Extensions of the Basic Model

As the preceding sections have indicated, a great deal of effort has been expended in recent years to clarify and test the systemic assumptions of the basic social disorganization model. Much of this research has failed to address some of the key aspects of neighborhood control that were discussed in the opening chapter. However, there have been efforts to expand the traditional scope of social disorganization beyond that discussed in the preceding section. These attempts have opened up new avenues of investigation that were either taken for granted by traditional theorists or were simply not considered. The findings have been extremely promising.

Disorder as a Mediating Condition of Systemic Control

For at least two decades, one of the central research issues of criminology has concerned the fear of crime. While we will extensively examine the role of the neighborhood in this context in Chapter 4, the notion of disorder that has developed has important relevance to the systemic control of criminal behavior (see Hunter 1978). Disorder has been defined by Wesley Skogan (1990:4) as a violation of norms concerning public behavior, Dan Lewis and Greta Salem (1986:xiv) similarly refer to disorderly behaviors (or, in their terms, "incivilities") as reflections of the "erosion of commonly accepted standards and values." It has generally been used to refer to situations such as unacceptable behavior by teenagers, the physical deterioration of homes, commercial areas, or public spaces, the intrusion of "different" population groups into an area, or an increase in marginal criminal behaviors such as drug use or vandalism (see Lewis and Salem 1986:10). As such, it is a much broader normative conceptualization of problematic behavior than the definition of crime that we presented in Chapter 1 and is especially susceptible to charges that the criminologist is applying middle-class standards of behavior on populations that do not consider such behavior especially troublesome.

For example, there is a commercial district directly across the street from the University of Oklahoma campus (referred to as Campus Corner) with a cluster of taverns, clubs, and restaurants that are very popular with the local and University communities. During the evenings, the streets of Campus Corner are often populated by small, but vocal congregations of people, many of whom are under the influence of legal and illegal substances. A relatively high proportion of these people are minors.

In the summer of 1990, the Norman Police Department formed a Street Crimes Unit, which was funded partly with federal money to focus on street-level narcotics users and narcotics-related offenses. On the evening of August 23, this Unit "swept" through Norman and made fifty-two arrests, targeting in particular the parking lots of restaurants and clubs in the Campus Corner area. Half of the arrests were for public intoxication (Cannon 1990).

Many residents of the general Normal community felt that perhaps this was an unwarranted display of force against a relatively minor problem. After all, according to the National Survey of Crime Victims (Wolfinger et al. 1985:47), the perceived seriousness of public drinking is extremely low (ranking 19th in a list of 204 offense descriptions). Yet the sweep was organized when the police department received complaints from residents and merchants in the Campus Corner area after a knife fight that occurred the preceding Friday. Therefore, attitudes were extremely mixed concerning the seriousness of the public behavior that was widespread in the area.

Lewis and Salem (1986:10) emphasize that what is seen as disorderly behavior may differ with the interests, values, and resources of neighborhoods, and they document a significant degree of variation in the perceptions of the seriousness of "incivilities" in their ten study communities. Skogan has discussed this issue extensively (1990:3–9) and has presented evidence that the problem of bias may not be especially severe. After controlling for the neighborhood of residence of the 12,813 respondents for which he had survey data, he examined the degree to which perceptions concerning the prevalence of disorder in the neighborhoods developed within this literature related to individual characterstics such as race, age, education, and income (pp. 54–57). Although age was significantly related to such perceptions, he finds that there is a great deal of within-neighborhood agreement concerning the distribution of disorder: about 95 percent of the explainable variation was attributed to the neighborhood effect. Therefore, while there may be differences between neighborhoods in the perception of the level of disorder, there is solid empirical evidence that consensus exists within particular local communities.

The relationship of neighborhood disorder to crime is very important. James Q. Wilson and George Kelling (1982:33) have argued that disorder and crime are intertwined in a developmental sequence. Disorder can lead directly to increases in crime. Wilson and Kelling note that "crime symbols of disorder (such as broken windows or abandoned cars) become threatened crime symbols in a community, behaviors such as vandalism are much more likely because disorder in the community is perceived as a threat by residents" (Cannon 1990:2). However, disorder has a much more important indirect effect on crime in that it may lead to a breakdown of community control. As Skogan has argued (p. 47), when indicators of social disorder (such as public drinking, the presence of littering youths and drug use, or sexual harassment) or physical disorder (such as abandoned buildings in disrepair or uncollected trash) become highly visible in a neighborhood,
the full set of dynamics that are related to a neighborhood's ability to control itself through relational networks can only be discerned when long-term processes of urban development are considered.

Shaw and McKay had access to a unique set of data that enabled them to analyze the relationship between ecological change and delinquency over a period of many decades. Without such research strategies, it would have been impossible for them to document their important finding that local communities tend to retain their relative delinquency character despite changing racial and ethnic compositions (c. 1965-1957). However, the compilation of such information over an extended period of time is costly and often impossible. Therefore, with the important exception of the studies of Calvin Schmid (1960, 1960b), most of the relational networks that appeared after Shaw and McKay's work were forced to rely on cross-sectional data.

This limitation had a major effect on the development of the social disorganization perspective, especially after Bernard Landor's cross-sectional study of Baltimore (1954) presented evidence that apparently contradicted Shaw and McKay's finding of a strong zero-order relationship between the socioeconomic composition of an area and its delinquency rate (see Burris 1986a). Landor's research led to an important set of replications that confirmed the existence of the economic status and delinquency relationship (Bordua 1958-1959; Chilton 1964; Rosen and Turner 1967; Gordon 1967; Chilton and Dusich 1974). However, even after the issue was resolved, most subsequent studies continued to ignore the full dynamic implications of the social disorganization model and remained associational rather than processual formulations.

Such a limitation presents no problems if the ecological structure of an urban system is in a state of equilibrium. However, as Scheurman and Kobrin (1983a, 1986) have argued, the ecological stability assumed to exist by Shaw and McKay disappeared after World War II, when an acceleration in the rate of decentralization in urban areas significantly altered the character of urban change. The effects of such developments on the distribution of crime and delinquency are impossible to detect without longitudinal data. Thus, the cross-sectional model of social disorganization were grounded in a basic assumption of stability that simply was not justified by historical evidence.

Recent work has been characterized by a renewed emphasis on the dynamics of ecological change in urban areas and their reflection in the changing distribution of crime and delinquency rates. Burris (1986a), for example, has shown that the ecological structure of Chicago was relative stable between 1930 and 1940, concluding that at this time in the city's history, Shaw and McKay's arguments concerning the existence of ongoing areas of social disorganization and delinquency were generally upheld.

However, this was not the case between 1940 and 1950, when important