Thus, weak structures of formal and informal control decrease the costs associated with deviation within the group, making high rates of crime and delinquency more likely. Framed in this manner, the social disorganization approach of Shaw and McKay is clearly a systemic theory of neighborhood crime control.

The Systemic Implications of the Basic Social Disorganization Model

One indication of the confusion that the concept of social disorganization has generated within criminology is the existence of at least five extended efforts to clarify the assumptions of the Shaw and McKay approach (Fenstone, 1976; Gold 1987; Kobrin 1971; Kornhauser 1978; Short 1969). Of the five, Kobrin's is the most historically interesting because it originated as an internal memo circulated at the Institute for Juvenile Research while McKay was still employed there. This suggests that Shaw and McKay's model may not have been completely clear even to those people working with them.

The most important source of confusion concerning social disorganization is the fact that Shaw and McKay sometimes did not clearly differentiate the presumed outcome of social disorganization (i.e., increased rates of delinquency) from disorganization itself. This tendency led some to equate social disorganization with the phenomena it was intended to explain, an interpretation clearly not intended by Shaw, McKay, and their associates (1929:205-206). For example, Bernard Lander (1954:10) concluded that the value of the social disorganization construct is "dubious in view of the fact that social disorganization itself has to be defined as a complex of factors in which juvenile delinquency, crime, broken homes... and other socio-pathological factors are included." Thus, Lander defined delinquency as social disorganization. It must be noted that Shaw and McKay were not totally responsible for this muddied distinction, for Stephen Pfohl (1985:167) has pointed out that the classic disorganization theorists of sociology often used a single indicator, such as a delinquency rate, as "both an example of disorganization and something caused by disorganization" (see his example concerning the mental health studies of Farni and Dunham 1939).

The modern reformulation of social disorganization as a systemic model of neighborhood control can clarify this distinction significantly. The instability and heterogeneity of local communities is assumed to affect the three levels of social control discussed by Hunter (1985). At the private level, ongoing changes in the residential population of a neighborhood make it very difficult to establish and maintain intimate primary ties within the community. Thus, affective relational networks tend to be fairly superficial and transient, making the threatened withdrawal of sentiment, support, and esteem a relatively ineffective form of control. As Greenberg et al. (1985:46) have observed, while gossip, or the threat of it, is a powerful means of social control, its effectiveness depends on the inability of people to hide details of one's life from other members of the peer group. When the emotional relationships within this peer group are fairly superficial, this is easily accomplished.

While neighborhood instability makes the development of deep and lasting affective relational networks very difficult, heterogeneity in the area limits the breadth of such networks (see Gans 1962; Sontzel 1968). This is nicely illustrated in Sally Merry's (1981) description of a public housing project populated by Chinese, blacks, whites, and Hispanics. Although over half the families had lived in the project for more than ten years and there was substantial daily contact among members of these groups when using the project facilities, friendship networks rarely crossed racial and ethnic boundaries. In such a situation, the overall capability of affective networks to control the behavior of the residents is extremely restricted. For example, Merry notes (p. 96) that when some of the black youths living in the project heard that the Chinese residents considered them to be criminals, "they were intrigued but unconcerned and made no effort to alter their behavior."

Recall that the second level of community control, which Hunter (1985) calls parochial, refers to relationships among the residents that do not have the same sentimental basis as the affective networks. Therefore, at this level of self-regulation, the systemic control of crime partly reflects the ability of local neighborhoods to supervise the behavior of their residents. Stephanie Greenberg and her colleagues (1982a, 1982b, 1985, 1986) have identified three primary forms of such supervision:

1. Informal surveillance: the casual but active observation of neighborhood streets that is engaged in by individuals during daily activities.
2. Movement-governing rules: the avoidance of areas or in the near-neighborhood or in the city as a whole that are viewed as unsafe.
3. Direct intervention: questioning strangers and residents of the neighborhood about suspicious activities. It may also include chastising adults and admonishing children for behavior defined as unacceptable (1982b:147-148).

Instability and heterogeneity also weaken the supervisory capabilities of these parochial networks. Greenberg et al. (1982a) show that residents are not likely to intercede in criminal events that involve strangers and are reluctant to assume responsibility for the welfare of property that belongs to people they barely know. Therefore, supervision is less likely in areas in which there is not a relatively stable population base.

The social boundaries that may exist between groups in heterogeneous
neighborhoods can also decrease the breadth of supervisory activities due to the mutual distrust among groups in such areas. Merry (1981:123) notes that robbers were committed within the housing project described above without fear of apprehension owing to the anonymity caused by the composition of the project. Mark Granovetter's (1973) discussion of urban networks suggests that in neighborhoods in which individuals are relationally connected to every other member of their network but to no one outside that network, supervisory activities have to develop independently within each network to ensure success in the control of crime throughout the community (see pp. 1373–1374). Thus, racial and ethnic heterogeneity may lead to a differential capacity of neighborhoods to exert parochial control.

The systemic reformulation of the social disorganization approach does not assume that the private and parochial levels of control only have effects on the level of neighborhood crime through the dynamics of affectively based expectations and supervisory capacities. In fact, to concentrate exclusively on these forms of community self-regulation would seriously distort the original argument of Shaw and McKay for, as Kornhauser (1979:138) has argued, they were also centrally concerned with the "effectiveness of socialization in preventing deviance." Shaw and McKay (1966:172) argued, for example, that children living in areas of low economic status are "exposed to a variety of contradictory standards and forms of behavior rather than to a relatively consistent and conventional pattern." Such a statement obviously indicates that there are subcultural aspects to the general Shaw and McKay model, and they eventually argued that certain neighborhoods were characterized by a "coherent system of values supporting delinquent acts" (1966:173); see Chapter 5 of this book. However, Kornhauser has observed that the cultural assumptions are not a necessary component of the social disorganization model. Rather, she argues that it is more consistent with the rest of their orientation to focus on the variability in the effectiveness of local structures of conventional socialization found in urban neighborhoods.

Some aspects of the socialization process entail processes of control at both the private and parochial level. For example, few criminologists would dispute the contention that the family represents one of the key socializing agencies in the United States. For example, in their recent discussion of low "self-control" as a key element of criminality, Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi (1990:97–98) suggest that children are most likely to develop self-control when (i) their behavior is closely monitored, (ii) deviant behavior is recognized by others when it occurs, and (iii) such behavior is punished. Neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization are least likely to provide this type of setting for child rearing.

Sampson (1986, 1987a) has been perhaps most successful in incorporating family dynamics into the systemic neighborhood control approach to social disorganization, arguing that in relatively stable neighborhoods, parents often take on the responsibility for the behavior of youth other than their own children. However, in communities characterized by residential instability and heterogeneity and a high proportion of broken and/or single-parent families, the likelihood of effective socialization and supervision is reduced and it becomes difficult to link youths to the wider society through institutional means. Thus, cohesive family structures are effective sources of control "because they are aware of and intervene in group activities . . . that are usually the predecessors of involvement in more serious delinquent activities" (1987a:107).

Unfortunately, other instances of socialization have not received a great deal of attention in the social disorganization literature. This is most apparent in the general neglect of the educational process, even though it has been shown that rates of high school suspension are related to the neighborhood context in which the schools are embedded (see Hellman and Beaton 1986). The ethnographic work of Gary Schwartz (1987) suggests that the failure to consider the role of educational institutions within the larger context of the neighborhood may seriously limit our understanding of the processes of internal self-regulation. For example, he notes the example of Parsons Park, in which the local schools serve as "the cultural battleground of the community" (p. 50). In this neighborhood, it is primarily through the educational system that ethnic traditions, religious faith, family patterns, and other community standards are "woven into the fabric of local institutions." Yet in a second neighborhood located at the same city, the local high school "is experienced in the classroom as having little connection with the larger society's goals and values" (p. 222). It is no coincidence that these two areas also have very different rates of juvenile delinquency; the second, for example, has a heavy concentration of gang activity.

Although Shaw and McKay (1969) noted as association between rates of truancy and delinquency, they never fully developed an argument pertaining to the role of neighborhood schools. Neither did they discuss in any detail the role of local religious institutions, although Avery Guest and Barrett Lee (1987) have shown that a key church-related activity is the provision of social services aimed at the resolution of local community problems. Therefore, the role of local institutions (other than the family) as agents of control was relatively undeveloped by Shaw and McKay.

Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the basic social disorganization model is the failure to consider the residential networks that pertain to the public sphere of control. The implications of this shortcoming have been illustrated in several studies that document the existence of stable neighborhoods with extensive interpersonal networks that nevertheless have relatively high rates of crime and delinquency (see, for example, Whyte 1981; Sutch 1968; Moore 1978; Hirschi 1969). The existence of such neighborhoods is an important contradiction of the predictions of traditional social disorganization approaches, which have focused only on the mutual
linkages of residents. Efforts to explain this contradiction sometimes have led to the consideration of nonsystemic dynamics (often focusing on culture) that are logically inconsistent with the assumptions of a systemic model (see Shaw and McKay 1969 and Kornhauser’s critique 1978).

However, as many urban analysts have noted (see, for example, Lewis and Salem 1986), it is very difficult to significantly affect the nature of neighborhood life through the efforts of local community organizations alone. Rather, these groups must be able to negotiate effectively with those agencies that make decisions relating to the investment of resources in the area that may fetter the kinds of control that we have been discussing. For example, Whyte (1981:273) clearly argues that the problems he observed in the “Cornerville” section of Boston were due to the lack of effective ties between the neighborhood and the broader society; a similar argument is found in Suttles (1968). Therefore, a consideration of the public bases of systemic control is crucial to a full understanding of the relationship between neighborhood dynamics and crime.

The potential power for these external resources to foster a community’s capacity for control is illustrated vividly in the history of the Conservative Vice Lords, one of Chicago’s “super gangs” (for an excellent review of this history, see Dawley 1992). In 1968 and 1969, the Lords were able to solicit funds successfully from outside of their community (most notably from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations) to develop a series of neighborhood-based programs. Although the central area of their territory generally was considered to be one of the most dangerous in Chicago, Dawley (1992) has argued that important changes in neighborhood life occurred during this period, including a significant decline in gang activity and a reduction in the fear of crime. Unfortunately, the Lords became involved in a series of intense clashes with City Hall and encountered problems with their tax-exempt status as an organization. As a result, the funding disappeared, and ten years later most of the Lords were either reinvolved in serious crime or dead, and the neighborhood regained its status as an “urban cemetery” (Dawley 1992:190).

Therefore, the existence of stable, high-crime neighborhoods in itself does not call the validity of the systemic model into question. Rather, it emphasizes the need to expand the focus of control beyond the internal dynamics of the community. We will examine recent extensions of the systemic approach that have attempted to address this issue later in this chapter. A summary of the basic systemic reformulation of the social disorganization model is presented in Figure 2–2.

### Empirical Support for the Basic Systemic Model

Some serious empirical deficiencies have characterized most attempts to evaluate the social disorganization model. Traditional studies have used local community =area (Bursik and Webb 1982; Bursik 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1989; Heitgerd and Bursik 1987), census tracts (or empirically based aggregations of those tracts into larger areas) (Schuerman and Kebbel 1983a, 1983b, 1986; Shannon 1982, 1988, 1991; Taylor and Covington 1988), electoral wards (Sampson and Groves 1989), or police districts (Shannon 1988, 1994) within a given urban context as the units of analysis. Some form of crime and/or delinquency data are then collected from a law enforcement agency, aggregated on the basis of the residential neighborhood of the offender, and the corresponding rates are computed. The compilation of these records in itself is a formidable task, but the information is usually housed in a central location and the costs of data collection (especially if the records are in a computerized form) are not high. Unfortunately, such research designs necessitate defining a neighborhood’s boundaries on the basis of administrative jurisdictions. As we argued in the opening chapter, the selection of the appropriate spatial aggregation to be used as the unit of analysis in neighborhood studies is a complex issue with important implications for the findings derived from social disorganization research.

Most modern researchers are well aware of the problems inherent to the use of such boundaries. For example, while Bursik and Webb (1982) defend their use of the official local community areas of Chicago, they also note that it is a problematic approach. Likewise, Sampson and Groves (p. 783) note that the neighborhoods used in their analysis are only “approximations” of local communities. Nevertheless, most social disorganization researchers have resigned themselves to these restrictions on the determi-