Much of the research on juvenile delinquency focuses on individual dispositional characteristics of youth like impulsivity and feelings of guilt. In these studies, social context often takes a back seat or is ignored altogether. When context is considered, the community context is seldom the focus. The most traditionally examined contexts with respect to juvenile offending include family, school, peers, youth gangs, and even the workplace. Rightly so, these are important contexts with far-reaching consequences for youth, as the other chapters in this section convincingly demonstrate.

Yet the community or neighborhood in which a juvenile lives also constitutes an important context. Neighborhoods vary along multiple dimensions including socioeconomic status, racial composition, access to resources—to name just a few. Given their features, some communities represent high-risk environments for youths (i.e., they generate temptations, provocations, and have low levels of social control), while others are more protective (i.e., they generate low levels of temptation, provocation, and have high levels of social control) (Wikstrom and Loeber 2000, p. 1114).

Apart from serving as a socially meaningful context for youth, communities and their characteristics are important to account for in delinquency studies because to the extent that individual-level studies identify a relationship between, for example, a familial social characteristic (economic status or parental composition) and delinquency, the link remains most often uninterpretable. That is, "no attempt is made to clarify the extent to which the relationship is inherently on the individual-familial level or is moderated by the contexts in which families live (for example, lower- versus middle-class neighborhoods; predominantly two- versus one-parent
family neighborhoods)" (Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz 1986:669; see also Hay et al. 2007:594).

The goal of this chapter is to describe the role of communities in the production of delinquency. In the first part of this chapter, I identify community characteristics of importance and describe why these have been most frequently examined by researchers. In the second part, I discuss the various theoretical mechanisms proposed to account for the link between community characteristics and rates of delinquency. In part three, I present two critical weaknesses in the communities and delinquency literature, and explain how they have been addressed to some degree in contextual studies of delinquency. In part four, I review the main findings from the contextual effects literature. And in part five, I conclude by identifying more general issues that warrant attention in communities and delinquency studies and by charting some promising new directions for research.

I. Ecological Conditions of Importance

The idea that communities differ with consequences for delinquency is not a new one. Shaw and McKay (1942) were among the first researchers to document that rates of delinquency varied across communities in Chicago. Their groundbreaking study led to a host of what are often referred to as “delinquency area studies.” Early delinquency area studies (e.g., Bordua (1958); Chilton (1964); Gordon (1967); Lander (1954); Polk (1957)) attempted to correlate a collective property of neighborhoods with juvenile delinquency rates for neighborhoods, also a collective property. Many presented evidence that local delinquency rates were associated with underlying community dimensions of socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic composition, and/or anomie. Delinquency area studies continue today, and collectively this literature has identified numerous ecological conditions of importance.

The most common ecological characteristic investigated, dating back to the early Chicago School researchers, is neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES), which has proven a robust predictor of delinquency rates. According to Bursik (2001, p. 395), “It would appear that … multicity evidence strongly supports the existence of a fundamental socioeconomic status factor that may be called a general component of the community context of delinquency.” Most often SES is reflected in the neighborhood’s poverty level, but more recent studies have broadened this concept to consider the combined effects of social and economic indicators of disadvantage. In many inner-city communities, as a result of macro-economic changes that have disproportionately affected the urban poor, scholars claim it is the combination of poverty, unemployment, and family disruption that defines the socioeconomic context for residents (Sampson and Wilson 1995; Wilson 1987). They posit that “concentration effects” contribute to social disorganization, which in turn leads
to delinquency. They additionally assert that residents living in areas of concentrated disadvantage are geographically and socially isolated, which gives rise to ghetto-specific cultural beliefs that undermine conventional values (e.g., crime is the way to resolve personal disputes). Such cultural beliefs readily develop in the gap created by joblessness, the exodus of middle-class residents, disruptions in the family, and the lack of government support for inner-city institutions. Beyond these claims, “A multidimensional focus on neighborhood disadvantage is...important because it allows for the possibility that not all high-poverty neighborhoods are characterized by high mobility, broken families, chronic unemployment, or excessive cultural heterogeneity; and that these conditions of disadvantage may interact with poverty to produce certain deleterious effects on adolescent development” (Elliott et al. 1996, p. 393).

Consistent with these arguments, researchers typically measure the multiple disadvantages that characterize areas by incorporating several measures (e.g., poverty, unemployment, single-parent families with children) into an overarching index of concentrated disadvantage. Researchers consistently find that neighborhood SES generally, and concentrated disadvantage in particular, are positively associated with rates of juvenile delinquency (Elliott et al. 1996; Haynie et al. 2006; Kupersmidt et al. 1995; Simons et al. 2005; Wikstrom and Loeber 2000). But the effects of concentrated disadvantage are not limited to delinquency. Sampson and colleagues (2002, p. 446) claim, “The range of child and adolescent outcomes associated with concentrated disadvantage is quite wide and includes infant mortality, low birthweight, teenage childbearing, dropping out of high school, child maltreatment, and adolescent delinquency.”

Another ecological characteristic often examined in delinquency area studies is neighborhood racial composition. Frequently the focus is on racial heterogeneity or diversity within neighborhoods. Racial heterogeneity has been hypothesized to affect the strength and salience of informal social control. Theorists have posited that in communities with diverse racial groups living in close proximity, interaction between members will be low, or at least lower than in racially homogeneous neighborhoods (Gans 1968). Heterogeneity can also undermine ties between neighbors, limiting their ability to agree on a common set of values or to solve “commonly experienced problems” (Bursik 1988, p. 521; Kornhauser 1978) due to cultural differences between racial groups, language incompatibility, and the fact that individuals prefer members of their own race to members of different races (Blau and Schwartz 1984, p. 14; Gans 1968). As a result, residents will be less likely to look out for one another and will not, to the same extent as in racially homogeneous communities, take an interest in their neighbors’ activities. Informal social interactions will be limited, and crime and delinquency rates in such neighborhoods can be expected to be higher. As Kornhauser (1978, p. 78) notes, “Heterogeneity impedes communication and thus obstructs the quest to solve common problems and reach common goals.” Studies of racial heterogeneity and changes in racial heterogeneity find that, in fact, both are associated with increased delinquency rates in communities (Heitgard and Bursik 1987; Kapsis 1978).
The "religious ecology of communities" (Regnerus 2003; Stark, Kent, and Doyle 1982) constitutes a third local dimension of neighborhoods thought to affect delinquency. Religion is theorized to impact the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of youths through several mechanisms, including social control, social support, and values/identity. Some examples include religious norms that promote marriage, legitimate sexual relationships, and childbearing, and norms that restrict alcohol sales, access to abortion, or curb Sunday athletic events (Regnerus 2003, p. 527). A key assumption is that religion is a living, salient feature of the larger group. In using the term "moral communities," Stark and colleagues (1982) argue that religion ought to be understood sociologically as a group property more than an individual one. Along these lines, religion is not said to make youth afraid to sin but to bind its adherents to a "moral community" (e.g., a community integrated by shared religious beliefs), compared to a secularized social climate.

It is often argued that religion only serves to bind youth to the moral order if religious influences permeate the culture and social interactions of individuals within communities. In social groups where a religious sanctioning system is the mode and is expressed in daily life, the propensity to deviate from norms will be influenced substantially by the degree of one's commitment to the religious sanctioning system. Where the religious sanctioning system is not pervasive, it is argued, the effects of the youth's religious commitment will be curtailed. In delinquency studies that examine the religious ecology of communities, religion is thought to directly affect the behavior of the group's members as well as indirectly moderate how individuals' religious traits shape their behavior (Regnerus 2003, p. 524; Stark, Kent, and Doyle 1982).

To a lesser degree, the social-ecological literature has considered additional aspects of neighborhood differentiation including life-cycle status, residential stability, home ownership, and density. Whatever neighborhood characteristic under investigation, the argument advanced in this literature is that ecological characteristics either enhance or disrupt the social organizational processes in the community, with implications for juvenile delinquency rates.

II. Intervening Theoretical Mechanisms

The ecological characteristics of communities such as those just discussed are expected to both directly and indirectly affect juvenile delinquency. Indirectly, socioeconomic status, racial composition, and the religious ecology of communities, among other characteristics, are theorized to influence the attitudes, relationships, and behavior of residents through various intervening theoretical mechanisms.

According to the systemic model, closely related to social disorganization theory, community characteristics affect delinquency because they deter neighborhood
residents from establishing relationships with one another and thus diminish a neighborhood's capacity for informal social control (Bursik 1988; Bursik and Grasmick 1993). This model is predicated on the notion that neighborhoods are complex systems of friendship and kinship networks and associational ties rooted in families and ongoing social processes (Bursik and Grasmick 1993). Residents living in neighborhoods with large and active social networks are better able to generate social trust and enforce shared community values, including the desire to live in a crime- and delinquency-free neighborhood. As a result, residents have an easier time supervising youths within the neighborhood, socializing them toward conventional values, and preventing them from becoming involved with delinquent peers. When associational ties and local social controls are weak, youths have greater opportunities to engage in delinquency and to become involved with delinquent peers in whose presence delinquency is experienced as highly rewarding (Haynie et al. 2006).

More recently, researchers have discussed the concept of collective efficacy, which combines concepts of social ties, social integration, and social control. Sampson et al. (1997) claim that although social ties are important, the willingness of residents to intervene on behalf of children may depend in large part on conditions of mutual trust and shared expectations among residents. One is unlikely to intervene in a neighborhood context where the rules are unclear and people mistrust or fear one another. It is thus the linkage of mutual trust and the shared willingness to intervene for the public good that captures the neighborhood context of collective efficacy.

Social ties, informal control, and collective efficacy are directly affected by ecological characteristics of neighborhoods, such as those identified in delinquency area studies. Kornhauser (1978, p. 81) notes, “Institutions that cannot supply the means to valued goals fail in all types of control. The attachments and commitments that enmesh the child in interlocking controls cannot be formed. Need satisfaction and goal achievement are conditions for the establishment of indirect control. When they are absent, affective and instrumental bonds to persons and institutions are likewise weak or absent.” The result, according to Kornhauser, is heightened delinquency within communities.

Expanding on the systemic model, Elliott et al. (1996, p. 396) identify two additional theoretically relevant organizational and cultural characteristics that link ecological conditions and delinquency rates in neighborhoods. Beyond weak neighborhood organization (e.g., low social integration, weak informal networks, weak informal controls), they cite attenuated neighborhood culture (e.g., low consensus on values, low consensus on norms, normlessness) and illegitimate opportunities (e.g., delinquent gangs, deviant role models, illegitimate job networks) as critical.

Concerning neighborhood culture, Shaw and McKay (1942) long ago discussed the extent to which communities tolerate or sustain social disorder and deviant subcultures. Socially disorganized neighborhoods, in particular, have a diversity (rather than consensus) of norms. Ecological characteristics such as poverty, racial heterogeneity, and residential mobility foster a diverse citizenry so that individuals
with all types of values, beliefs, and behaviors are clustered together; that is, “socially disorganized neighborhoods provide ‘room’ for both conventional and unconventional groups” (Cattarello 2000, p. 36). Youths living in disorganized neighborhoods are thus exposed both to conventional and unconventional groups and norms regarding standards of behavior. In essence, deviant subcultures affect adolescents’ normative values as well as the probability of association with delinquent peers which, in turn, results in delinquency. Community deviant subculture, therefore, can affect delinquent behavior via its effect on youth normative values and via the probability of association with delinquent peers. Deviant subcultures can also provide illegitimate opportunities for youth, as suggested by Cloward and Ohlin (1960). For example, delinquent gangs and organized crime provide jobs, food and clothing, role models, and self-affirmation for youths; “they satisfy basic individual and social needs in the same way that stable families, prosocial peers, and legitimate employment satisfy these needs and reinforce conventional behavior” (Elliott et al. 1996, p. 394). In sum then, there are several intervening theoretical mechanisms that help explain why ecological characteristics of communities are found to be associated with juvenile delinquency rates in delinquency area studies.

III. Weaknesses in the Literature

One major problem in the communities and delinquency literature, at least with respect to delinquency area studies, is that studies often assume these mediating processes exist without actually measuring them. Sampson et al. (2002, p. 447) claim: “Although concern with neighborhood mechanisms goes back at least to the early Chicago School of sociology, only recently have we witnessed a concerted attempt to theorize and empirically measure the social-interactional and institutional dimensions that might explain how neighborhood effects are transmitted.” Thus, many studies document associations between poverty, racial heterogeneity, and so forth, and rates of juvenile delinquency yet are only able to theorize they occur due to intervening processes related to social ties, social control, collective efficacy, attenuated neighborhood culture, and illegitimate opportunities.

One implication of this is that we actually know very little about how neighborhood effects are transmitted to youth—that is, how neighborhoods impact juveniles and encourage or discourage delinquency. The key question remains: What are the relationships among ecological characteristics, family and peer processes, and rates of juvenile delinquency in neighborhoods? Some have suggested that family processes mediate much of the effect of community context on youths (Simons et al. 2005). Others have suggested that involvement in peer networks is the primary mediating factor (Haynie et al. 2006). And still others have claimed that community and family and peer processes interact in ways that amplify delinquency in some communities. Hay et al. (2007, p. 594), for example, argue that community poverty
amplifies the effects of family poverty on delinquency, such that these effects become greater when community poverty is also high.

The latter example of an interaction effect suggests complex relationships among the mechanisms at play. An example is illustrative. With respect to community characteristics and their effects on family processes, Simons et al. (2005) describe the potential combined effects of collective efficacy and authoritative parenting on delinquency. Recall that a community is high on collective efficacy to the extent that residents share values, mutual trust, and a disposition to intervene for the public good (i.e., to reduce crime and delinquency). Authoritative parents combine warmth and support with firm monitoring and control. Both authoritative parenting and collective efficacy, according to Simons et al. (2005), function as supportive control, albeit at different levels of analysis (the family and the community), which has a theorized effect on a youth’s risk of affiliating with deviant peers and thus engaging in delinquent behavior. Stated another way, just as parental control is an expression of parental affection and concern for the child, so community control appears to be an expression of the residents’ concerns and commitment to the community (p. 994). According to these researchers, adults living in communities marked by high levels of collective efficacy exert subtle, as well as not so subtle, pressures upon parents of delinquent youth to become more responsible caretakers. When they witness a child misbehaving, they tend to contact the child’s parents or authorities (e.g., school or police). Therefore, parents living in communities with high collective efficacy are apt to be approached by neighbors, school authorities, other parents, or the police when their child misbehaves. Parents might be expected to respond to these complaints by increasing the quality of their parenting in an effort to minimize further difficulties. Uninvolved or permissive parents may be prodded into adopting a more authoritative parenting style in response to the collective efficacy displayed by adult residents in their community (p. 1018). In this way, family- and community-level processes are often correlated and work together to influence juvenile delinquency. Unfortunately, without empirically measuring intervening theoretical mechanisms, our ability to fully and accurately specify how communities and delinquency are related remains limited.

A second problem is apparent in the communities and delinquency literature. Decades ago, Kornhauser (1978, p. 114) asked: “How do we know that area differences in delinquency rates result from aggregative characteristics of communities rather than characteristics of individuals selectively aggregated into communities?” Here Kornhauser raises the possibility that “what appears as a neighborhood effect in the… study could actually be an artifact of not having adequately controlled for neighborhood differences in the background characteristics of local residents” (Kapsis 1978, p. 470). This latter point, often referred to as a selective migration interpretation of the finding (Kapsis 1978, p. 470), implies that residential mobility decisions can artificially create “generative neighborhood effects” when in fact differences across neighborhoods are due, instead, to individual selection effects. Elliott et al. (1996, p. 397) explain: “People are not randomly assigned to neighborhoods but make personal choices that are related to their education, income, race/
ethnicity, and perceived characteristics of the neighborhood….This selection process produces a compositional effect that is independent of the emerging organizational and cultural effects…”

Researchers are thus left asking: Are neighborhood effects artifactual, reflecting either individual-level compositional effects or self-selection by parents into particular neighborhoods (Haynie et al. 2006)? Some argue yes, and others no, prompting a contextual versus compositional debate. A contextual explanation involves the proposition that the social organization of an area influences the individuals who inhabit it, above and beyond the individuals who reside there. A compositional explanation involves the proposition that variation in delinquency rates across areas is primarily a result of the aggregate characteristics of the individuals who inhabit the areas (e.g., certain kinds of neighborhoods attract persons predisposed to criminality). A challenge for ecological researchers, then, is to demonstrate that neighborhood structure affects adolescent behavior net of compositional and selection factors, and to show that such effects operate through measurable mediating processes.

This has been achieved, to some degree, in neighborhood or contextual effects studies of delinquency, which have proliferated over the last couple of decades (Cattarello 2000; Elliott et al. 1996; Haynie et al. 2006; Gottfredson et al. 1991; Regnerus 2003; Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz 1986; Simons et al. 2005). As Sampson et al. (2002, p. 445) noted in a review of this literature, “the study of neighborhood effects has generated a multidisciplinary research agenda with a strong focus on child and adolescent development.” Contextual effects studies address the contextual versus compositional debate because they control for the relevant individual-level traits of residents (e.g., single-parent family, social class, etc.) in order to ensure that a neighborhood-level effect (e.g., disadvantage) is not due to compositional differences among the individuals within neighborhoods. If neighborhood effects on adolescent delinquency are observed net of the individual characteristics on which the neighborhood measure is based, it is argued, we can be more confident that a neighborhood-level effect has indeed been observed (Haynie et al. 2006). Thus, researchers incorporate controls for background demographic characteristics, parental resources, and parenting practices in most neighborhood effects studies.

As noted earlier, parents may choose to reside in a particular neighborhood in part because of the level of crime or delinquency occurring in the area, reflecting selection bias. Selection bias may also produce spurious neighborhood effects because more conscientious parents (an unmeasured trait) may be more likely to select neighborhoods with less crime. If not accounted for, observed neighborhood effects would simply reflect the decision-making of conscientious parents, rather than a true neighborhood effect. In this literature, to help reduce the possibility of selection effects operating in analyses, researchers attempt to incorporate variables indicating parents’ reasons for moving into their current neighborhood (Haynie et al. 2006), although this is often difficult to accomplish given data constraints.
IV. Neighborhood Effects Studies and Their Findings

Challenges aside, the neighborhood effects literature has produced many significant findings with respect to communities and delinquency. One set of findings reveals that neighborhood ecological characteristics directly affect rates of juvenile delinquency, even after controlling for a variety of individual-level characteristics of residents—findings that speak directly to the contextual versus compositional debate. For example, Kapsis (1978) tests Shaw and McKay's ideas regarding neighborhood racial change and delinquency using 1960–1966 data on a sample of 721 black adolescent males from adjacent low-income neighborhoods that had undergone varying rates of black population change. He finds that delinquency is positively correlated with the rate of racial change of neighborhoods, in line with Shaw and McKay. But perhaps more important, he finds this neighborhood effect remains after controlling for individual attributes of the residents. Similarly, Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz (1986), using survey data from neighborhoods in New York City, find that two neighborhood-level factors—organizational participation and extent of disorder and criminal subculture—significantly affect delinquency, even after controlling for individual-level correlates. Finally, in a contextual study of delinquency using data on 3,729 adolescents who are clustered within diverse social areas in Baltimore, Gottfredson et al. (1991) find that social areas have an independent effect on individual delinquent behavior, although the size of this effect is rather small.

A second set of findings from this literature reveals that neighborhood ecological characteristics indirectly affect rates of juvenile delinquency through various intervening processes, such as those identified earlier. That is, according to these studies, community levels of social ties, informal social control, collective efficacy, attenuated neighborhood subculture, and illegitimate opportunities mediate much of the effect of ecological characteristics on juvenile delinquency. Elliott et al. (1996), for example, find that a variety of organizational and cultural features of neighborhoods mediate the effects of concentrated disadvantage on adolescent development and behavior in their study of Chicago and Denver neighborhoods. Likewise, using data on a national sample of youth, Haynie et al. (2006) not only find that neighborhood disadvantage is associated with adolescent violence net of compositional and selection effects, but also that disadvantage is associated with adolescents' exposure to violent and prosocial peers and that peer exposure mediates, in part, the neighborhood disadvantage-adolescent violence association.

A third set of findings documents an interaction effect between individual- and community-level characteristics and processes. Neighborhood effects studies of interactions demonstrate that characteristics at both levels matter in unison for understanding and predicting juvenile delinquency. Along these lines, Regnerus (2003, p. 523) notes that "a proper understanding of...delinquency included the joint consideration of individual traits and the social contexts in which those traits
have meaning." Likewise, a central premise in Furstenberg (1993) and Furstenberg et al. (1999, p. 6) is that "[adolescent] development results from an ongoing process of social change between individuals and their immediate milieus." The work of Furstenberg and his colleagues focuses, in particular, on the interface between the family and the community, and how this interaction affects the course of adolescent development, particularly for disadvantaged youth. Collectively, interaction studies consider a range of social milieus, and as is evident in the Simons et al. (2005) and Hay et al. (2007) research discussed earlier, interaction studies produce perhaps the most complex statements regarding the relationship between communities and delinquency.

As another example, Stark and colleagues (1982) demonstrate how the "religious ecology" of communities affects the individual-level correlation between religiosity and delinquency. Using a national sample of 16-year-old boys from eighty-seven high schools, they find there is a substantial negative relationship between religious commitment and delinquency, but that the relationship vanishes in the most highly secularized West Coast schools. Based on this, they argue that in communities where religious commitment is the norm, the more religious an individual, the less likely he or she will be delinquent. The larger point is that religious effects on delinquency vary according to ecological conditions, namely, the religious climate of the community; religion inhibits a youth from norm violations to the degree that he or she is embedded in a moral community (p. 15).

In a similar study on "religious ecology" and delinquency, Regnerus (2003) tests whether religion, when understood as a group property, is significantly linked to lower delinquency among youths in schools and counties where select religious characteristics are high. He asks: (1) Are adolescents who live or attend school in devoutly religious environments less delinquent, regardless of their own religious practice or affiliation? (2) Do adolescents who live in religiously homogeneous places (e.g., densely conservative Protestant ones) display less delinquency? and (3) Does it matter whether they are themselves conservative Protestant as well? Regnerus (2003, p. 546) finds that conservative Protestant homogeneity in both schools and counties constitutes an effective and robust social control against delinquency and, more important, that homogeneity serves to strengthen the inverse relationship between theft and students' self-identification as born-again Christians.

In a third study testing for interaction effects, Wikstrom and Loebel (2000) ask: Is the onset and prevalence of juvenile serious offending invariant by neighborhood SES context when controlling for individual sets of risk and protective characteristics? They report two key findings: first, for those boys scoring high on risk factors, there was no difference in serious offending by neighborhood SES context. That is, there was no evidence of a direct impact of the neighborhood on male juvenile serious offending for those with high risk scores. And second, for those boys having a balanced mix of risk and protective factors, or scoring high on protective factors, the neighborhood SES context influenced serious offending—but only for late onsets (during adolescence). That is, there is a significant direct effect of
neighborhood disadvantage on well-adjusted children influencing them to become involved in serious offending as they reach adolescence.

Collectively, the neighborhood and contextual effects literature provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding the relationships among ecological characteristics, neighborhood processes, individual attributes, and juvenile delinquency. This literature begins to answer critical questions, such as those related to how youth living in high-risk environments overcome adversity. On this point Elliott et al. (1996, p. 391) argue: "Our primary interest in neighborhood effects is to understand how youths growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods manage to complete a successful course of adolescent development in spite of the social and economic adversity that characterizes these social contexts. Our interest in the neighborhood is thus to identify those specific conditions and social processes that interfere with a successful course of youth development, as well as those that buffer or mitigate the potential negative ecological influences and physical dangers found in these environments."

Just as with delinquency area studies, there are some unresolved issues in the neighborhood effects literature. Unanswered is the question: Are community and individual risk factors primarily additive or interactive? That is, do community characteristics matter in addition to or in conjunction with individual risk factors? A related issue involves identifying the relative importance of neighborhood and individual risk factors for delinquency. One of the most common findings in the literature is that the proportion of variance in juvenile offending explained by community factors is rather low (Cattarello 2000, p. 49; Gottfredson et al. 1991; Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz 1986). Thus, social areas appear to have a small effect on individual delinquent behavior. Why might this be the case? Another finding is that many of the effects of community characteristics on individual offending are mediated by measures of individual characteristics (Cattarello 2000, p. 53; Haynie, Silver, and Teasdale 2006; Simons et al. 2005). Such findings raise the question: What are the implications for neighborhood studies of juvenile delinquency?

V. Future Directions in Communities and Delinquency Research

Research on communities and delinquency is alive and well. Still, there are several directions scholars can navigate in future studies to advance what is already known. To start, it is important to remember that neighborhoods are not remote and isolated entities. In thinking about neighborhood effects, one must consider, therefore, the presence of external, symbiotic relationships on local rates of delinquency (see, for example, Heitgard and Bursik 1987 who studied the effect of racial change occurring in nearby communities). Along these lines, neighborhoods are influenced by
extra-community politics and public policies. Sampson and Wilson (1995, p. 54) emphasize the importance of analyzing crime at the neighborhood level and the policy context in which crime occurs when they contend: "On the basis of our theoretical framework, we conclude that community-level factors...are fruitful areas of future inquiry, especially as they are affected by macrolevel public policies regarding housing, municipal services, and employment." It is also important to remember that neighborhood contexts are not constant. They undergo change in response to broader political, economic, and cultural changes in the larger society, and in response to changes in the characteristics and composition of individual residents (Elliott et al. 1996, p. 392).

An important question for scholars who study communities and delinquency remains: Are patterns in delinquency across communities stable or variable? Unfortunately, most research in this area is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, and thus we know very little about how changes in ecological characteristics, changes in neighborhood social and organizational processes, and changes in rates of delinquency are associated over longer (or even shorter) periods of time. Yet it is argued that "the general omission of temporal considerations from this research tradition is a serious impediment to the community-level study of delinquency, for it forces the analyst to assume that the underlying dimensions associated with delinquency rates during a single time period are in fact real and persistent, regardless of historical changes in urban dynamics that may be taking place" (Bursik 2001, p. 394). In short, community processes related to delinquency should be placed within larger urban dynamics and given a full meaning through longitudinal data (Bursik 2001, p. 395).

Another key issue for future research has to do with determining at which point in the life course it may be most appropriate to measure or study juvenile delinquency. For example, should the focus be on variations in age of onset of delinquency, in terms of early or late onset? Should the focus be on the development of serious offending? What about recidivism rates among juveniles? As Wikstrom and Loeber (2000, p. 1117) point out, "Few studies have addressed the question of influences of community of residence on aspects of criminal careers, such as variations in the age of onset and individuals' development of serious offending," and "The question of whether community context influences the development of individuals' dispositions and social situation relevant to (future) offending has hardly been studied at all" (p. 1134). There is some evidence that neighborhood effects vary by the age of youths; more specifically, "they are minimal on very young children and stronger on older youths, who become increasingly embedded in neighborhood social networks and activities and have longer periods of exposure to the risks in disorganized neighborhoods" (Elliott et al. 1996, p. 417). As such, one could argue researchers should also compare different age groups of juvenile offenders.

Finally, in the conclusion of their review of neighborhood effects studies, Sampson and his colleagues (2002, pp. 470–73) focus on four additional directions for designing research on the neighborhood context of child and adolescent well-being: (1) redefining neighborhood boundaries in ways that are more consonant with social interactions and children's experiences; (2) collecting data on the physical
and social properties of neighborhood environments through systematic social observations; (3) taking account of spatial interdependence among neighborhoods; and (4) collecting benchmark data on neighborhood social processes. I think each of these is critically important if the communities and delinquency literature is to make major strides in the future.

Apart from these future directions, criminologists must continue to recognize that adolescent delinquency and violence are a function of multiple social contexts including family, peer group, school, and, as this chapter hopefully has conveyed, the neighborhood. Perhaps of even greater importance, policy makers must begin to direct more attention toward focusing on neighborhoods in their attempts to develop programs and policies to curb juvenile delinquency. Unfortunately, approaches to reducing delinquency that do not involve additional investments within the juvenile justice system have received little attention in the public sphere. In the long list of recommendations for reducing delinquency (e.g., stiffer penalties, job training, boot camp, drug treatment), one arena of change is typically left out of the equation—changing communities. Yet by disregarding community context, we are critically ignoring key influences and pressures that directly and indirectly influence youth behavior. In sum, local areas must be considered when we think about juveniles and juvenile delinquency because they provide the environments that contextualize the lives of youth offenders and nonoffenders alike. As this chapter demonstrates, local areas afford opportunities and constraints for both normative and nonnormative behavior.

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