

Systematic Observation in Chicago Neighborhoods

You first learned about Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbush's classic study of disorder and crime in urban neighborhoods in Chapter 4. In this section, we will elaborate on their use of the method of systematic social observation of public spaces to learn more about Chicago neighborhoods. A systematic observational strategy increases the reliability of observational data by using explicit rules that standardize coding practices across observers (Reiss, 1971).

Sampson and Raudenbush's study was a multiple-methods investigation that combined observational research, survey research, and archival research. The observational component involved a stratified probability (random) sample of 196 Chicago census tracts. A specially equipped sport utility vehicle was driven down each street in these tracts at the rate of 5 miles per hour. Two video recorders taped the blocks on both sides of the street, while two observers peered out the vehicle's windows and recorded their observations in logs. The result was an observational record of 23,816 face blocks (the block on one side of the street is a *face block*). The observers recorded codes that indicated land use, traffic, physical conditions, and evidence of physical disorder (see Exhibit 8.4). Physical disorder was measured by counting such features as cigarettes or cigars in the street, garbage, empty beer bottles, graffiti, condoms, and syringes. Indicators of social disorder included adults loitering, drinking alcohol in public, fighting, and selling drugs.

Peter St. Jean (2007) advanced the research of Sampson and Raudenbush by examining the variation in collective efficacy, community disorder, and crime within specific blocks in one high-crime police district in Chicago. After examining official data and combining them with interviews asking residents where crime typically took place in the neighborhood, St. Jean found that pockets of crime emerged in which most crimes occurred on particular blocks within a neighborhood while other blocks remained relatively untouched. The goal of St. Jean's work was to determine why. He used multiple methods for this project, including resident surveys, participant observation, in-depth interviews with residents and offenders, and systematic social observation. For this last method, video cameras were mounted on each side of a vehicle while it was slowly driven through neighborhood streets so that physical and social appearances could be captured. An example of the video St. Jean captured is available on the Student Study Site for this text. Using the tapes, neighborhood characteristics were then coded for social disorder by using the conditions of the buildings, properties, and vacant lots and the prevalence of behaviors such as loitering, public drinking, and panhandling. A snapshot from one of St. Jean's videos is displayed in Exhibit 8.5.

Innovatively, St. Jean (2007) not only coded the videos; he also used the footage as a visual cue when interviewing offenders about their reasons for selecting particular locations and victims. He explains,

For instance, drug dealers and robbers were able to use the [Systematic Social Observation] movie to explain in detail how and why certain locations are more attractive than others. It also allowed offenders to identify the specific features of neighborhoods that they considered distasteful, and to explain associated meanings, especially as such meanings pertain to the crimes they commit . . . it refreshed the subjects' memories of relevant events that they often claimed they would have forgotten to mention [without the video]. (p. 27)

Among other things, St. Jean discovered that even when offenders faced opposition from neighborhood reformers, they were not deterred from engaging in crime in an area when it offered "ecological advantages" such as retail establishments and bus stops.

These studies illustrate both the value of multiple methods and the technique of recording observations in a systematic form. The systematic observations, when combined with residents' own perceptions, provide us with much greater confidence in the measurement of relative neighborhood disorder. When these are combined with rich narrative accounts from neighborhood residents and active offenders, both the measurement validity of the constructs and the overall validity of the findings are significantly enhanced.