

TRANSCENDING TRADITION: NEW DIRECTIONS IN COMMUNITY RESEARCH, CHICAGO STYLE*

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As seems befitting a Sutherland lecture, I would like to turn to the intellectual home of the so-called "Chicago School." It is a place that Sutherland inhabited, at least for a time, and it is the place I currently call home, both literally and in thought. But let's be honest; it does seem a bit odd to be talking about the Chicago School in 2001. Robert Park is long gone and even I am sick of hearing about Shaw and McKay. Rather than wallow in the past, I thus propose to reflect on new directions and ideas in criminological research, especially those that may be transcending the grand Chicago tradition. I promise, then, no waxing nostalgic about the good old days. I propose to describe instead some of the themes and current findings that are emerging from a large-scale, ongoing study of Chicago neighborhoods. Before doing so, permit me to place the idea of community in its historical and intellectual context.¹

BACKDROP

"Community" now reigns as the modern elixir for much of what allegedly ails American society. Indeed, calls for a return to community values are being heard from a bewildering number of sources. Whether from politicians (on both the left and the right), private foundations, real estate developers, government officials, communitarians, or mainstream social scientists, the appeals to community seem ubiquitous.

Consider just a few examples of diverse efforts to mobilize action under the common rubric of community. In the foundation and nonprofit world, community increasingly serves as a conceptual umbrella to coordinate new initiatives. Some of the most ambitious include those propounded by the Ford, Rockefeller, and MacArthur Foundations to increase the capacity of local communities to solve common problems. Even the World Bank has

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1. The following section draws on some of my previous thinking about community theory and civic society, sans extensive references. For further engagement, see Sampson (1999).

jumped on the bandwagon, mining concepts of community to alleviate poverty around the globe. The move to community-based approaches has been equally swift and broad in criminal justice, starting with well-known efforts to increase community policing and expanding to community-based prosecution policies and now community corrections. Although with pecuniary goals in mind, real estate developers are also on the make with community. Taking heed of modern discontent with suburban sprawl and anonymity, they are proffering new visions that promote neighborliness, local interaction, and common physical space—all in an attempt to restore some semblance of community lost.

Intellectual interest in the idea of community is, of course, antediluvian. The very discipline of sociology was founded on late nineteenth-early twentieth century upheavals widely thought to have frayed the social fabric of American communities, yet the alleged decline of community continues anew, perhaps best captured by the intense attention focused on the notion of Americans “bowling alone.” Robert Putnam’s (2000) thesis of a decades-long decline in civic participation, voluntary associations, social trust, and informal neighborly exchange has captured the imagination of social scientists and the public at large. Similarly, the concept of community has been frequently invoked in debates on social capital and civil society. In the public intellectual world, the rise of communitarianism is centered on community responsibility and civic engagement as the glue undergirding social justice and the good society. Perhaps not surprisingly, the communitarian juggernaut has recently landed at the Bush White House.²

Scholarly research on community is seen in the return migration to the great tradition in American sociology and criminology of neighborhood ecological studies. The study of “neighborhood effects” on childhood and adolescent development has led the way, gaining prominence in the social sciences. A major stimulus to neighborhood research has been the ecological concentration of socioeconomic resources coupled with the persistence of racial and ethnic segregation. The range of child and adolescent outcomes associated with concentrated urban poverty and racial exclusion is considerable, including infant mortality, teenage childbearing, dropping out of high school, child maltreatment, delinquency, and violence.³

COMMUNITY REDUX?

Whatever the ultimate source, there has thus emerged, once again, what

2. “Needed: Catchword For Bush Ideology; ‘Communitarianism’ Finds Favor.” Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*, A Section, Pg. A01, 2001.

3. For a recent and extensive assessment of the neighborhood-effects literature focusing on problem behavior and well being, see Sampson et al. (2002).

Robert Nisbet in 1953 called the “ideology of lament”: a widespread concern that something has been lost in American society, and that a return to community is in order. The declensionist narrative today is expressed most loudly (and, some would say, pathetically) among baby boomers, a group that has achieved widespread prosperity and educational achievement when considered in historical perspective. Seeking an alternative to suburban sprawl, consumerism, mainstream institutions, and the alienation thought to characterize globalization, the baby boom generation is driving unforeseen demand for the good that is deemed community.

There is, however, a problem, one that presents us with a deepening array of ironies, paradoxes, and fundamental questions. For starters, the “loss of community” thesis was wrong 100 years ago and remains so today. For another, if community has come to mean everything good, as a concept it loses its analytical bite and therefore means nothing. Despite widespread interest across multiple disciplines, the nature, sources, and consequences of community in modern society remain ambiguous and largely unscathed by serious social scientific inquiry. And so it is that debates on social capital and civic society tend to romanticize the idea of community rather than pose hard questions subject to empirical scrutiny. What do we mean by community? Does the concept refer to geographic locales, such as neighborhoods, or to common membership in non place-based groups? Does it mean shared values and deep commitments, and if so, to what? What does community “supply” that makes it so in demand?

Not only are the answers to these questions unclear, the current appropriation of community rhetoric elides any connotations to the dark side of communal life, and to the clear evidence that a generation of community-building efforts came up largely empty.⁴ One might ask, what do we stand to lose by a return to community and the idea of local community organizing and control—what does such a communal life potentially *deny*?⁵ As Michael Sugrue’s (1996) research on postwar Detroit has painfully revealed, neighborhood associations were the vehicles exploited by whites to forcibly keep blacks from moving into white working-class areas (e.g., by means of arson, threats, and violence). Is this what communitarians mean by neighborhood cohesion? How is enduring conflict reconciled with the idea of community? Does the current drumbeat of community values beseech a mythical past, raising the paradox of returning to nowhere? Or to a suffocating yesterday?

4. Gerald Suttles (1972) wrote 30 years ago on how the passion for local control and community organizing seemed impervious to evidence on the movement’s failures.

5. For my money, novelists have been more astute than social scientists in their writings on the potentially crushing weight of community. Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche are especially emblematic in this regard, as Casey Groves creatively showed (e.g., Groves, 1983).

Trendy fashions in social science have not helped matters, either. Facile debates about globalization and postmodernism have blinded many social scientists to the persistence of local variation, concentration, and place stratification. We are said to live in an era of globalization that renders place irrelevant. The Internet, cell phones, and planes are the coin of the global realm, not neighborhood difference, yet serious globalization theorists suggest that, if anything, the reverse is true. The traditional stratification of resources by place remains entrenched despite the advance of globalization (Castells, 1996). Paradoxically, in fact, inequality among neighborhoods in life chances has increased in salience along with, and perhaps has been exacerbated by, globalization (see also Sassen, 2001).⁶

Perhaps most important, however, the social mechanisms and processes hypothesized to account for neighborhood effects remain largely unexplored. Why, for example, does concentrated poverty—which is, after all, the concentration of poor *people*—matter? If neighborhood effects are not merely the reflection of individual characteristics, presumably they are constituted from social-interactional and institutional processes that involve collective aspects of community life. Social scientists nonetheless remain transfixed by compositional features of the population, most notably the poor (or “underclass”), restricting variation and systematic inquiry of the mosaic that modern cities represent. What I call the “poverty paradigm,” with its attendant focus on the outdated concept of the inner city, has dominated the urban research agenda since Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). The resulting logic has directed surveys to focus on poor individuals and ethnographies on poor communities. Variation across community contexts thus remains a limited object of inquiry, as does a direct focus on processes such as informal social control, network ties, and organizational capacity. And almost no research has examined *changes* in community-level processes.

The cumulative result is a set of foundational questions confronting our contemporary understanding of cities and communities. Indeed, how do we theorize and measure community-level variations in social mechanisms, processes, and organizational networks? What are their antecedents? Consequences? What social features of local communities matter most in modern (and, yes, global) cities and how have they changed? If community has in fact been liberated, social science needs a new theory to chart its direction. It is to that I now turn.

6. Airport intellectuals tend to fall hardest for the notion that neighborhoods do not matter. At least, that is, until they return to typically posh homes in segregated wealthy communities with elite schools. Or perhaps to the highly secure condominium with private doormen and elaborate owners’ associations set up to protect and enhance neighborhood residential investments. Stratification by street address holds little wonder outside the ivory tower.

THE CHICAGO PROJECT

If called upon to defend a Chicago School for the present, I would articulate matters quite differently than the textbooks of central business districts (CBDs) and concentric zones. Building on an article written by James Coleman (1994) just before his death, I posit seven themes that: characterize Chicago-style inquiry (see also Abbott, 1997; Sampson, 2002): (1) A relentless focus on context (especially place); (2) a focus on properties of communities and cities as social systems; (3) a relational concern with variability in forms of social organization as opposed to population attributes (or composition); (4) continual attention to neighborhood change and spatial dynamics (time and space); (5) an eclectic style of data collection that relies on multiple methods but that always connects to some form of observation; (6) a concern for public affairs and the improvement of community life; and (7) an integrating theme of *theoretically interpretive empirical research*. The disjuncture that seems to exist today in much of sociology between theory and empirical research seems never to have had much force at Chicago—past or present (Abbott, 1997).

Coleman wrote eloquently on how the Chicago-style tradition of research was led astray in the 1960s by the increasing dominance of survey research. The focus in social science turned to individuals, both as units of data collection and targets of theoretical inference. This dominance continues despite a resurgence of interest in neighborhood effects. To my mind much of this new research is impoverished, not just because it obsesses on impoverished communities, but also because it treats social context as just one more characteristic to predict individual variations in some behavior. I thus take as a central goal the study of community-level processes and dynamics in their own right, staking claim to a renewed Chicago School energized by the theoretical challenge of understanding the changing nature of community in mass society, and by methodological advances in collecting new forms of data on community.

The empirical base for this effort builds on the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). This large-scale, interdisciplinary, and collaborative project was designed to probe more deeply into human development in its social context. From a developmental perspective, seven cohorts of Chicago children and their families were carefully chosen and have been studied in detail to the present day. Some 6,500 children ranging in age from birth to 18 are participants. From a contextual perspective, the cohorts were sampled from a variety of contexts that were subjected to independent empirical scrutiny. We began by dividing the city into 343 neighborhood clusters (NCs)—ecologically defined units that were internally similar in distributions along a variety of

socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, family, and housing characteristics. Major geographic boundaries were also used to define NCs.

We then executed three independent studies. The *Community Survey* (CS) was a multidimensional assessment by Chicago residents of the structural and cultural organization of their neighborhoods. The idea was to use residents as informants about neighborhood context using a clustered survey approach, or what one might think of as contextual sampling. The design yielded a representative probability sample and a large enough within-cluster sample to create reliable between-neighborhood measures of social-organizational dynamics. In total, 8,782 Chicago residents representing all 343 of the city's neighborhoods were interviewed in their homes. The second was *systematic social observation* of some 23,000 street segments in 80 NCs selected to maximize variation in race/ethnicity and SES. This approach, to which I will return, used videotaping techniques to capture aspects of microenvironments (such as street-blocks) that bear on crime. The third method consisted of *key informant interviews* with 2,800 leaders in business, law enforcement, community organizations, education, politics, and religion.

LESSONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Having provided a brief overview of the study's motivation and design, I would now like to highlight three themes or contributions of the study to date: (1) a methodological paradigm, (2) a theory of social processes that matter most for crime, and (3) the importance of space. I will then take up separately a fourth major theme, the value of systematic social observation.

The first theme concerns the challenge of building strategies for direct and reliable measurement of the social mechanisms and collective properties hypothesized to be of theoretical relevance. It is tempting to describe this challenge as the need to understand the psychometric properties of ecological measures, but this awkward phrasing merely reveals the individualistic bias of modern social science, underscoring the need to take ecological assessment seriously as an enterprise that is conceptually distinct from individual-level assessment. It is for this reason that my colleague Stephen Raudenbush and I have sought to understand what we call the "ecometric" rather than psychometric properties of ecological measures (Raudenbush and Sampson, 1999). We argue that ecometric assessment, although it borrows tools from the rich tradition of psychometrics, has its own logic.

Moreover, without a coherent strategy for evaluating the quality of ecological assessments, a serious mismatch arises in studies that aim to integrate individual and ecological assessments. Standing behind individual

measurements are decades of psychometric research, producing measures that have withstood rigorous evaluation. This is especially true of measures of cognitive skill and school achievement, but extends as well to measures of personality and social behavior. These measures have been thoroughly evaluated in many studies—each scale includes many items, ill-performing items have been discarded, and psychometric properties have been found to hold up in many settings. Without comparable standards to evaluate ecological assessments, the search for individual and neighborhood explanations is likely to overemphasize the individual component simply because the well-studied psychometric properties are superior to the unstudied ecometric ones. As interest turns increasingly to contextual approaches that emphasize individual factors in social context, the mismatch in quality of measures has become even starker (Raudenbush and Sampson, 1999:3, 32).

In short, I believe ecometrics provides a new paradigm for assessing collective properties. An important component of ecometrics is the development of statistical tools for measurement evaluation (e.g., multi-level Rasch modeling; generalizability theory for assessing multiple sources of error), but I shall (mercifully) skip over those details and emphasize the more important implications for designing research in the first place. I consider the latter to be one of contemporary criminology's weakest links, for as a field we are characterized by sophisticated statistical analysis of weak or fundamentally flawed data. Ecometrics is thus part of a larger move that I hope re-establishes research design as a major criminological enterprise.

A second area of my inquiry concerns the puzzle of crime's ecological concentration, and by implication, the broader question I raised earlier of what a social theory of community might look like in the modern city. The motivating facts are clear. Over the course of the past century, criminological research in the ecological tradition has continually rediscovered the concentration of interpersonal violence in certain neighborhoods, especially those characterized by poverty, the racial segregation of minority groups, and single-parent families (Sampson et al., 2002).

Still, fundamental questions remain about what explains this pattern. The traditional or perhaps idyllic notion of local communities as urban villages characterized by dense networks of personal social ties continues to pervade neighborhood perspectives on crime. Yet such ideal typical neighborhoods, which seem to be the touchstone for social-capital theorists such as Putnam, bear little resemblance to contemporary cities where weak ties prevail over strong ties and social interaction among residents is characterized by increasing instrumentality. Consider, moreover, that in some neighborhood contexts, strong ties impede efforts to establish social

control. Wilson (1987), for example, has argued that many poor neighborhoods where residents are tightly connected instill a parochial culture that does not emphasize collective responses to social problems. In her study of a black middle-class community in Chicago, Pattillo (1999) also addresses the limits of tight-knit social bonds. She argues that although dense local ties do promote social integration, they simultaneously foster the growth of criminal networks that impede efforts to rid the neighborhood of drug- and gang-related crime.

Social ties thus present a challenge for thinking about crime. Most neighbors are acquaintances or strangers rather than friends—living out what Baumgartner (1988) called “moral minimalism.” Moreover, strong ties that are tightly restricted geographically may actually produce a parochial environment that discourages collective responses to public issues. In recent work we thus have proposed a focus on the mechanisms of working trust and shared expectations for social control, or what we have defined as neighborhood “collective efficacy” (Sampson et al., 1997, 1999). Moving from a focus on private ties to social efficacy signifies an emphasis on shared beliefs in neighbors’ conjoint capability for action to achieve an intended effect, and hence an active sense of engagement on the part of residents. The meaning of efficacy is captured in expectations about the exercise of control, elevating the agentic aspect of social life over a perspective centered on the accumulation of stocks of personal resources. Although some level of working trust or cohesion is essential for shared expectations to take root, strong personal ties are not the key to understanding in this theoretical framework. Many a powerful organization, university, or even society is held together by norms of action rather than personal bonds. Put more strongly, conflict in personal relationships is not antithetical to collective efficacy. (A secret: many of my colleagues at the University of Chicago dislike each other personally, sometimes intensely, yet we share a strong sense of the collective. Might this be true of some neighborhoods, too?!) Note that this theoretical move bears on the very definition of community itself. The common belief that neighborhoods have declined in importance as social units is predicated on the definition of neighborhood as a primary group that possesses the face-to-face, intimate relations that characterize all primary groups. I reject that definition.

Distinguishing between the resource potential represented by personal ties, on the one hand, and the shared expectations for action among neighbors represented by collective efficacy, on the other, helps clarify the dense ties dilemma in criminology (Morenoff et al., 2001:521). *Namely, social networks foster the conditions under which collective efficacy may flourish, but they are not sufficient for the exercise of control.* The theoretical framework proposed here thus recognizes the transformed landscape

of modern urban life, holding that although community efficacy may depend on a working trust, it does not require that my neighbor or the local beat cop be my friend. We do not need communities so much to satisfy our private and personal needs, which are best met elsewhere, nor even to meet our sustenance needs, which, for better or worse, appear to be irretrievably dispersed in space (Sampson, 1999). Rather, local community remains essential as a site for the realization of public or social goods, such as public safety, clean environments, and education for children (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). As Skocpol et al. (2000) and other critics of Putnam have pointed out, one of the keys to generating social goods, and in my view, collective efficacy, is institutions that are viewed as legitimate and that are supported by strong government. It is simply a mistake to view neighborhoods only in terms of local (or resident) determinism: *Institutions matter*.⁷

Which brings me to a third and related goal of our work—to elucidate spatial dynamics arising from neighborhood interdependence. In a recent paper in *Criminology* (for details, see Morenoff et al., 2001), we questioned the common assumption that networks of personal ties map onto the geographic boundaries of spatially defined neighborhoods, such that neighborhoods can be analyzed as independent entities. By contrast, most modern neighborhoods are less distinctly defined with permeable borders. Social networks in this setting are more likely to traverse traditional ecological boundaries, implying that social processes are not neatly contained in geographic enclaves. Consider as well that offenders are disproportionately involved in acts of violence near their homes. From the routine activities perspective, it follows that a neighborhood's exposure to homicide risk is heightened by geographical proximity to places where offenders live. Moreover, personal crimes are rooted in social interaction and thus are subject to spatial diffusion, as when acts of violence instigate a sequence of retaliatory events that lead to further violence in a spatially channeled way.

There are good reasons, then, to believe that spatial dependence arises from processes related to both diffusion and exposure, such that the characteristics of surrounding neighborhoods are, at least in theory, crucial to understanding violence in any given neighborhood. Contrary to the common assumption in ecological criminology, we thus conceptualize neighborhoods as *interdependent*.

RESULTS

What do the data tell us about these organizing themes? Summarizing

7. See also Bursik and Grasmick's (1993) articulation of the importance of public control.

across multiple papers and making a long story short, the first take-away lesson is that we *can* measure social processes reliably and effectively: *Ecometrics works*.

A second result is that neighborhoods vary widely in social control and cohesion, with those high in collective efficacy experiencing lower rates of violent crime after accounting for a variety of neighborhood characteristics, including immigration, density, residential stability, economic resources, and even prior violence itself (with estimates of about 12% lower homicide for a one standard deviation change in measured collective efficacy). At the same time, it is clearly the case that concentrated disadvantage predicts higher rates of violence, both directly and indirectly through its effect on reduced collective efficacy. By contrast, the density of local organizations, voluntary associations, and dense social ties turns out to yield weak direct links to violence. The effects of friend/kinship networks and local institutions are instead mediated by the collective efficacy of residents in generating social control and cohesion. This overall result suggests that collective efficacy can be achieved in the context of weak social ties in modern cities, especially if backed up by organizational and institutional infrastructure.

From the perspective of collective efficacy theory, moreover, we need to consider the legitimacy of criminal justice institutions, especially community policing and its specific means of enactment. To the extent that the police are mistrusted, particularly in the predominantly minority communities that bear the brunt of violent crime, cooperative efforts will fail even though all residents share a desire for lower crime rates. It is a myth, for example, that African-American mistrust of the police goes hand in hand with a tolerance of deviance and violence. Contrary to stereotypes, another finding from the community survey revealed that African and Latino Americans are in fact *less* tolerant of deviance and violence than whites (Sampson and Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998). At the same time, neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage displayed elevated levels of legal cynicism and dissatisfaction with police unaccounted for by sociodemographic composition and crime rate differences. It seems likely that disadvantaged communities want not fewer police, but crime control of a *different kind*. Related to this theme, Tracey Meares and Dan Kahan (1998) stress the unintended consequences of "get tough" policies and heavy-handed enforcement practices on a community's ability to contribute to crime reduction efforts. As an alternative, they advocate crime control strategies in disadvantaged African-American communities that bolster social organization and co-involve the community in significant ways to show that crime is not tolerated. Such norm-sensitive strategies have the potential to alleviate some of the legal cynicism that pervades

disadvantaged communities, expressed even by residents with little tolerance for the crime that surrounds them.

In any case, the implications of our Chicago findings for rethinking how the police and other agents of criminal justice should approach social norms in disadvantaged communities are potentially far-reaching. I would argue that the good community, at least with respect to public safety, is one where the legitimacy of a just social order comes from the mutual engagement—indeed, negotiation—of residents and local institutions with agencies of law enforcement. It is instructive in this regard to recall Albert Hirschman's (1970) classic work on the options available to persons in organizations—exit, voice, and loyalty. Residents of American neighborhoods have long employed the exit option, often to the detriment of the collective. Loyalty has been used as well, but often in an exclusionary manner (such as in the racially defended neighborhood). The logic of collective efficacy theory suggests that community safety is tied to the equitable implementation of voice.

A third bottom line is that our findings establish the salience of spatial proximity and the extreme inequality of neighborhood resources that are played out in terms of city-wide spatial dynamics. The intertwined phenomena of spatial advantage and disadvantage are seen clearly in our mapping of homicide "hot spots" and "cold spots" (Morenoff et al., 2001). In fact, the estimated effects of spatial proximity were larger than standard structural covariates and an array of neighborhood social processes. What this implies is that violence is conditioned by the characteristics of spatially proximate neighborhoods, which in turn are conditioned by adjoining neighborhoods in a spatially linked process that ultimately characterizes the entire metropolitan system. Focusing solely on the internal characteristics of neighborhoods, the default move of traditional ecological research, is thus insufficient.

SYSTEMATIC SOCIAL OBSERVATION

The fourth and final theme that I would like to address concerns observation. In the spirit of the early Chicago school of urban sociology, I believe that direct observation is fundamental to the advancement of scientific knowledge. In the present case, systematic observation provides an innovative way to collect direct measures of context. By systematic, I mean (building on Reiss, 1971) that observation and recording are done according to explicit rules that permit replication, and that the means of observation are independent of that which is observed.

One of the primary obstacles to bringing independent and systematic observation to bear on social phenomena has been methodological uncertainty, not just on how to properly conduct observations, but on how to

properly assess their measurement properties at the neighborhood level (Raudenbush and Sampson, 1999). Another concern has been cost, even though direct observations are potentially less expensive than household surveys, with listing, screening, and response rates eliminated. Yet another obstacle has been conceptual in nature, stemming from underappreciation of the yield of systematic observation for answering fundamental questions in criminology.

Taking seriously the idea that visual cues matter, the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods applied the method of systematic social observation (SSO) to study the manifestations of social and physical disorder. By social disorder I refer to behavior usually involving strangers and considered threatening, such as verbal harassment on the street, open solicitation for prostitution, public intoxication, and rowdy groups of young males in public. By physical disorder I refer to the deterioration of urban landscapes—for example, graffiti on buildings, abandoned cars, broken windows, and garbage in the streets. Visible evidence of disorder has long been noted as central to a neighborhood's public presentation. Jane Jacobs's (1961) classic observation of urban life in the 1950s even then evoked a concern with the threats of disorder to neighborhood civility, especially the negotiation of public encounters among strangers. In *Behavior in Public Places*, Goffman (1963) goes back to the obligation in medieval times to keep one's pigs out of the streets. In his case, the norms regulating public order include the visual ordering of the physical landscape.

In the present, of course, a reigning criminological theory posits that minor disorder is a direct cause of serious crime. The "broken windows" thesis (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) argues that public incivilities—even if relatively minor as in the case of drinking in the street, graffiti, and the literal broken window—attract predatory crime because potential offenders assume from them that residents are indifferent to what goes on in their neighborhood. The metaphor of broken windows serves the idea that signs of disorder are a signal of the unwillingness of residents to confront strangers, intervene in a crime, or call the police, such that disorder entices nonresident predators (assumed to be outsiders, that is) to commit crime.

To address these and other issues, we developed systematic procedures for observing public spaces. In the summer and fall of 1995, trained observers drove a sport utility vehicle (SUV) at a rate of three to five miles per hour down every street within a stratified probability sample of Chicago neighborhoods. The geographic unit of recorded observation was the face block: the block segment on one side of a street. At each intersection a unique geographic identification code was assigned so that adjacent block faces could be pieced together to form higher levels of aggregation.

As the SUV was driven down the street, a pair of video recorders, one located on each side of the SUV, captured social activities and physical features of both face blocks simultaneously. At the same time, two trained observers, one on each side of the SUV, recorded their observations.

One might wonder how we managed to do all this without suspicion. The answer is twofold: the windows were tinted, and by 1995, SUVs had become commonplace. Despite our fears, no one seemed to notice much. So on we went, observing and videotaping face blocks during the hours of 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. The SSO team produced videotapes, observer logs, and audiotapes for every face block in each of the sampled areas. In all, approximately 23,000 face blocks were observed. The data from the observer logs focus mainly on land use, traffic, the physical condition of buildings, and evidence of physical disorder. From the videotapes we coded information on physical conditions, housing characteristics, businesses, and social interactions occurring on each face block.

RESULTS

The detailed findings of our study are beyond the scope of the present format. But for those interested, a paper we published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999) led us to question the prevailing wisdom about the causal connection between disorder and broken windows. To be sure, disorder is a moderate correlate of predatory crime, and it varies consistently with antecedent neighborhood characteristics. Once these characteristics were taken into account, however, the connection between disorder and crime vanished in four out of five tests—including homicide, arguably the best available measure of violence. The empirical results tend to support the view that disorder and most predatory crimes share similar theoretical features and are consequently explained by the same constructs at the neighborhood level, in particular concentrated disadvantage and lowered shared expectations for the social control of public space. Disorder and crime, in other words, may simply be different manifestations of the same phenomenon, albeit at different levels of perceived seriousness.

Regardless of one's position on broken windows, however,⁸ an essential point is that public disorder in urban spaces is a robust ecological construct that can be reliably measured using systematic observational procedures. Appropriately assessed, the reliability of our scales was on the order of .8 to .9. Ecometric methods, therefore, can be used to construct and assess

8. Nothing in Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) suggests that disorder is an unimportant phenomenon, any more than we would say crime is unimportant. For important analyses of the theoretical and empirical disputes in the disorder debate, see Duneier (1999); Harcourt (2001).

the quality not just of surveys, as noted earlier, but observational measures of neighborhoods.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

I would also argue that the implications of SSO for research possibilities in criminology are intriguing. Unlike surveys or even on-site assessments, videotapes can be revisited, whether for assessing interrater reliability, recoding, or looking anew at processes not considered by the original investigators. Because street blocks are the first unit of measurement, neighborhoods can also be defined at varying levels of aggregation and linked to geographic information system (GIS) databases that allow for instantaneous merger with rich sources of information, such as address-level data on employment, real estate sales, and building code violations.

Most compelling from my perspective, SSO offers a distinct advantage in studying how land use patterns bear on social life. The location of schools, the mix of residential with commercial land use (e.g., strip malls, bars), public transportation nodes, and large flows of nighttime visitors, for example, are relevant to organizing how and when children come into contact with other peers, adults, and nonresident activity. The routine activities perspective in criminology provides the important insight that crime events require the intersection in time and space of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. Because illegal activities feed on the spatial and temporal structure of routine legal activities, the land use of neighborhoods distributes situations and opportunities conducive to crime.

To take a poignant example, the SSO method allows us to develop nuanced, place-specific measures of land use and social-interactional patterns, including potentially important sequential patterns. Census measures of poverty simply cannot tell us of neighborhood contexts like the following, which several of our study's children call home. As captured on film with SSO, in a short compass one passes "Prayer of Hope Church," "Discount Liquors," a funeral home, "Bible Books," an abandoned store, "Johnny's Liquor," "Halleluiah Church," a currency exchange, "Free-My-Chains Ministry," an abandoned lot strewn with trash, "Cut-Rate Liquors," a dollar store, Chinese carry-out, "Bottoms-Up Tavern," an abandoned gas station, "Mom and Pop's Liquor," and "Spiritual Awareness Church."⁹ In the late afternoon sun the liquor appears to have lubricated a number of street-level interactions and hustling for money, sex, and drugs. A sequential pattern that jumps from the screen is that for

9. I have used a composite of synonyms that, while capturing the physical and social persona of an actual setting, preserves the confidentiality of local institutions and businesses.

every church one sees, a liquor store or bar seems to follow. This visual picture suggests the struggles for salvation—bottle or sanctuary—that are played out on the streets for all to observe, perhaps most intently by the children that are co-present. Whether or not a child-friendly environment, certainly it is the sort of contextual setting that would be missed in traditional methods of community assessment.

In short, much as practiced by the original Chicago School of urban sociology, SSO takes researchers to the streets in a very real way. My description has only scratched the surface of the potential scope of systematic social observation as an analytic tool for assessing measures of context. Visual cues are salient in many dimensions of social life; systematically observing them in the natural social context should be a fundamental part of the criminological enterprise. As James F. Short, Jr., noted in reference to Park and Burgess's *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*: "The old 'Green Bible' called upon students to observe and record social life in every conceivable setting, and to generalize its forms and processes. This was the essential spirit of the 'Chicago School' " (Short, 1963:xvii). This continuing spirit has ushered in a new flowering of observational research, quantitative and ethnographic alike (see especially Duneier, 1999).

CONCLUSION

In closing, I obviously think it is important to take seriously the study of community-level processes *in their own right*. Rather than treat neighborhood as an attribute tagged on to individuals, we need to develop a truly social theory of community and assess empirically the causes and consequences of salient neighborhood-level processes and mechanisms. Too often our policies and theories are reductionist in nature, looking only at (or to change) individuals. It is an irony of sorts that Sutherland, whom we also honor with an award, is remembered and empirically tested in criminology almost exclusively for his individualistic theory of differential association. I demur, and would suggest that Sutherland's more profound writing was on differential *social organization*. It is not that individuals or individual characteristics are unimportant, but rather that much can be learned, and possibly changed, by focusing on community and social organizational context. I hope to have demonstrated that through new technologies and methodological strategies, coupled with a theoretical lens that captures the changing nature of modern cities, community research is alive and well—Chicago Style.

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