levels of poverty are high but also where immigrant populations are concentrated. And regardless of sociodemographic characteristics, neighborhoods where land use is mixed tend to have higher levels of physical and social disorder.

In neighborhoods where collective efficacy was strong, the levels of physical and social disorder observed were correspondingly low. This finding is consistent with the idea that collective

efficacy acts to inhibit disorder. This finding also held after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, type of land use, and residents' perceptions of the amount of crime and disorder.

Broken windows revisited

Overall, the findings did not support the thesis that disorder directly causes crime. First, although it is true that where survey-reported violence was high, levels of disorder detected by SSO tended to be high, the relationship was not strong. Second—and more important—is the finding, noted above, that the level of disorder varied strongly with neighborhood structural characteristics, poverty among them. Once these characteristics and collective efficacy were taken into account, the connection between disorder and crime vanished in most instances. Homicide, arguably one of the best measures of violence, was among the offenses for which there was no direct relationship with disorder.

The implication is that disorder and crime have similar roots: The forces that generate disorder also generate crime. It is the structural characteristics of neighborhoods, as well as neighborhood cohesion and informal social control—not levels of disorder—that most affect crime. Where collective efficacy was strong, rates of violence were low regardless of sociodemographic composition and observed disorder. Levels of homicide and burglary were affected by the amount of poverty and the strength of collective efficacy. Immigrant concentration also affected crime: In neighborhoods where immigrants were concentrated, crime victimization levels (as reported by the survey) tended to be higher. What is more, disorder did not act as a mediator between neighborhood structural characteristics and predatory crime.

The main exception was the link between disorder and robbery. Of all five measures of crime—residents’ reports of violent victimization and burglary or theft and police counts of robbery, burglary, and homicide—a direct association with disorder was found only for robbery. Evidently, robbers respond to visual cues of social and physical disorder in a neighborhood. These cues may entice them to act, and this in turn undermines collective efficacy, producing a cycle of yet more disorder and ultimately more robberies.

Implications for crime control

Although a basic tenet of the broken windows thesis was not sustained by the study, the findings do *not* signify that disorder is irrelevant to understanding crime. Signs of physical and social disorder are highly visible cues to which neighborhood residents respond, and they potentially influence migration, investment, and the overall viability of a neighborhood.

In particular, disorder may operate in a cascading fashion by motivating residents to move out of their neighborhood, thereby increasing residential instability. And because people move only if they have the financial means to do so, outmigration would increase the concentration of poverty among those left behind. Since residential instability and concentrated poverty are associated with lower collective efficacy and higher crime and disorder, over the course of time this process would lead to more crime and disorder.

More important, the findings strongly suggest that policies intended to reduce crime by eradicating disorder solely through tough law enforcement tactics are misdirected. (For a list of recent NIJ publications on policing disorder and related topics, see “Crime, Disorder, and Public Safety: Selected NIJ Publications.”) Eradicating disorder *may* reduce crime indirectly by stabilizing neighborhoods. This is implied in the finding that there is no direct link between disorder and most preda-

tory crimes. Neighborhoods with high levels of disorder did not have higher crime rates than neighborhoods with low levels of disorder once collective efficacy and neighborhood characteristics were taken into account. Visible street-level disorder does not necessarily translate into high rates of violence; hence, public disorder may not be so “criminogenic” after all in certain neighborhood and social contexts. The active ingredients of crime seem to be structural disadvantages and low levels of collective efficacy more than disorder.

Tackling public disorder as a means of reducing crime leaves the common origins of both, but especially the latter, untouched. Perhaps more effective would be an approach that focuses on how residents’ efforts to stem disorder may reap unanticipated benefits in greater collective efficacy, which in turn would lower crime in the long run. Informally mobilizing a neighborhood cleanup, for example, would reduce physical disorder while building

Crime, Disorder, and Public Safety: Selected NIJ Publications

“Broken Windows” and Police Discretion, by George L. Kelling (Research Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, October 1999, NCJ 178259).

“Crime Control, the Police, and Culture Wars: Broken Windows and Cultural Pluralism,” by George L. Kelling, in *Perspectives on Crime and Justice: 1997–1998 Lecture Series* (Research Forum, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, November 1998, NCJ 172851): 1–28.

Crime, Grime, Fear, and Decline: A Longitudinal Look, by Ralph B. Taylor (Research in Brief, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, July 1999, NCJ 177603).

“The Incivilities Thesis: Theory, Measurement, and Policy,” by Ralph B. Taylor, in *Measuring What Matters: Proceedings From the Police Research Institute Meetings*, ed. Robert H. Langworthy (Research Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, July 1999, NCJ 170610): 65–88.

“Measuring What Matters: Crime, Disorder, and Fear,” by Wesley G. Skogan, in *Measuring What Matters*, ed. Langworthy: 37–53.

“Measuring What Matters: A New Way of Thinking About Crime and Public Order,” by George Kelling, in *Measuring What Matters*, ed. Langworthy: 27–35.

Public Involvement: Community Policing in Chicago, by Wesley G. Skogan et al. (Research Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, September 2000, NCJ 179557).

collective efficacy by creating and strengthening social ties and increasing awareness of the residents' commitment to their neighborhood. Such a mobilization might also demonstrate to participants and observers alike that neighborhood residents could be relied on to maintain public order. By contrast, a police-led crackdown on disorder would probably produce a very different response by residents.

Notes

1. The thesis was first elaborated by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in "The Police and Neighborhood Safety: Broken Windows," *Atlantic Monthly* 249 (3) (March 1982): 29-36, 38.

2. Wilson, William Julius, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; Land, Kenneth, Patricia McCall, and Lawrence Cohen, "Structural Covariates of Homicide Rates: Are There Any Invariances across Time and Space?" *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1990): 922-963; and Hagan, John, and Ruth Peterson, eds., *Crime and Inequality*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.

3. Kasarda, John, and Morris Janowitz, "Community Attachment in Mass Society," *American Sociological Review* 39 (1974): 328-339.

4. Sampson, Robert J., Stephen Raudenbush, and Felton J. Earls, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy," *Science* 277 (1997): 918-924. This article was summarized as *Neighborhood Collective Efficacy—Does It Help Reduce Violence?*

Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, April 1998, FS 000203.

5. See Reiss, Albert J., Jr., "Systematic Observations of Natural Social Phenomena," *Sociological Methodology*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Costner, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1971: 3-33.

6. The face block is the block segment on one side of a street only. Thus, the buildings across the street from one another on any block count, for observation purposes, as two units.

7. For more details of the way collective efficacy was defined and measured, see Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime."

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