

AN INVESTIGATION OF SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION  
THEORY AT TCU

by

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THEORY AT TCU

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## INTRODUCTION

The college campus seems to hold a strange duality in regards to danger in the eyes of the general public and media. On the one hand, college life is portrayed in countless movies and stories as a time to let loose a little, where transgression becomes the norm and everyone is at least a little bit naughty. This is what college is *supposed* to be, they argue, with a sort of “college kids will be college kids” mentality that excuses behavior that would never pass in the home they came from. On the other hand, we are somberly reminded of the dangers of these transgressions when they go too far. Whether it be massacres like the Virginia Tech shooting, rape stories surfacing from a fraternity house, or the end of a young life after a night of binge-drinking, these stories come to the public’s attention from time to time and remind us that some of our nation’s most promising institutions also hold some of its darkest history.

The unique nature of college life has puzzled many lawmakers, parents, and university officials since the inception of these institutions. In particular, there is always disagreement among these interest groups on the best way to approach criminality and deviance in this environment. On one hand, many feel that a more punitive system of discipline will do too great of a harm to the chances of success for these young people, and they argue for a more forgiving and education-based approach. Their models recognize that college students are experiencing many new freedoms and pressures, and try to give students some leeway in adjusting to their new lives. On the other hand, there will always be some who argue for a stricter approach to college deviance. They feel that being too lenient and forgiving will set college students up for further (and increasingly more dangerous) criminality, in a world which will be much more punitive off campus.

These discussions on the best way to approach college deviance find their front lines, for the vast majority of campuses, in the on-campus residence halls. For many universities, living in an on-campus hall or dormitory is required for at least the first year of attendance there, with further living requirements varying greatly with schools and enrollment size. This means that on-campus residence hall policies are a telling place to learn a university's stance on crime and deviance. In this controlled and unique environment, we can easily see if the theories a university is putting into practice prove to be an effective means of control.

This paper will take a qualitative look at the effectiveness and applicability of social disorganization theory as observable in on-campus residence halls at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth, Texas. With an undergraduate population just under 8,000, first- and second-year students at TCU are required to live on-campus unless they appeal to live off campus due to extenuating circumstances (such as financial reasons). The university is well known for having strong student affairs and housing/residence life departments. A smaller private institution, TCU prides itself on being very community-driven. Although you will not find direct mention of social disorganization on any of the websites or housing documents, there is a noticeable reliance on the same theories and ideas as social disorganization theory in its policies and approaches to residence life. This paper will investigate what social disorganization theory in on-campus residence halls looks like in practice at TCU, and how it affects the student life, communities, and deviance within the halls.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social disorganization theory, also known as the “Chicago School” theory of criminology, was devised by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay in the early 1900s. This theory was first developed to investigate why certain neighborhoods have more social problems, especially delinquency, than others. Shaw and McKay proposed that the neighborhoods with the highest crime rates shared three problems in particular: physical dilapidation, poverty, and heterogeneity. These factors, they argued, lead to a state of social disorganization, which then led to higher crime rates (Shaw & McKay, 1969).

As influential as a theory of community social disorganization was, it was not to be empirically tested for years to come. With their 1989 essay “Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social Disorganization Theory”, Sampson and Groves (1989) showed that while indeed structural factors of a neighborhood impact crime rates, this impact can be mediated by informal social controls. Sampson and Grove measured community organization by looking at local friendship networks, frequency of unsupervised youth groups, and youth groups through a national survey of over 10,000 residents in Great Britain. This research was pivotal in the study of social disorganization theory. By providing a basis for how community can mediate structural problems, Sampson and Grove added another layer to this research and provided empirical support for community-based programs in high-crime areas throughout the United States.

While Sampson and Grove’s research has been replicated and expanded upon countless times in neighborhoods throughout the United States, data on social disorganization theory on college campuses is still extremely scarce. Few can deny that college campuses are indeed neighborhoods themselves (Barton, Jensen, & Kaufman,

2010). A community can be defined as a collection of people who have regular interaction and share an area, similar culture and institutions that provide basic requirements (Beck, 2001). A college campus as a whole definitely fits this criteria, as do individual residence halls on campus.

However, the only research currently available compares the concept and strength of community on college campuses across the nation (Barton, Jensen, & Kaufman, 2010). This research compared campus crime data as published in the FBI's *Uniform Crime Report* with student populations in *Peterson's Guide to Four Year Colleges* as a means to evaluate the way in which populations, heterogeneity, relative disadvantage, residential instability, and community organization affected rates of index property and violent crimes. This study found "mixed support for the generalizability of social disorganization theory to college communities", but that indeed "social composition of campus populations plays an important role in determining the amount of crime that occurs on campus (Barton, Jensen, & Kaufman, 2010). This research, while providing a starting point, suffers severe limitations in the fact that by using UCR data, the research only looks at very specific types of reported crimes, and may not be representative of actual crime.

This research will attempt to expand our knowledge of social disorganization theory by applying it to individual residence halls on campus at Texas Christian University, many of which contain unique subcultures (Honors, athletes, etc.), sizes, and locations. We aim to discover if differences in community across residence halls exist, and if so, the effect, if any, this has on crime, delinquency, and disruption within the hall.

Specifically, this research looks into freshman halls at TCU and the four upper-class halls located in the Commons. It is important to understand the layout, populations, and goals of residence hall life at TCU in order to put the following opinions into perspective. The vast majority of the freshman halls studied feature mostly double occupancy rooms with a few triples, as well as community style restrooms. The Commons buildings feature mostly suite-style living, with individual rooms sharing living spaces and restrooms. Housing and residence life at TCU is deliberately designed and conducted in order to “create the communities in which students live, study, and build friendships” (TCU Student Affairs, 2012). As TCU prides itself on being a residential community, the strength of its on-campus living experience is something that is clearly of great importance for the university.

#### METHOD OF INQUIRY

This study uses data collected from several face-to-face qualitative interviews with three residents of on-campus halls at TCU, two resident assistants (RAs), and one former hall director (HD) who now specializes in community building models at the university. The researcher also obtained two open-ended interviews via email, one with a current hall director and one with an assistant hall director. These surveys were done with the same questions used in the interviews for the sake of time and by request of participants. Each interview lasted approximately 15-30 minutes, and occurred in common spaces in a residence hall or at the nearby coffee shop.

The individuals chosen for inclusion in this study were selected because the researchers<sup>1</sup> felt they represented a variety of experiences within halls here at TCU. For

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, “researchers” refers to main investigator Samantha Stroud and supervising professor Dr. Polzer, while “researcher” will refer to only Samantha Stroud.



example, one of the RAs was a first-year RA working in a freshman all-female hall, one was a second-year in a very small first-year hall quite removed from the main campus, and the AHD is a third-year RA in an upperclassmen hall.

Individuals were asked semi-structured questions such as “In your personal experience, do you feel like the community of a residence hall affects the crime and delinquency of the residents in your hall?” Subjects were then asked to elaborate or clarify answers if needed. All questions used were adapted directly either from past studies in social disorganization theory or surveys conducted by the Housing and Residence Life office at TCU used to measure community (see Appendices A-C for reference).

It should be noted that the original method of data collection chosen for this study was an online anonymous survey distributed to all members of the halls mentioned above. The survey yielded 300 responses in the Spring semester of 2012. However, over the summer before the data was to be analyzed, the site used, KwikSurveys, “was attacked and suffered multiple outages and data loss which resulted in the company website being shut down” (2012). The domain name and branding was shut down and then reopened by another owner. As a result, none of the data collected from the researcher’s survey could be recovered. The researchers felt that obtaining new answers to the survey would not yield an accurate picture of community life at TCU, as the survey needed to be filled out closer to the end of one’s time in a hall. Deadlines and student constraints prevented this from happening. Therefore, the method was reevaluated and a qualitative direction was decided upon as the next best step.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first aspects of social disorganization theory to be examined in this study were definitions “community” and “campus crime” as to how those terms manifested themselves in the minds of student residents. After gathering basic demographics (such as year in school, hall assignments, and major), subjects were asked to personally define “community,” in their own words. The purpose of this was to investigate whether college individuals thought of “community” in the same way the researchers did, and indeed, most answers were strikingly similar to Beck’s definition (2001). Resident assistant and hall director answers mirrored that of one RA who stated a community was “a group of people all mutually interested in appreciating and supporting each other,” some adding aspects such as “shared space,” “feeling connected and valued,” and “caring” about this shared space. Resident answers seemed to focus more on shared space than caring, but also added ideas on “common goals” and “relating to and respecting” each other. Signs of community were said to be such things as open doors, involvement within the community, having conversation within shared spaces, and recognizing/greeting others in the space. The similarity of responses here are important for establishing that all respondents had a similar idea of what the sometimes ambiguous term of “community” represented, in order to more validly compare their answers.

All respondents agreed that an on-campus residence hall at TCU fit the description of a community, although interestingly enough, two of the non-leader residents believed that there were caveats. One felt that larger halls did not constitute as much of a community, and one felt that when you moved into upperclassmen halls, a great deal of community was lost. This respondent lived in an upperclassmen suite-style hall, and said:

It's a little bit different . . . because you have your own living room now, you don't have to go outside that. It's your own space, so it's a different kind of community. Now I'm not close with my neighbors. I know who they are, but that's partly because I was friends with one of them before. A few rooms over, I have no idea who they are.

The halls this respondent was mentioning were large suite-style halls that all feature mostly four-person suites. The suites at TCU have mostly four single rooms that share two bathrooms and a living space.

This is interesting to note because in this sense, residents in the halls mentioned would have everything needed in a self-contained space that also held three other friends. The need for them to interact with others outside of their suite within the hall is very slim. In contrast, the majority of freshman halls feature double- and triple-occupancy rooms with community bathrooms and spacious main lounges as well as smaller side lounges and "nooks" on each floor. This poses a question for future research in whether a need for interaction between members of a community is required for relationships to occur there. Without a need, would a shared location really be enough to bring individuals together to form a community?

As mentioned above, it was also important to measure what "crime" and "delinquency" in a residence hall really meant according to the respondents in order to ensure we were comparing like definitions. Most commonly, the first answer here was vandalism. Subjects reported that to them, tearing down hall decorations, things being drawn in bathrooms or other public spaces, and destroying bulletin boards all were signs of "crime and delinquency." Indeed, in my personal experience as an RA for three years,

hall vandalism such as this is the most common type of delinquency encountered in a hall and often the first signs of disharmony within a community before larger things begin to occur. After vandalism, respondents also stated that larger policy violations such as theft, rape, harassment, confrontations such as fighting, and alcohol violations (most on-campus residence halls at TCU house first- and second-year students, so the large majority of this population is under 21). It is interesting to note that during the winter holiday banquet for RAs, the Director of Housing actually mentioned in his speech that the lower number of alcohol violations within notoriously troublesome halls indicated to him an improvement in the community.

Researchers investigated further whether this social disorganization response was the most commonly used in residence halls at TCU (if not always consciously). The RA and HD responses, of course, will represent official policies on how to fight violations within a hall, and for the most part did seem to correspond with social disorganization theory. One RA in a freshman hall said that her staff had dealt with exit signs being torn down in the beginning of the year and had used a more community based approach. They told them:

This was their home, and we would hold them all responsible. This spoke volumes to a lot of the residents, and all of the sudden they started staying up (the exit signs), and watching guests more closely when they realized their actions would affect everyone else.

Another freshman hall RA also reported this tactic of holding the entire hall responsible for policy violations. In her hall, this meant vandalism and false fire alarms. Even the upperclassmen hall AHD reported that his staff fought crime “by creating a safe and fun

environment, by fostering the community and having an RA staff that will invest in residents and empower them to excel”. One can see that by holding all hall members accountable for delinquency, this in facilitates community in a sense, rather than simply waiting for community to organically develop. It can be noted that from a student affairs standpoint, a social disorganization approach is indeed the normative way to fight crime and delinquency within on-campus residence halls at this institution.

In addition to staff policies leaning towards social disorganization theory, the RAs that were interviewed displayed an overwhelming personal belief in the importance of community in a safe residence hall. A freshman hall RA elaborated, saying :

We have certain wings where the community isn't high, and it's the same wings where the (outer) doors are propped (a small violation that triggers an alarm to the RA on duty as a safety concern), they are letting in the guys who are pulling the fire alarms . . . These are the girls who keep to themselves, who don't care as much about the rest of the hall being affected by fire pulls and things like that. Most of the girls who feel a sense of community are more likely to follow the rules to make sure the other girls aren't disadvantaged by their actions.”

The residents' views on the validity of a crime-community connection was investigated with the question, “in your personal experience, do you feel that the community of a residence hall affects the crime and delinquency of the residents in that hall?” Here, we saw some mixed responses. One freshman resident in Milton Daniel, the Honor's hall on campus, responded, “I think it does. The fact that we're all Honor's students . . . makes us a stronger community.” One resident from another freshman hall (the most notorious ‘party hall’) reported “It does, but maybe not always in a good way.

If you have a bunch of friends on the same floor, everyone's going to be more lenient." The upperclassmen resident reported that she agreed it did. This resident cited locking her door as an indicator of comfort with a community. This particular resident had lived in Milton Daniel the previous year, and said that since she felt more connected there, she was more likely to leave her door unlocked when she was out of her room but still within the hall. However, she said, "in Carter, I'm going to lock my door every time I leave my room. I wouldn't leave my stuff in the study pods. I think it's because I don't really know my community there." Here, we see a resident with experience with both types of on-campus residence halls reporting that she did perceive community as connected with crime, and found her freshman hall to be a better community than the suite-style hall she currently occupied.

### **Broken Windows: Dilapidation and Community**

Shaw and McKay's original framework of social disorganization theory suggested that physical dilapidation of a neighborhood would detract from the community and therefore increase the likelihood of crime in the area. They believed that physical dilapidation was a sign that residents of the community did not care for or take pride in their neighborhood, which would then invite further criminality. This facet of social disorganization theory later became the basis for the "broken windows" theory and model of policing- however, that is research for another day.

In this interview, we briefly explored the "broken windows" aspect by merely asking respondents how they felt about their building's physical condition, as well as their thoughts on how this affected respect for the facility and the behavior of the residents of the hall. The responses on the whole appeared to be mixed, but do indicate a

belief that physical dilapidation can be offset by a strong community, as well as a belief that it can be a sign of a weak one.

We must note that the general quality of residence halls at TCU are far above what one might expect at a public, state-funded university- the vast majority have been remodeled in the past ten years. On that note, it is interesting to compare the community of the two oldest halls, Colby (the only all-female hall, and a larger one, with a population of about 300) and Brachman (a very small hall, with a population of about 200, located farther from campus than the rest) to the newer ones. Advocates of the broken windows offshoot of social disorganization theory would hypothesize that these older, more “worn” halls would experience higher rates of crime such as vandalism and have the least successful communities, compared to the brand new halls with little to no damage. Two of the RAs we interviewed were each from one of these communities in order to look more closely at this hypothesis. Interestingly enough, their responses indicate that with a strong community, any animosity towards the older buildings and its effect on crime rates seem to disappear. The Brachman RA noted that it’s “nobody’s first choice, but after being able to bond with the people there, and being set apart from the rest of campus, they learn to turn it into the best possible experience.” She also noted that she didn’t believe that having an older building had an effect on respect for the facility. The Colby RA noted a very interesting contrast between how outside students and Colby residents viewed the older building:

Guys are more likely to vandalize within Colby, because it’s already old, but with the girls it doesn’t seem to (affect respect for the facility). Now that they’ve gotten to know one another, they see Colby as more of a building; they see it

more as the events and the community there. Colby has a ‘home-y’ feeling. It’s the kids who don’t have the sense of community who just look at the building as plain.

The residents themselves had mixed reactions as to the connection between physical dilapidation and crime. A freshman in the newest hall, Milton Daniel, noted, “if someone has the purpose of tearing stuff up, they’re going to no matter what it is. But I guess people do appreciate it more.” Another freshman resident in a different hall said she didn’t think so; however, the researchers would like to note that she said herself she was not very involved in the hall community. Perhaps those who don’t include themselves in a community cannot see the mitigating effect it can have on a building’s physicality. A sophomore resident in a suite-style hall said, “I think it’s really dependent on the people you live with.” Here again, it’s not exactly clear-- this could mean specific personalities, or community.

Overall, the bit of these interviews that touched on broken windows theory and the physicality of a neighborhood’s effect on crime seem to provide support for the idea that community can mediate the affect of a lower quality building or community. While we found no direct examples that a “bad” hall caused more crime, we did find examples where the less desirable halls were made desirable and valued through the community ties of the building.

#### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This qualitative look at social disorganization theory at work on a specific college campus succeeded in demonstrating that residence hall populations do equate to “communities,” and provided a unique and interesting look at how community can



mediate crime. By interviewing residents, RAs, and a hall director at TCU, a university that takes pride in its student affairs and residence life focus, we established that the theories behind social disorganization are very much applicable to a college campus.

In addition to establishing that social disorganization theory forms the (albeit unconscious) basis for policy and hall life at TCU, we also established that it is perceived to be successful. More often than not, the interviewees showed a belief in the power of community in mediating crime and delinquency within a residence hall. Both the RAs and residents themselves had examples and specific stories to show how community had affected the crime of their halls. However, the strength of the community can be negatively affected by the type of hall (suite style upperclassmen halls showed a less powerful community), the size, and the population (again, upper class halls already have friend groups established for the most part). On the other side, a strong community can also mediate the effect of physical dilapidation on crime in a community, as theorized by broken windows.

As promising as this research is for social disorganization theory implementation at the college level, the research does present some limitations. First of all, as with any qualitative research, one may argue that the mere anecdotes presented here do not establish any actual statistics or data that could be used for policy implementation. A survey such as the one initially attempted by the researchers could certainly help to examine the effect of crime on community on a larger scale. In addition, TCU is a small, private university, with a culture designed around the importance of community and student life. It is unclear whether such a strong community/crime relationship would be

seen in larger universities that may not enjoy privileges such as smaller residence halls and very competitive resident life positions<sup>2</sup>.

Further research could include a look at how certain aspects of a hall's structure contribute to or detract from community building. It was mentioned earlier that the halls with suite-style living, without community bathrooms or lounge spaces, suffered from less overall community. Is shared space a requirement for a community strong enough to detract from crime? This structural research could also be expanded onto neighborhoods in cities. If shared space is needed for a hall community, could that mean that increasing community spaces (such as parks) could affect a neighborhood's crime rate?

In addition, it would also be interesting to look at how criminological theories such as social disorganization theory line up with student affairs teachings and policy. It was noted in this research that the crime/community connection seemed to be already built into TCU's residence life approach. Further research should investigate where social disorganization theory matches up with student affairs theories, and how these play out in colleges. When viewed this way, university policies could serve as a laboratory to test criminological theory and its relevance to policy, design, and planning, and its affect on a population. We have seen how social disorganization policy has done just that with TCU's residence life, but this overlap between disciplines could certainly be investigated more deeply and expanded upon.

Residence life at TCU provides a perfect example at how social disorganization theory can function in a real life setting. Further research into both this theory across campuses as well as overlap between student affairs and criminology could form an

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<sup>2</sup> this year, over 250 people are applying for Resident Assistant- there are less than 60 spots available

important bridge in the future to how to turn theory into policy, and how to turn data into results.

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APPENDIX A

**RA Interview Questions:**

1. Name, year, major, hall, how many years as R.A. (if returner, what other halls)

How would you personally define “community”?

How can you tell if you have a strong community?

2. Do you feel like an on-campus residence hall here at TCU fits this description?

What sets your hall apart from other halls?

This could include location, population size or makeup, etc.

3. In your personal experience as an RA, do you feel like the community of a residence hall affects the crime and delinquency of the residents in that hall?

Any examples?

4. What do you personally think would constitute ‘crime and delinquency’ in the hall?

How do you feel about your building’s physical condition?

Do you think it affects the behavior of the residents in the hall?

Do they respect the facility?

5. In your experience, what is the best way to combat crime and delinquency within the hall?

6. Do you feel that the majority of the residents who live in your hall are similar in:

Values and beliefs

Campus involvement/academic goals

Race/ethnicity

Overall similar

7. Do you think these similarities and/or differences contribute to or detract from the crime and delinquency in the hall?
8. Do you think that residents feel comfortable coming to you or other hall staff with concerns?  
Do they feel comfortable coming to each other?
9. Do you feel that your residents (either in your wing or the hall) have established mutual expectations about community behavior?
10. Do you think they care about and accept others? Feel cared about and accepted themselves?

## APPENDIX B

### **Resident Interview Questions**

1. Name, year, major, hall(s) lived in
2. How would you personally define “community”?  
How can you tell if you have a strong community?
3. Do you feel like an on-campus residence hall here at TCU fits this description?
4. What sets your hall apart from other halls?  
This could include location, population size or makeup, etc.
5. What do you personally think would constitute ‘crime and delinquency’ in the hall?
6. How many pre-planned hall events do you attend? Most, some, not very many...
7. How involved are you with leadership in your hall? (Hall Crew, Desk Assistant, etc.)

8. In your personal experience, do you feel like the community of a residence hall affects the crime and delinquency of the residents in that hall?

Any examples?

9. How do you feel about your building's physical condition?

Do you think it affects the behavior of the residents in the hall?

Do they respect the facility?

10. Do you feel that the majority of the residents who live in your hall are similar (to you or each other) in:

Values and beliefs

Campus involvement/academic goals

Race/ethnicity

Overall similar

11. Do you think these similarities and/or differences contribute to or detract from the crime and delinquency in the hall?

12. Do you feel comfortable coming to hall staff with concerns?

Do you feel comfortable going to other residents?

13. Do you feel that your wing and/or hall have established mutual expectations about community behavior?

14. Do you think they care about and accept others? Feel cared about and accepted themselves?

### APPENDIX C

#### **Hall Director Interview Questions**

1. Name, hall, how many years as HD (if returner, what other halls)

2. How do you personally define “community”?

How can you tell if you have a strong community?

3. Do you feel like an on-campus residence hall here at TCU fits this description?
4. What sets your hall apart from other halls?

This could include location, population size or makeup, etc.

5. In your personal experience, do you feel like the community of a residence hall affects the crime and delinquency of the residents in that hall?

Any examples?

6. What do you personally think would constitute ‘crime and delinquency’ in the hall?

7. How do you feel about your building’s physical condition?

Do you think it affects the behavior of the residents in the hall?

Do they respect the facility?

8. In your experience, what is the best way to combat crime and delinquency within the hall?

9. Do you feel that the majority of the residents who live in your hall are similar in:

Values and beliefs

Campus involvement/academic goals

Race/ethnicity

Overall similar

10. Do you think these similarities and/or differences contribute to or detract from the crime and delinquency in the hall?



11. Do you think that residents feel comfortable coming to you or other hall staff with concerns?

Do they feel comfortable coming to each other?

12. Do you feel that your residents (either in your wing or the hall) have established mutual expectations about community behavior?

13. Do you think they care about and accept others? Feel cared about and accepted themselves?

## ABSTRACT

The relationship between criminal behavior and community ties as theorized within social disorganization literature has rarely addressed one important and unique environment: the college campus. To investigate the way in which previous research and theory applies to on-campus residence halls at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, TX, a series of qualitative interviews were conducted. A general hypothesis that residence hall communities with stronger ties and efficacy would present fewer delinquent characteristics presented the basis for interview questions and investigation, with questions and concepts rooted in previous research.

Results from the interviews, which included Resident Assistants, residents from various communities, and a Hall Director, support the hypothesis and indicate that variables such as hall size, shared community characteristics (such as single gender or Honor's students), and the years of residents (freshman, upperclassmen) all served to mediate this relationship. Results also showed that student affairs practices and policies seemed to align with social disorganization theory, implicating a correlation between disciplines and an ideal situation to test criminological theories.