

**DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR: THE COLLAPSE OF  
COMMUNITY SOCIAL CONTROL MECHANISM IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA**

**GBENEMENE KPAE (PhD)**

**Centre for Conflict and Security Studies, University of Port Harcourt  
Rivers State, Nigeria  
benkpae@hotmail.com**

**ABSTRACT**

*The prevalence of criminal violence particularly gang violence and property crimes in many neighborhoods and communities in Rivers State is alarming. Many of these communities and slums are concentrated by jobless, poor youths of lower-socio-economic background. These communities are also experiencing breakdown of collective means of social control of youth behavior since the formal means of crime control have not been able to cope with increasing rates of youth violence. Many communities that, hitherto, used to be governed by elders and traditional leaders are now being ruled by heavily armed youths that are ready to unleash violence on the slightest provocation. This paper examines how breakdown on informal system of social control has exacerbated the crime situation. Drawing on the social disorganization theory, and the concept of collective efficacy, we contend that many communities and neighborhoods in Rivers State are experiencing high rates of gang violence and youth criminality, because of the total collapse of informal means of social control.*

**KEYWORDS:** deprived neighborhood, social disorganization, collective efficacy. Juvenile delinquency

**INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between neighborhood and juvenile delinquency has been the subject of empirical investigation by scholars for several years. Many of these studies have examined community conditions, and how it generates criminal behavior. The earlier work on neighborhood conditions had used the theory of social disorganization, while later works used the concept of collective efficacy to explain delinquency at the community or neighborhood level.

For instance, Park and Burgess (1921) developed the theory of urban ecology to explain how communities became socially disorganized. According to the concentric theory of social disorganization, Park and Burgess argued that neighborhood conditions, either wealth or poverty, had a much greater determinant effect on criminal behavior than other individual factors such as age, gender and religion. Later Sutherland (1934) adopted the concept of social disorganization to explain the increases in crime that accompanied the transformation of preliterate and peasant societies in which influences surrounding a person were steady, uniform, harmonious, and consistent compared to modern Western civilization, that is characterized by inconsistency, conflict, and un-organisation. Sutherland argued that the mobility, economic competition and individualistic ideology that accompanied capitalist and industrial development had been responsible for the disintegration of the large and homogenous neighborhoods as agents of social control. Shaw and McKay (1942) applied Sutherland's theory to argue that criminality was not caused at the individual levels but in response by normal individual to abnormal conditions. Following some of the criticisms against Shaw and McKay's work, Bursik (1988) was able to establish that it was possible and likely to have stable crime patterns within an area that showed constant population change. This is because it was difficult to develop primary relationship that resulted in informal structures of social control when the local networks were in constant flux. Bursik and Grasmick (1993) further contributed to the social disorganization theory by reformulating the concept of social control within neighborhoods. Bursik and Grasmick concluded that social control which is influenced by structural factors within a neighborhood such as poverty, residential mobility, heterogeneity, and broke homes affect the ability of the neighborhood to implement models of social control.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Social disorganization refers to the inability of community structure to realize the common value of the residents and maintain effective social control (Sampson and Groves, 1989).

**Collective efficacy:** This refers to the ability of members of community to control the behavior of individuals and groups in the community as a way of guaranteeing community safety and orderliness. However, in the sociology of crime, the term collective efficacy refers to the ability of members of a community to control the behavior of individuals and groups in the community. Control of people's behavior allows community residents to create a safe and orderly environment for residents (Hipp & Wo. 2015). They also conceptualized collective efficacy as the combination of a general sense of residents' willingness to provide informal social control along with high levels of trust and solidarity among residents.

**Deprived neighborhood:** simply refers to communities or neighborhoods inhabited by people of lower-socio economic background or by people that are economically disadvantaged. Studies have shown that individuals particularly youth that live in neighborhoods plagued by poverty, lower socio-economic background, slum neighborhood etc have a higher propensity to commit criminal behavior compared to their counter-parts that reside in middle or affluent neighborhoods. This was contained in the study of Shaw & Mckay, (1947) of social dispersion in the Chicago area of the U.S. In their study that lasted for two decades on the spatial distribution of delinquency across urban areas in Chicago, Shaw and Mckay linked local delinquency rates to measures of population change, sub-standard housing, economic and racial segregation. They identified the highest rates of delinquency in the areas of low socio-economic status, which is unsurprising. But they also demonstrated considerable consistency in these neighborhood problems across time, despite complete changes in the populations occupying those areas. Rather than viewing delinquency as a result of direct result of competition over lack of economic resources, they suggested that this occurred in conjunction with the impact of residential change and high levels heterogeneity, limiting the ability of informal social control mechanism to community's to control their residents. The obstruction of informal social controls was primarily reflected through restrictions on residents' abilities to develop strong friendship networks within their community, reduced participation in local organisations, and a limited set of social resources available to supervise teenage peer groups (Brunton-Smith, I., Sunderland, A., & Jackson, J. (2013).

### **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

Social disorganization theory is one of the theories developed by the Chicago School. This theory links crime rates to neighborhood ecological characteristics. In other words, a person's residential location is a substantial factor that shapes the likelihood that such individual would become involved in illegal activities. The concept 'social disorganization' was first introduced in the work of Shaw and Mckay (1942). According to Shaw and Mckay social disorganization refers to the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social control. The theory suggests that youths from disadvantaged neighborhoods are likely to participate in a subculture which approves delinquency.

### **Collective Efficacy**

The concept of collective efficacy derives its origin from psychology literature and the writing of Bandura. Bandura (1982) in Hipp and Wo (2015) argues that collective efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results. This concept was later introduced by Sampson et al (1977) when they tried to understand the relationship between neighborhood and crime. According to Sampson et al (1977) collective efficacy refers to the ability of members of a community to control the behavior of individuals and groups in a community. Control of people's behavior allows community residents to create a safe and orderly environment. Sampson et al believes that collective efficacy is the willingness of residents to provide informal social control along with high level of trust and solidarity among them.

The theory of social disorganization and the concept of collective efficacy can be used to analyze and explain the prevalence of violent crimes in most communities in Rivers State. Recently, many communities in Rivers

State have been experiencing high levels of cult related violence. Cult rivalry and battle over turf has made living in most communities a nightmare. There is increase victimization of both cult members and innocent members of the public. The prevalence of violent crimes has forced many community members to seek for shelter elsewhere outside of their communities.

The prevalence of violent crimes in many communities is due to the total collapse of the informal means of social control. In the past, discipline of young ones was the collective responsibility of every member of the community. There was also social cohesion, mutual trust and solidarity among community members in their fight against criminal behavior. As a result, local residents were willing to intervene for the common good to instill discipline in some unruly child. However, presently, such means of informal means of social control no longer exist. The elders and traditional institutions do not command the respect from the young ones that, hitherto, used to exist and help to shape the behavior of children. The inability of communities to exert social control on youth behavior has led to increase in violent crimes and juvenile delinquencies.

It also imperative to point out that the community structures in Rivers State perpetrators and victims of these violent crimes are mostly youths from poor and lower-socio economic background. Many of these youths have seen the sub-culture of violence as a normal way of living. Despite government effort by introducing the amnesty programme for cultist, the spate of violence has continued to increase. The question then is, why has government amnesty programmes and formal means of social control not been able to reduce the rates of violence in several communities in Rivers State? The answer to this question lies in the collapse of the informal means of social control, thereby creating a vacuum where jobless and poor youths have taken over these communities. Thus the break-down of security in the south south region of Nigeria especially in Rivers State is that while the formal means of social control has been ineffective in controlling street crimes particularly gang related violence in various communities, the informal means of social control has also been weak due to urbanization and weakening of the social system that usually binds communities together.

### **Previous Literature**

A neighborhood is considered to be socially disorganized if it exhibits certain characteristics such as concentrated poor and unemployed, broken down houses, and residential mobility. These structural conditions lead to increase in juvenile crime and delinquency because they inhibit a community ability to enforce informal means of social control.

Park and Burgess (1921) argued that crime was prevalent certain area of Chicago, particularly in zone 2, because it was populated by very poor people who were mostly unskilled. The zone also has broken down houses and high level of juvenile delinquency, because of the absence of the institutional means of social control. Later on Shaw and McKay (1942) replicated the same study in trying to understand the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and crime. They found that crimes and delinquency were likely to flourish in impoverished neighborhoods. They also found that weak neighborhood structural factors such as concentrated poverty, residential mobility, and racial-ethnic heterogeneity, are connected to higher rates of juvenile delinquency, because they lead to social disorganization. Similarly, Bursik (1988) found that community level social disorganization such as poverty, levels of alienation, disassociation, and fear of crime were responsible for the increases in crime rates. Further, Curry and Spergel (1988) found that there was a connection between socially disorganized neighborhood and criminal delinquencies.

Sampson and Groves (1989) study in Britain also confirmed the assumption that socially disorganized neighborhoods had high rates of crime and victimization. Sampson (1989) also examined the effects of neighborhood characteristics on personal criminal victimization (rape, robbery, assault, and larceny). Data used for the study was obtained from the United States National Crime Survey for the years 1973-1975. Specifically, the study examined the effects of neighborhood factors such as unemployment, income inequality, racial composition, structural density, residential mobility, and family structure on crime victimization. The study found that structural density, residential mobility, and female-headed households have strong positive effects on rates of personal victimization. However, the study found that inequality and

racial composition have small effects on victimization when social integration and opportunity factors are included in the analysis.

Bursik and Grasmik (1993) used the Shaw and McKay (1942) work to develop a two-stage model of social disorganization. The model notes that neighborhood structural characteristics such as low socio-economic status, residential mobility, racial heterogeneity, and family disruption, are exogenous sources of social control disorganization that lead to the disruption of local social organization. The disruption of local organization is characterized by weak local friendship networks, low organizational participation, and unsupervised teenage groups. Bursik and Grasmik (1993) conclude that social disorganization limits the capacity of neighborhoods to regulate and control behavior, which contributes to higher rates of crime and delinquency (Sun, Triplett, and Gainey, 2004). Also, apart from the indirect effects of social organization variables of criminality, neighborhood structural characteristics have direct effects on crime delinquency. Sampson, et al (1997) in a cross-sectional study found that neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy exhibited lower levels of violence whether measured as perceived violence, violent victimization or homicide events). In Nigeria, Iwarimie-Jaja (1990) found that there was high incidence of armed robbery in slums and middle-class residential areas of Port Harcourt metropolis. Iwarimie-Jaja argued that such areas have high rates of violence because such neighborhoods provided less security to combat criminality. However, unlike previous studies, Iwarimie-Jaja's study showed that in the city of Port Harcourt incidence of armed robbery could also take place in middle class neighborhood. This means that property crime was not limited to poor neighborhood alone.

Sampson (2012) also examined the role of neighborhood structural conditions on juvenile delinquency. He found that community and neighborhood conditions were related to level of crime and delinquency in such neighborhood.

Other factors have also been connected to youth delinquency including neighborhood disorder, weak social connections within the neighborhood, low levels of informal social control, and low levels of collective efficacy (Chung and Steinberg, 2006).

Recent studies have faulted the arguments that neighborhoods effects alone contribute to juvenile delinquency. For instance, the ecological model argue that youth criminality is due to a combination of an outer system, that is , the neighborhood, and an inner system, that is the family. They also argued that the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and youth criminal behaviour is limited, because such relationship is mediated by several factors such as parents' parenting behaviours (e.g., the type of supervision the child receives from the parent), and characteristics of the home environment in which the child is raised (e.g, level of economic hardship in the home) (Tolan and Henry, 2000).

Other studies have also examined the combined effects of neighborhood characteristics, parenting practices, and peer deviance on youth criminal outcomes. Chung and Steinberg the relationship between neighborhood structural and social characteristics, parenting practices, peer group affiliation, and delinquency among a group of serious juvenile offenders. The respondents consisted of youths from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minority youth living in urban communities. Chung and Steinberg found that weak neighborhood social organization is indirectly related to delinquency through its association with parenting behavior and peer deviance. Chung and Steinberg also found out that community social ties may confer both pro-and anti-social influence to youth.

Rankin and Quane (2002) studies indicated that higher rates of community collective efficacy were related to better parental supervision, fewer deviant peer affiliation, and lower levels of adolescent problem behaviour. Also, Tolen et al (2003) in Chung and Setinberg, 2006) examined the mediating role of parenting practices and deviance in the same model of youth violence. Using a longitudinal data Tolen et al (2003) established that both parenting practices and youths' affiliation with deviant peers served as important mediators of neighborhood effects on violent offending. More importantly, Tolen et al (2003) found that weak neighborhood structural and social characteristics were indirectly related to gang membership, through their effects on parenting practices, and that gang affiliation mediated the influence of ineffective parenting behavior on individual violence.

The concept of collective efficacy that is derived from the social disorganization literature represents the capacity of residents, organizations, and other groups to exert social control and thereby reduce crime and violence (Uchida, Swatt, Solomon, Verano, 2014). According to Sampson (2012) collective efficacy includes established trust among residents and the willingness to intervene to achieve social control. Also Sampson (2004) in Uchida et al (2014) believe collective efficacy captures the link between cohesion, especially working trust and shared expectations for action. Similarly, Robert Sampson, Stephen Raudenbush, and Felton (1977) study had hypothesized that collective efficacy was linked to reducing violence in communities with concentrated disadvantage. This hypothesis was tested on a 1995 survey of 8782 residents of 343 neighborhoods in Chicago, Illinois. The result of the analysis showed that a measure of collective efficacy yielded a high

### **Conclusion**

Previous researches have established a common link between neighborhood characteristics and juvenile delinquency. The effects of these neighborhood factors on adolescents criminal behavior was first examined in the work of Shaw and Mckay who developed the concept of social disorganization. Although, some of the structural factors examined by Shaw and Mckay (1942), such as residential mobility and racial-ethnic heterogeneity that are linked to juvenile delinquency might not apply to most communities in Rivers State, however, characteristic such as 'concentrated poverty' are applicable to most communities in which our youths live because many of the communities are inhabited by people of poor background.

This concept social disorganisation has been expanded to include the theory of collective efficacy and social cohesion. However, this paper specifically dwells on the social disorganization theory and how it applies to many neighborhoods and communities in Rivers State. In many communities and neighborhoods in Rivers State, the people are unable to maintain effective social control of its youths. These communities are also experiencing low level of collective efficacy because of the collapse of the informal means of social control of adolescent behavior. This explains the reason why there is increase in cult related violence and gang violence. Many youths grow up in poor homes where the parents cannot cater for their daily needs due to the depressed Nigerian economy. Many grow up to embrace gang violence as an acceptable way of life and use violence as a means of settling dispute with rival cult members. This has created a sub-culture of violence in many communities, which has lead to internal displacement for many of the communities where gang violence have become the order of the day.

### **References**

- Bursik , R. and Harold G. Grasmick (1993) *Neighborhoods and Crime: The Dimensions of Effective Community Control*. New York: Lexington.
- Bursik, (1988) "Social Disorganisation and Theories of Delinquency: Problems and Prospects" *Criminology* 26(4): pp 519-52.
- Brunton-Smith, I., Sunderland, A., & Jackson, J. (2013). *The Role of Neighborhoods in Shaping Crime and the Perceptions of Crime*. Springer.
- Chung, L. and Steinberg, L (2006) "Relationship between Neighborhood Factor, Parenting Behaviours, Peer Deviance, and Delinquency among serious Juvenile Offenders." *Development Psychology* 42(2) pp 319-334.
- Iwarimie-Jaja, D. (1990) Implication of Drug Trafficking: The Nigerian Experience. *Criminal Organization*. Vol. 5(1):6-10
- Park, R. and Buress, E. (1921) *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition, 1969).
- Sampson, R. and Byron Groves (1989) "Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social Disorganization Theory." *American Journal of Sociology* 94: 774-802
- Sampson, R. J., Stephen W. Raudenbush, and Felton Earls (1997) "Neighborhoods and Violent

- Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy” *Science* Vol. 277 (5328): 918-924.
- Shaw, C. and Henry D. McKay (1942) *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Sun, Y. I. Ruth Triplett, and Randy R. Gainey (2004) “Neighborhood Characteristics and Crime: A Test of Sampson and Groves Model of Social Disorganisation.” *Western Criminology Review* 5(1): 1-16
- Uchida, C. D. Marc L. Swatt, Shellie E. Solomon, and Sean Varano (2014) “Neighborhood and Crime: Collective Efficacy and Social Cohesion in Miami- Dade County