



Jennie Di Rocco

A (socio-)ecological perspective on crime and fear of crime in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

While it is well known that crime and fear of crime are unevenly distributed across neighbourhoods and that certain individual factors are more associated with involvement in crime and being fearful of crime than others - several questions remain unanswered.

The purpose of this dissertation is to increase the knowledge on how neighbourhood-level factors can impact both neighbourhood-level and individual-level outcomes. More specifically, the aim is to examine how neighbourhood-level fear of crime changes over time and how neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder can impact individual-level involvement in crime and fear of crime. The findings from four studies make theoretical contributions and offer insights relevant for crime prevention and safety enhancing efforts.

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**A (SOCIO-)ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CRIME AND
FEAR OF CRIME IN DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBOURHOODS**

A (socio-)ecological perspective on crime and fear of crime in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Thesis for Doctoral Degree (Ph.D) in Criminology

By Jennie Di Rocco

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ABSTRACT

Despite considerable progress in understanding the importance of neighbourhood factors in shaping crime and fear of crime, important gaps remain at both the neighbourhood and individual level regarding how these processes operate. To address these gaps, the current dissertation draws primarily on repeated cross-sectional survey data to examine how neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder are associated with crime and fear of crime across neighbourhoods and individuals.

The first two studies adopt an ecological perspective, focusing on how neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder relate to neighbourhood-level fear of crime. The two subsequent studies take a socio-ecological perspective, examining how neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder are associated with involvement in crime and fear of crime at the individual-level.

By using growth curve modelling in Study I and a mixed methods approach in Study II, the findings show that levels of fear of crime and disorder are, as expected, elevated in neighbourhoods with high disadvantage. Moreover, the findings reveal that neighbourhood fear of crime change over time and that this change appears to be associated with change in disorder. The results from study I further show that fear of crime had the highest increase in more affluent neighbourhoods.

Study II evaluated a crime prevention initiative in a disadvantaged neighbourhood over a ten-year period, with five years pre-implementation and five years post-implementation. The findings indicate that both fear of crime and disorder were reduced, as reported by residents and local experts working in the area.

Applying a multilevel approach in Study III, findings suggest that neighbourhood of residence appears to be more important for explaining individual level fear of crime than individual involvement in crime. The findings

also point to a variation in how disorder is perceived among individuals: some report high levels of perceived disorder and fear of crime without any involvement in crime, whereas others report similarly high levels but also an involvement in crime.

Study IV shows that neighbourhood of residence has limited explanatory power in relation to individual variation in involvement in crime overall, however, neighbourhood effects appear to be stronger in relation to serious crime. Furthermore, findings also show that neighbourhood-level disadvantage explain a significant part of the small observed between-neighbourhood variation in involvement in crime. However, the small between-neighbourhood variation indicates that individual-level factors are more important for understanding variation in involvement in crime than neighbourhood-level factors.

Overall, the findings suggest that the impact of neighbourhood factors differs across neighbourhood- and individual-level outcomes. This highlights the importance of clearly specifying the level of analysis to avoid incorrect inferences. Moreover, future studies should adopt theoretical and methodological approaches that recognize that fear of crime and perceived disorder are, in part, shaped by how people interpret and experience their surroundings.

LIST OF PAPERS

I.

Di Rocco, J., Vasiljevic, Z., & Ivert, A-K. (2023). Neighbourhood fear of crime and disadvantaged areas: a comparative longitudinal study. *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 25.

II.

Di Rocco, J., Kronkvist, K., Vasiljevic, Z., & Ivert, A-K. (2025). Changes in disorder and fear of crime in a disadvantaged neighbourhood following the implementation of a BID organisation. *Safer Communities*, 24(3).

III.

Di Rocco, J. Vasiljevic, Z., & Ivert, A-K. Does neighbourhood disorder matter? The association to individual variation in crime involvement, fear of crime and perceived disorder. *Manuscript (submitted)*.

IV.

Di Rocco, J., Vasiljevic, Z., & Ivert, A-K. The role of neighbourhood disadvantage in adolescent crime. *Manuscript (submitted)*.

Jennie is the first author on all papers and has contributed to all parts of the studies, including the formulation of research questions, conducting the data analyses and writing the manuscripts. The supervisors, as well as the additional co-author in Study II, have contributed with feedback throughout the research process and co-written the manuscripts together with Jennie.

INTRODUCTION

Crime and fear of crime are not evenly distributed across society: (Pratt & Cullen, 2005; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Skogan, 1986) some neighbourhoods are more affected, leaving residents at greater risks of negative life outcomes. Sweden also faces challenges associated with the concentration of problems, such as high crime rates and fear of crime in neighbourhood characterized by unemployment, crowded living conditions and ethnic heterogeneity (Boverket, 2025). These types of neighbourhoods are often referred to as disadvantaged.

Spatial concentrations of disadvantage, however, are not a new phenomenon. Places with a rough or troubled reputation have existed throughout human history (de Antuñano, 2021): in ancient Rome, the poor were confined to overcrowded and badly constructed housing called *insulae*. In medieval times, marginalized groups were placed in ghettos, with limited resources and subpar living conditions. The more modern version of such areas emerged during the 19th century when rapid industrialization drew rural populations to cities more quickly than housing and infrastructures could adapt, resulting in overcrowded areas that became known as “slums”. Already a century ago, researchers such as Shaw and McKay (1942), Thrasher (1927/2006) and Park et al. (1925/1967) laid the groundwork for the research tradition known as ecological criminology, which showed that neighbourhoods characterized by structural conditions such as poverty and rapid population changes were associated with elevated crime rates. This association was theoretically explained using the concept of social disorganization, which highlights how structural conditions can lead to elevated crime rates in certain areas (Shaw & McKay, 1942). The theoretical explanation has since been tested empirically (e.g. Sampson and Groves (1989) and further developed to better understand the neighbourhood processes *through* which structural conditions can lead to higher crime levels (e.g Sampson et al., 1997;

Taylor, 2015). Later research has also shown that fear of crime appears to be affected by similar neighbourhood conditions (Ivert et al., 2016; Lagrange et al., 1992; Skogan, 1986). What remains understudied, however, is whether and how neighbourhood levels of fear of crime change over time. Knowing this is essential, since fear of crime can impact both crime levels and also people's health (Golovchanova et al., 2021; Hale, 1996; Lorenc et al., 2012; Riger et al., 1981; Skogan, 1986).

Later theoretical developments have further highlighted that a socio-ecological lens is required to develop a comprehensive understanding of individual involvement in crime and fear of crime, since individual and neighbourhood factors interact (Wikström, 2022). While some studies have been conducted, the use of an integrative approach to crime and fear of crime still remains limited (Oberwittler & Wickes, 2025; Wikström & Sampson, 2003), particularly in a Swedish setting.

In essence, the ecological and socio-ecological perspectives offer different ways of understanding crime and fear of crime: *where* problems are concentrated, *how* neighbourhood factors ensure their persistence, *who* is fearful and involved in crime and *how* these outcomes can be shaped by individual factors in combination with neighbourhood factors. This dissertation builds on both ecological and socio-ecological perspectives, with the overarching aim being to investigate whether and how neighbourhood factors affect crime and fear of crime, at both the neighbourhood and individual levels. This merits attention not only because crime and fear of crime have tangible implications for residents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Mellgren, 2011; Pearson et al., 2015), but also because identifying mechanisms can inform crime preventive initiatives and ensure that resources are allocated effectively (Sellström & Bremberg, 2006).

BACKGROUND

This chapter begins with an introduction and a problematization of the key issues surrounding disadvantaged neighbourhoods from a criminological perspective. This is followed by a presentation of the theoretical frameworks that guide the dissertation. Finally, existing empirical findings are reviewed and current knowledge gaps within the research field are identified.

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods

A common approach in criminology is to operationalize neighbourhood disadvantage using a composite index focused on structural factors. Such indices typically combine indicators of socioeconomic status: areas with lower household income-, educational attainment and occupational status are considered more disadvantaged. Some indices might also use the proportion of single-person households, social benefit recipients, the proportion of foreign-born residents or population turnover. Even though Sweden is often considered a wealthy and egalitarian country with high quality of life and a strong welfare system, there are indications that Sweden has a high degree of segregation (Malmberg & Clark, 2021). In the Swedish population it is estimated that around 7-8% reside in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Boverket, 2025).

Moreover, disadvantaged neighbourhoods often experience higher concentration of crime (Pratt & Cullen, 2005; Shaw & McKay, 1942) and fear of crime (Skogan, 1986) in comparison to more affluent areas. In criminological research, such differences between neighbourhoods are often discussed in terms of neighbourhood effects. Neighbourhood effects are often divided into contextual- and compositional effects. *Contextual effects* refer to the way features of the neighbourhood, such as high levels of disorder and lower levels of collective efficacy (concepts which will be explained shortly) can explain

differences in crime and fear of crime. *Compositional effects*, instead refer to the way differences between neighbourhoods can arise from the characteristics of the people who live there, with outcomes mainly being explained by varying concentration of individual factors. Studying neighbourhood effects is important for understanding why certain negative outcomes are spatially concentrated and persist over time. It is also essential to disentangle contextual effects from compositional effects, since failing to do so may lead to incomplete or inaccurate conclusions about the relationship between neighbourhood disadvantage, crime and fear of crime (Kölegård-Stjärne, 2005; Robinson, 1950; Zeoli et al., 2019).

Studying places or people? A theoretical rationale

The distinction between contextual- and compositional effects reflects not only a methodological standpoint but also a theoretical lens, separating the influence of neighbourhood conditions from the characteristics of people in accounting for neighbourhood-related outcomes. Looking exclusively at places, or exclusively people, is not in itself problematic; the different perspectives just emphasize different levels of influence. This is neatly illustrated by Albanese (2013, p. 263): “there are two ways to look at the world: that of the bird or that of the frog. The bird’s eye view is the macro-level approach in which the world and its problems are viewed from above, and broader social context is seen to produce social problems. The frog’s view sees the world and its problems from the bottom up. This is the micro-level approach where individual-level experience produces many individual outcomes, which might ultimately have larger social implications”. Essentially, both the bird and the frog see the world correctly, but from different viewpoints.

One way to structure the movement between these levels of analyses is Coleman’s Boat (Coleman, 1990) which provides a useful broad analytical framework. Figure 1 is a simplified and modified version of Coleman's Boat (1990) and its multiple adaptations (e.g. Jepperson & Meyer 2011), but Coleman's basic premise was that macro conditions (macro input) influence individuals' opportunities, experiences and perceptions (micro input). Individuals then act on their perceptions and preferences (micro output). When the individual actions are aggregated, they produce macro-level outcomes (macro output). The top part of the ‘boat’ in Figure 1 represents large structures that can influence macro outcomes, such as neighbourhoods (the structures might also be schools, the legal

system or cultural norms etc). Relating this to the current dissertation, it would imply that neighbourhood-level factors can influence neighbourhood-level outcomes, an association that is aligned with an ecological perspective (represented by the top pink arrow in the figure).

The lower part of the ‘boat’ instead refers to individual-level processes (such as personal preferences, resources, actions etc.). The movement from neighbourhood factors to the individual level is illustrated by the black arrow to the left in the figure. The arrow demonstrates how neighbourhood-level factors can shape individual-level factors, which in turn influence individual-level outcomes. Moving from neighbourhood factors to individual outcomes is illustrated by the lower purple arrow in Figure 1, where individual outcomes are assumed to be mediated via individual factors. The focus of the current dissertation will be on the pink arrow directly from neighbourhood factors to individual outcomes, based on prior research in the field. Moreover, it is an essential first step to establish these associations after which future work can further examine the indirect links via individual factors.

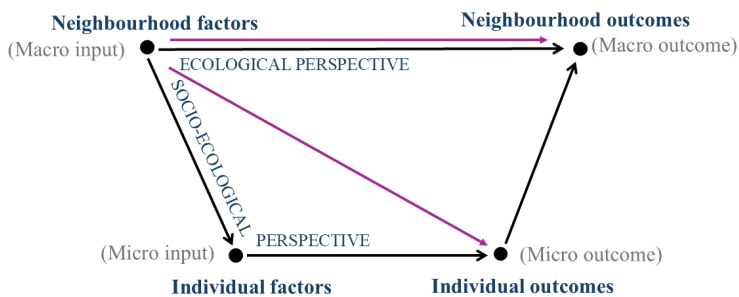


Figure 1. Adapdtion of Coleman’s boat (1986/1990). The terms in brackets in the figure refer to Coleman’s original labels. The purple arrows illustrate the associations explored in the current dissertation.

Overall, Coleman’s Boat demonstrates how research questions suitable for both an ecological and socio-ecological perspective can assess crime and fear of crime. Moreover, it illustrates that while the two perspectives measure the same outcomes, although at different levels, they are not competing with another

(Taylor, 2015; Wikström & Sampson, 2006). For example, neighbourhood-level research can inform interventions aimed at improving factors such as the physical environment in an area, or access to services such as health care. In contrast, individual-level research can inform interventions that target individual factors, such as behavioural therapy.

However, there is a potential issue that can arise when exploring different analytical levels when the distinction between these levels is not acknowledged. This can lead to the ecological fallacy, i.e. drawing individual-level inferences from neighbourhood-level associations (Robinson, 1950; Zeoli et al., 2019), potentially resulting in misdirected or inefficient interventions (Sellström & Bremberg, 2006). An ecological fallacy relevant for this dissertation might, for example, be that while there may be an association between high levels of neighbourhood disadvantage and high levels of fear of crime, this does not necessarily mean that the fear of crime experienced by an individual with high level of disadvantage (e.g. low socioeconomic status) mirrors the fear of crime level in the neighbourhood. Such an inference is incorrect because the group-level pattern can mask variation within the group. A study by Durkheim (1897/2002) is often cited as the classic example of the ecological fallacy, (even though Durkheim himself problematized the issue): he compared national- and regional-level data on the suicide rates of Catholics and Protestants and concluded that since protestants had higher rates of suicide, protestant individuals were at higher risk of committing suicide. However, Durkheim did not have any individual data and thus should not have drawn this conclusion, illustrating the case of the ecological fallacy (Poppel & Day, 1996). A central insight from this example is that an association at the neighbourhood level can exist even if there is no corresponding association at the individual level.

A (socio)-ecological perspective on crime and fear of crime

Since an ecological perspective on crime and fear of crime focuses on places as the primary unit of analysis, the central assumption is that neighbourhood factors can influence outcomes at this level (Zeoli et al., 2019).

Social disorganization can be seen as a theoretical framework for explaining how structural factors can impact level of crime and fear of crime unevenly across neighbourhoods. It is not the structural factors themselves that cause crime, instead these produce disorganization (Kubrin & Wo, 2016; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Taylor (2015) for example, states that social disorganization refers to the

neighbourhood processes through which these structural factors lead to outcomes such as crime.

The study that is most closely associated with social disorganization is that of Shaw and McKay (1942), which found high levels of juvenile delinquency in the inner-city zones of Chicago's urban neighbourhoods and labelled these areas "socially disorganized". These areas had high levels of crime, poverty, a high turnover of residents and a mix of cultural groupings. Even though people moved in and out of these areas, neighbourhood crime levels remained high.

Other researchers have also examined how structural factors in an area can impact crime and disorder (e.g. Bursik, 1988; Byrne & Sampson, 1986; Drakulich, 2025; Taylor, 2015). Taylor (2015), for example, have argued that processes such as a lack of participation in local organisations, low informal social control and social connectedness and also the presence of disorder all constitute indicators of social disorganization. One of the key processes explaining how structural inequalities between neighbourhoods can lead to higher crime rates is collective efficacy (Sampson et al., 1997). Collective efficacy refers to the lack of social cohesion and of the ability to maintain informal social control among residents in a neighbourhood. Low collective efficacy essentially means that there is a lack of trust and social cohesion among residents, which makes it difficult to achieve common goals, such as ensuring low crime levels. As a result, there is little willingness to intervene when things such as people fighting, or drug dealing occur. Consequently, crime levels are high since there is no strength in the neighbourhood to combat unwanted behaviours and levels of collective efficacy are often low in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Besides low collective efficacy, disadvantaged neighbourhoods often present visible signs of disorder (Skogan, 1990). Disorder may be physical and include issues such as littering and rundown buildings covered in graffiti. There is also social disorder which can include loitering, rowdy behaviour and the sale or use of drugs. While disorder has constituted an essential part of the discussion in criminology for a long time (Booth, 1903), one of the most well-known theories linking disorder to crime is Wilson and Kelling (1982) Broken Windows theory. This theory posits that visible disorder in a neighbourhood signals to passers-by that the area has low social control, since nobody is intervening to correct the disorder, thus making it a suitable place for crime. This in turn can escalate into more serious crime, and the theory thus assumes that disorder plays a causal role in crime.

Broken Windows Theory has been subject to criticism on several levels however: *theoretically* (disorder is merely a symptom of greater social

inequalities (Taylor, 2015) or a lack of collective efficacy (O'Brien et al., 2019), *empirically* (Wilson and Kelling's theory was not directly based on empirical evidence and little evidence has since been produced to support it (Drakulich, 2025), and *in terms of policy* (the impact on police work was immense yet often led to the mistreatment of people who engage in minor forms of crime, (Drakulich, 2025). Part of the criticism has also questioned the causal role of disorder. Some researchers have instead argued that rather than assuming that disorder influences crime, disorder should more appropriately be understood as a part of a socially disorganized areas with eroded social control (Drakulich, 2025).

The theoretical frameworks used to explain why some neighbourhoods have more crime than others have also been used to interpret neighbourhood differences in fear of crime. It has long been recognized in the field that experiencing fear of crime is more common than being a victim of crime (Lane, 2015). It is also more common to witness and experience less serious crime (Helldén et al., 2025). As a result, physical cues in a neighbourhood provide important signals that affect how people perceive the risk of victimization, and places can thereby amplify experiences of fear (Drakulich, 2025). This essentially means that signs of disorder in a neighbourhood can increase residents fear of crime. Consequently, it is assumed residents withdraw from the public space which reduces social control in the neighbourhood even further and increases crime opportunities (Hunter, 1978; Markowitz et al., 2001; Skogan, 1986).

The neighbourhood processes described above can be further conceptualized in a socio-ecological framework, which assumes that individuals are nested in and influenced by the context in which they find themselves. A socio-ecological perspective is most often associated with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which was originally focused on child development, but has over time been adapted to other fields such as criminal behaviour.

A key contribution of the socio-ecological framework is that it addresses a major limitation of much criminological research: "most individual level research is inadequate because it neglects variation in community characteristics, while community level research fails to take account of individual differences" (Tonry et al., 1991, p. 42). To overcome these limitations, contemporary theories and empirical work have integrated neighbourhood- and individual-level factors (such as Situational Action Theory by Wikström et al. (2012), or transactional model by Roosa et al. (2003)), highlighting that a multi-level approach is required to account for the dynamics involved in explaining crime and fear of crime. A socio-ecological perspective to fear of crime may, for example, assess whether this fear is primarily driven by neighbourhood factors (such as high levels of

neighbourhood disorder) or by individual factors, such as gender, with women tending to report higher levels of fear (Chataway & Bourke, 2020). Another benefit of this perspective is that it enables the study of how neighbourhood- and individual factors interact, thereby explaining why different people respond differently to the same place. For instance, there is research suggesting that the association between neighbourhood disadvantage and crime involvement is generally weak to moderate, with the effects of disadvantage instead being mediated by individual- and family-level factors (Airaksinen et al., 2021; Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 2007; Brännström, 2004; Oberwittler, 2004; Sariaslan et al., 2013; Wikström & Treiber, 2016). A study of self-reported offending by Vogel and Van Ham (2018) showed that the link between individual factors and serious crime among young people is strongest in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This is attributed to some individual factors being more prone to becoming translated into involvement in crime in these neighbourhood contexts, and points to the fact that neighbourhood disadvantage does not independently predict involvement in crime but that it can become significant under certain conditions (Wikström & Treiber, 2016).

Another important aspect of the socio-ecological framework is of course its focus on individual-level factors, a large number of which have been linked to crime and fear of crime, such as personal characteristics (DeLisi et al., 2010). However, it is “exceedingly difficult to capture and model these complex dynamics, having a clear theoretical framework can help draw out clear testable implications” (Wikström et al., 2024, p. 412) and the complexity of the real-world forces researchers to make selective choices about what to include when studying these outcomes (Posick & Rocque, 2018). This can lead to the omission of important contextual or individual factors because a socio-ecological framework does not limit itself to the neighbourhood as the only important context. For example, schools constitute another relevant context in relation to adolescent crime and fear of crime (Eklund & Fritzell, 2014; Sandahl, 2021; Vasiljevic et al., 2024). In addition, interpersonal relationships such as socializing with antisocial peers (Pratt et al., 2010), and family dynamics (Hoeve et al., 2009) can also influence these outcomes. In addition, while a socio-ecological framework can separate contextual from compositional effects, one limitation is that it cannot provide insight regarding selectivity bias, which refers to the fact that people are not randomly distributed across areas, either by choice or structural constraints (Taylor, 2015). As such, selectivity bias can confound neighbourhood effects and make it difficult to determine if the observed effects are due to contextual influences or population composition, which represents a general limitation

within the research field. Nevertheless, because crime and fear of crime are strongly linked to place and theoretical assumptions emphasizing the importance of neighbourhoods, this current dissertation therefore opts for a focus on the neighbourhood context and a few selected individual characteristics.

Current knowledge gaps

Building on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, several issues remain unanswered. One central challenge is that structural conditions are notoriously difficult to change, and many neighbourhoods remain disadvantaged (Sampson, 2012) which raises a critical question: even if structural disadvantage remains stable, can neighbourhood processes such as disorder and collective efficacy change? Changes in neighbourhood processes are relevant because these processes are theoretically linked to neighbourhood levels of crime and fear of crime.

There are mixed findings regarding the dynamics of collective efficacy: some research shows that it is not easy to improve collective efficacy in neighbourhoods because it involves a process that is inherently collective and cannot be achieved through individual motivation alone (Gearhart, 2022). On the other hand, other research instead suggests that collective efficacy is amenable to change, with residents updating their perceptions in response to changes in crime and disorder in the neighbourhood (Hipp, 2016). Further, Ohmer (2016) has shown that structured opportunities for collaboration can strengthen social cohesion and social capital, demonstrating that collective efficacy is not merely a static neighbourhood characteristic but a process that can be cultivated. For disorder, a study utilizing an objective measure of physical disorder on street segments noted higher levels of disorder over a ten-year period (Gullon et al., 2023). Moreover, there are indications that neighbourhood-level disorder can change over time (Markowitz et al., 2001), although, this type of aggregate research is scarce compared to research on individual-level disorder (e.g. Brunton-Smith & Sturgis, 2011).

Moreover, ecological research has historically relied heavily on cross-sectional data (Zeoli et al., 2019), which limits our understanding of changes over time. While some research has worked to overcome this limitation (e.g. Helldén, 2026; Ivert et al., 2016), longitudinal research that examines how disorder and fear of crime evolve in neighbourhoods is still lacking. It is essential to understand if there are changes over time and also to gain insight into which processes are responsible for any changes.

Furthermore, although there are numerous place-based initiatives aimed at improving neighbourhood levels fear of crime, there is a lack of research evaluating interventions that specifically target fear of crime as opposed to crime levels (Ekblom & Pease, 1995). This is a notable gap in the literature given that fear of crime is associated with neighbourhood crime levels and has independent consequences for well-being (Golovchanova et al., 2021; Hale, 1996; Lorenc et al., 2012; Riger et al., 1981; Skogan, 1986). Related to the lack of evaluations on fear of crime is a broader methodological gap in evaluation studies. Many studies rely on designs that do not fully capture the complexity of the real world (Heap & Waters, 2019; Morris et al., 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Hitchcock, 2017), which highlight the need for neighbourhood-level research that is both longitudinal and methodologically flexible.

While these limitations relate to the study of neighbourhood factors, it is nonetheless still relevant to understand how such neighbourhood factors can influence individual-level outcomes. For example, only a small number of studies have examined whether *neighbourhood-level* disorder influences individual-level involvement in crime, and the general findings is the two are not associated (Nilsson et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2019; Schofield et al., 2012). However, research examining whether neighbourhood disorder can influence fear of crime at the individual level is inconsistent, with some studies identifying an association between neighbourhood disorder and fear of crime (O'Brien et al., 2019; Wyant, 2008) whereas others do not (O'Brien et al., 2019; Polling et al., 2014).

Individual-level research on the association between individual-level disorder (i.e. perceived disorder) and fear of crime, on the other hand, has consistently found a link to individual demographics, characteristics and experiences (e.g. Hardyns et al., 2018; Sreetheran & van den Bosch, 2014). There are also differences in fear of crime where research suggest that individuals who are more fearful are also more likely to perceive their neighbourhoods as having high levels of disorder, which suggests individual-level variation in how the surrounding context is perceived (Brunton-Smith, 2011; Sampson, 2004; Wallace et al., 2015).

Further, perceived disorder at the individual level has been found to be positively associated with both involvement in crime (Kan et al., 2021; Martin-Storey et al., 2021; Nilsson et al., 2021; Schofield et al., 2012) and fear of crime, although less is known about whether these two associations can be found simultaneously in the same sample. To investigate these associations in the same sample is of importance since it would provide insights whether the associations co-occur, whether one accounts for the other or whether both are driven by the

same underlying factors. Also, previous work has not always accounted for both individual- and neighbourhood factors simultaneously, which limits the understanding of neighbourhood disorder to explanations that primarily focus on either neighbourhood- or individual-level factors.

A similar question arises in relation to the role of neighbourhood disadvantage for involvement in crime. International and European research shows that the direct association between neighbourhood disadvantage and individual-level crime is non-significant or small, and is mediated by individual and family-related factors (Airaksinen et al., 2021; Goetz et al., 2025; Oberwittler, 2004; Schofield et al., 2012; Wikström et al., 2018). In a Swedish context, there is some multilevel research, but this research has either focused on contexts other than the neighbourhood (e.g. school: Vasiljevic et al. (2024); Sandahl (2021); Eklund and Fritzell (2014)) or has used registry data (Brännström, 2004; Sariaslan et al., 2013). Registry data tend to underestimate the prevalence of offending by comparison to self-report measures, where self-report measures are able to detect more subtle differences in offending patterns (Junger-Tas & Marshall, 1999). This presents a current knowledge gap in the Swedish context regarding whether neighbourhood disadvantage is associated with individual involvement in crime assessed on the basis of self-reported offending. Additionally, a key insight from international research findings is that even though serious offending is relatively rare, it occurs among young people from all levels of neighbourhood disadvantage (Wikström & Treiber, 2016), which makes it important to replicate these findings in a Swedish context and see how much of neighbourhood of residence and neighbourhood disadvantage influences involvement in crime.

Aim & objectives

Despite much progress having been made on the importance of neighbourhood factors for crime and fear of crime, a number of knowledge gaps remain. The overall aim of this dissertation is therefore to examine whether neighbourhood factors can impact neighbourhood- and individual-level outcomes. Accordingly, the first two studies in the dissertation adopt an ecological perspective to examine whether and how neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder might influence neighbourhood fear of crime, while the subsequent two studies apply a socio-ecological perspective to capture how neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder influence involvement in crime and fear of crime at the individual level. Table 1 summarizes the four studies and outlines each study topic and the analytical level

in focus. The aim of the dissertation can be summarized in the following overarching research questions:

- How does fear of crime change over time across neighbourhoods with varying levels of disadvantage, and to what extent are these changes associated with neighbourhood disorder?

-To what extent can a neighbourhood intervention change fear of crime in a disadvantaged neighbourhood?

- To what extent do differences between neighbourhoods, as captured by neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder, explain variation in individual-level crime and fear of crime?

Table 1. Summary of studies included in the dissertation.

	Analytical level		Theme				
	Neighbourhood level	Individual level	Neighbourhood disadvantage	Disorder	Individual characteristics	Crime	Fear of crime
Study I	✓		●	●			●
Study II	✓		●	●			●
Study III	✓	✓	●	●		●	●
Study IV	✓	✓	●		●	●	

● Used as predictor variable ● Used as outcome variable

METHODS

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the methodological choices made in relation to the four studies, which is followed by a section that defines the variables examined. The final section of the chapter describes the design, method and analytical strategy employed in each of the studies.

The studies designs and analytical approaches employed in the dissertation rests on two essential components: a repeated cross-sectional design and multilevel statistical analyses.

A repeated cross-sectional design was used in all four studies. In contrast to a panel study where the same individuals participate in each data collection wave, a repeated cross-sectional design involves a new sample of participants for each data collection, but from the same population. Repeated cross-sectional designs are often used to overcome limitations related to attrition, but the design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions at the individual level. However, since the aim of Studies I and II was to examine how *neighbourhoods* change over time, the design allows for this because the neighbourhoods remained the same at each data collection point. This made it possible to compare changes in one neighbourhood to other neighbourhoods, regardless of population turnover.

In Studies III and IV, the data from the repeated cross-sectional design were used cross-sectionally. For these studies, two waves were combined to produce a single large dataset in order to increase statistical power. Using a pooled sample in this way can yield more precise estimates, especially when using complex models such as multilevel modelling (Curran & Hussong, 2009). Since the focus in Studies III and IV was directed at both neighbourhoods *and* individuals in neighbourhoods, multilevel modelling constitutes a central component since “multilevel statistical models are always called for if we are interested in propositions that connect variables defined at different levels” (Snijders &

Bosker, 2012, p. 10). Multilevel models allow for the simultaneous analysis of the neighbourhood level (often referred to as Level 2) and the individual level (Level 1) by separating the total variance of the outcome into the between-group variance (between neighbourhoods) and the variance found among individuals within the same group (within neighbourhoods). This makes it possible to examine whether neighbourhoods differ and how much of this difference is related to the outcome, but also how much of the variation is explained by level 1 and 2 variables respectively.

Operationalization of variables

The following section outlines how the concepts examined in the four studies were measured.

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods

As an analytical unit, a neighbourhood is treated as a single unit/place and then compared with other neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods were defined by census tracts in accordance with municipal boundaries and the census tracts vary in geographical size. In Malmö, the setting for the dissertation, there is a total of 136 neighbourhoods where an average neighbourhood consists of approximately 2700 residents over 1200 households (SCB, 2025).

In all the studies, neighbourhoods were categorized by varying levels of disadvantage, which was used as a predictor variable. In Studies I, III and IV, neighbourhood disadvantage was measured using a composite score based on registry data from Statistics Sweden. The composite score comprised the proportion of foreign born, of unemployed, of individuals with low education, and income level. The disadvantage score was created by means of a factor analysis, with the regression scores being used to divide the neighbourhoods into three groups: the 25% with the lowest disadvantage scores, the 50% with mid-range scores and the 25% with highest disadvantage scores (Fabio et al., 2011). In Study II, the disadvantaged area was identified based on criteria determined by Malmö municipality, but analyses indicated it had lower socioeconomic status compared to other neighbourhoods in the city.

Crime

In Studies III and IV, crime was used as an outcome variable and was assessed by means of self-report data, with participants having answered a set of questions

regarding their involvement in crime. Nine different crime items were included, based on a Swedish adaptation of the 'Community Youth Survey', a translated survey instrument to measure adolescents' well-being (Arthur et al., 2002). The items intended to capture youth crime were: [how many times in the past 12 months have you] carried a gun, sold drugs, stolen a vehicle, been arrested, assaulted a person, carried a gun to school, stolen anything above the value of 50 SEK, reported shoplifting or property damage, with the response alternatives 'never' (0), 'a few times'(1), 'at least once a month'(2), 'at least once a week' (3).

In Study III, a dichotomous prevalence variable was employed based on responses to all 9 items, with zero crime involvement coded as '0' while having experience of one or more of the crime events was coded as '1'.

In Study IV, the items "assaulted a person" and "shoplifting" were used as dichotomous variables, with zero crime involvement coded as '0', while having engaged in one or more crime events was coded as '1'. Having assaulted a person was used to represent serious crime and shoplifting less serious crime.

Fear of crime

When used as an umbrella term, fear of crime can be described by in terms of the 'ABC' of fear of crime - the 'affective', 'behavioural' and 'cognitive' component (Ferraro & Lagrange, 1987; Gabriel & Greve, 2003; Hale, 1996; Jackson & Gouseti, 2014). The affective component relates to what people experience, or feel, when they think about crime, such as how worried they are about becoming the victim of a certain type of crime. The behavioural component concerns how people's behaviour is altered as a result of being fearful about crime, for example limiting one's daily life or not leaving one's home. The cognitive component involves a broader feeling of unsafety, and how fearful people are when they go out alone, for example.¹

In Studies I, II and III, fear of crime was used as an outcome variable. Two components of 'fear of crime' were utilized: the affective and cognitive. For Studies I and II the affective component "worry about [crime type]" was used and focused on crime types that are relevant to neighbourhood processes. Examples of these crime types include assault, theft or damage to property (i.e. crimes that can occur in public, while crimes such as fraud, online crime or domestic crime were excluded) and participants were asked to rate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement that they worried about these different types of crime.

¹ This aspect of fear of crime is in the literature sometimes synonymously described as unsafety. Note that this *perceived unsafety* concerns risk assessment and should not be confused with *actual safety* which instead can be ascribed to crime levels.

The individuals' answers on the ordinal-scale variables were aggregated to the neighbourhood level.

For Studies II and III, the cognitive component of fear of crime, 'unsafety', was used. Here, participants were asked if they were fearful of any individuals in their neighbourhood (study II) or if they were fearful of walking alone at night in the neighbourhood (study II and III). The answers were dichotomized and used on individual level (study III) and aggregated to proportions of unsafe/safe on neighbourhood level (study II).

Disorder

Disorder was treated as a predictor variable in study I and III, and in Study II as an outcome variable². Disorder measured participants' perceived levels of disorder in their neighbourhood. On an ordinal scale, residents were asked to rate to what extent different types of disorder were present in their neighbourhood. In Studies I, II and III, disorder was aggregated from individual-level responses to the neighbourhood level to represent a contextual variable. In Study III, both the individual-level score (i.e. perceived disorder) and the aggregated score were used.

In total there were four different surveys used to assess disorder in Studies I, II and III. There were slight differences between items in the different questionnaires, but perceptions of physical disorder were measured using items such as the presence of graffiti, litter, rundown buildings and problematic traffic issues such as speeding cars. Social disorder was measured using items such as having observed youth loitering, drug dealing, people who were drunk, and fighting in public. In Studies I and II, disorder was split in to 'social' and 'physical' disorder. This choice was made because earlier research has indicated a significant difference between the two in relation to fear of crime (Kuen et al., 2022). Study III instead used a total disorder score because the focus in this study was to generate insights regarding links between involvement in crime and fear of crime rather than investigating subgroups of disorder.

Individual characteristics

In Study IV, the individual factors 'favourable attitudes to antisocial behaviour' and 'rebelliousness', known to be associated with crime involvement (García-

² In Study II, disorder was used as an outcome variable in the quantitative analyses to assess pre-post intervention levels. However, in the qualitative analyses it was conceptually considered a predictor.

Rojo et al., 2025; Stams et al., 2006; Vogel & Van Ham, 2018; Wikström et al., 2012) were treated as predictors at the individual level. Both favourable attitudes to antisocial behaviour and rebelliousness were assessed using scales from the ‘Community Youth Survey’ (see more under operationalization of “crime”). The items concerning favourable attitudes to antisocial behaviour focused on how wrong participants felt it was to assault someone or steal something, for example. High values on the Likert-scale (0-4) were indicative of anti-social attitudes. Rebelliousness was based on a Likert-scale (0-4) using items whether the participants sometimes did things even though they should not, or did the opposite of what they were told. High values indicated high rebelliousness.

Study I: neighbourhood changes in fear of crime

Study I used a repeated cross-sectional design. Even if the participants differed across the measurement waves, the same neighbourhoods were included at each measurement point (with at least 20 respondents per neighbourhood (Raudenbush & Sampson, 1999), thus the design can be viewed as a ‘neighbourhood panel design’.

The study used two datasets from two different cities: Malmö and Stockholm. For Malmö, the ‘Malmö Community Survey’ was used which was conducted in 2012, 2015 and 2018 and which included a representative sample of people in Malmö between the ages of 18 and 85. Approximately 3,700 people answered the survey each year with a response frequency of between 39 and 52%. Around 80 neighbourhoods were included in the study and then followed over time.

For Stockholm, the ‘Stockholms Trygghetsmätning’ was used, with data collected in 2011, 2014 and 2017. The data were based on a randomized stratified sample of participants aged 16 and over. For each year, 20,000 participants were invited to participate, with an average response rate of 56% per year. Around 120 Stockholm neighbourhoods were included in the study.

Multilevel growth curve models were used to account for the longitudinal and hierarchical structure of the data, and were estimated separately for Malmö and Stockholm. The common procedure in multilevel modelling is to treat individuals as level 1 units and neighbourhoods as level 2 (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). In this case, since the study was focused on neighbourhood change, time was treated as the level 1 variable and neighbourhood disadvantage as the level 2 variable. Fear of crime was the outcome variable, with physical disorder, social disorder and

collective efficacy included as time-varying level 1 predictors. Results from Malmö and Stockholm were compared by examining differences in growth patterns over time, and models were also estimated separately by neighbourhood type to assess consistency across levels of disadvantage.

Study II: neighbourhood changes in fear of crime following an intervention

For the second study, a mixed methods approach was used for a quasi-experimental design to evaluate a crime prevention initiative. The use of a mixed methods approach, i.e. incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, was intended to increase the opportunities to observe effects of an intervention where the use of mixed methods can provide comprehensive and context-sensitive insights (Heap & Waters, 2019; Morris et al., 2020).

The evaluation focused on a collaborative intervention called Business Improvement Districts (BID). The aim of a BID is often to improve a geographically defined area, such as a neighbourhood. Findings on the effectiveness of BID's have been mixed, but mainly positive effects have been observed for property crime while findings for violent crime have been inconclusive (Moir et al., 2024).

The BID organisation in Study II was run by property owners, with the organisation co-operating with local organisations and government entities. The activities that the organisation carried out were mainly focused on beautification, such as additional cleaning services, fixing rundown buildings and improving traffic conditions. The organisation also hosted certain social activities in the relevant area. For more details on the BID organisation, please see Study II.

The quantitative part of the study was based on repeated cross-sectional data from a community survey, 'Polisens Trygghetsmätning'. Apart from the intervention neighbourhood, which was classified as disadvantaged by the municipality, a comparison area was included, which was composed of three disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Malmö.

'Polisens Trygghetsmätning' was a community survey conducted annually in Skåne, Sweden, by the Swedish Police Authority, during the years 2010-2020. Each year, 7,500 residents aged 16-85 in Malmö were sampled using a stratified randomized sample. The average response frequency over the years was 45% in the intervention area and 53% in the comparison areas, and on average the intervention neighbourhood had 140 survey participants over the years examined.

The qualitative part of the study consisted of pre-post interview data from key informants in the intervention neighbourhood. These key informants comprised local experts who were able to assess relevant factors in the neighbourhood (Hardyns et al., 2023). For the pre-implementation period, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted on the basis of purposeful sampling, with representatives from the municipality, police and local non-governmental organisations. For the post-intervention interviews, ten additional interviews were conducted with the key informants from the municipality, police, local non-governmental organisations and property owners in the intervention neighbourhood. The CEO of the BID-organisation was also interviewed.

The quantitative and qualitative components were analysed separately: the quantitative analyses used multivariate variance of analysis for the outcome variables disorder and worry about crime. For the categorical outcome of unsafety, chi-square tests were used to assess pre-post changes in the intervention neighbourhood, with separate analyses conducted for the comparison area.

To identify and interpret patterns from the interviews, the qualitative data were analysed using deductive thematic analysis. The pre-implementation interviews (2014) and the post-implementation interviews (2021) were analysed separately and then merged.

After the quantitative and qualitative data had been analysed, the findings were integrated in a joint display table, a mixed methods integration tool used to combine results visually and analytically (Guetterman et al., 2015).

Studies III & IV; contextual and compositional effects on individual-level crime and fear of crime

The third and fourth studies once again utilized repeated cross-sectional data based on questionnaires. This time the questionnaire was answered by adolescents in Malmö and the questionnaire was a translated version of the Community Youth Survey (see under operationalization of “crime”).

Survey data from 2019 and 2021 were used, with the two measurement points being pooled to increase sample size. The dataset covered the entire population of 12-17-year olds in Malmö, which means all adolescents in Malmö in grade 6 to year 2 in high school. Every year, around 12,000 answers were collected and the response rates were 83% respectively 81% for the two measurement points.

For Study III (and IV), the more traditional multilevel modelling was used to examine how disorder at the neighbourhood and individual levels was associated with involvement in crime and fear of crime. One set of logistic multilevel models was used to assess involvement in crime and another set for fear of crime, with neighbourhood disorder as the level 2 variable and crime and fear of crime as level 1 variables. The analyses were then repeated on neighbourhoods with low vs high disadvantage to see if any similarities in patterns appeared.

To assess the role of disadvantage in involvement in crime in Study IV, the same methodology was used as in Study III. The analytical approach was more or less identical except for the use of different variables, with ‘assault’ being used as the outcome variable in one set of logistic regression models and ‘shoplifting’ in the other, with neighbourhood disadvantage as the level 2 variable, while the level 1 predictors were favourable attitudes to antisocial behaviour and rebelliousness.

Ethical considerations

The Swedish ethics law (SFS 2003:460) is based on a mixture of moral philosophical reasonings and may be considered to derive from a principle-based approach (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019/1979). The principal-based approach includes autonomy (freedom of choice), maleficence (do no harm), beneficence (do good) and justice. In the law, this is translated into the view that research should balance between ensuring human dignity, while contributing to scientific advancement which is of use to everyone. If there is an imbalance between the two, human dignity has the highest priority (SFS 2003:460, § 7 & 8). Therefore, when conducting research on humans, the research is not allowed to cause participants harm or, risk their safety or integrity (Görman, 2023). Based on this, all four studies in the dissertation have undergone ethical review (Dnr 2014-826; Dnr 2021-05683-01; Dnr 2021-01629; Dnr 2025-03444-01). The reason for seeking ethical approval was that the studies would use survey data that included sensitive questions about feelings of unsafety and involvement in crime. Sensitive questions are allowed if participation in the study will not lead to negative consequences for the participants, and if there is no other way of obtaining the information needed to answer the research questions (SFS 2003:460, § 1 & 10). For all four studies, the survey material had already been collected and the approval process for the use of secondary survey data in the current dissertation involved confirming whether the existing data could be used for the new research purposes. In neither of the data sets were there any available identification keys,

which meant there was no way of identifying individual participants to ask for their consent to re-use the data for a slightly different research purpose than the one they originally consented to. Since using the collected data would not impose any further risk on the participants, obtaining ethical approval was straightforward. However, for Study I, the Swedish Ethical Review Authority requested that a statement be published on the university's website declaring that if 'you had participated in the given survey, during the given years, your data might also be used in the current research'. Despite low odds of participants finding this information years after participating in the study, the aim was to ensure that participants did not feel deceived and consequently lose trust in the research process (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022).

The re-use of existing data for Studies I-IV can be viewed as an ethical decision consistent with Beauchamp and Childress (2019/1979) principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, by avoiding the unnecessary new involvement of participants and ensuring that valuable longitudinal data did not go to waste. For a more elaborate ethical discussion concerning the potential risks and benefits of studying disadvantaged neighbourhoods, please see the 'discussion' chapter.

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings from the four studies. The chapter is divided into two parts, with Study I and II being reported under the heading 'Changes in neighbourhood fear of crime' and Studies III and IV under 'Contextual and compositional effects on individual-level crime and fear of crime'.

Changes in neighbourhood fear of crime (Studies I & II)

Studies I and II aimed to investigate whether fear of crime can change over time, and if so, what might drive these changes and whether changes are similar depending on the level of neighbourhood disadvantage. Situating the findings from Studies I and II within the established literature, the results echo previous research showing higher levels of *fear of crime* in disadvantaged neighbourhoods compared to more affluent areas. Elevated levels of *disorder* were also observed in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This pattern was evident in Malmö across two independent samples and was also reflected in Stockholm. These findings provide a point of departure for the research questions examined in the first and second studies, which focus on how such patterns unfold over time.

The most noteworthy result of Study I was that while fear of crime slightly increased in neighbourhoods over time in the two cities examined, the trajectories differed depending on the level of neighbourhood disadvantage. In the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, fear of crime either remained consistently high or increased only slightly. Unexpectedly, fear of crime increased most in the neighbourhoods that were the least disadvantaged. This change is illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. The results suggest that neighbourhood level fear of crime does change over time, although the degree of change is smaller in highly

disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The similarity in these patterns across both cities points to a general process regarding changes in neighbourhood fear of crime.

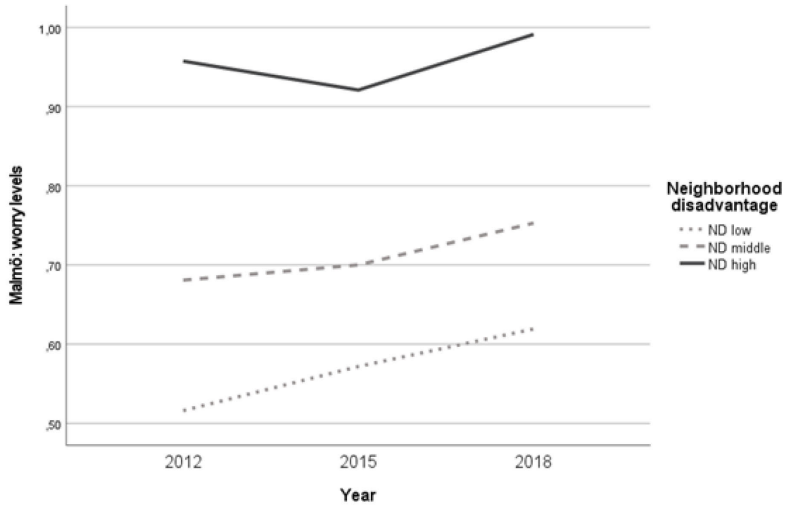


Figure 2. Fear of crime levels in **Malmö** over time, by level of neighborhood disadvantage (3 categories), Study I

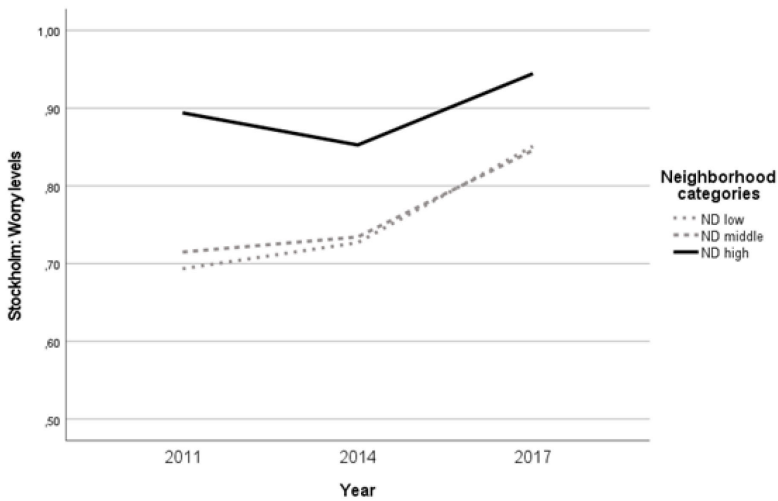


Figure 3. Fear of crime levels in **Stockholm** over time, by levels of neighbourhood disadvantage (3 categories), Study I

As regards changes in collective efficacy, lower levels of collective efficacy were linked to increases in fear of crime. Moreover, increases in physical disorder was generally linked to increases in fear of crime, which corresponds with theoretical expectations. It was also found that in the most affluent areas in Stockholm, where fear of crime increased the most, neither physical nor social disorder were related to the change. This would suggest that unmeasured factors were responsible for the change, since the outcome shifted even though none of the included variables could account for this shift. However, no controls were included for any safety enhancing efforts aimed at improving fear of crime in the neighbourhoods, which might have affected the results if included. Irrespective of this, the results suggest that neighbourhood fear of crime changed over time whereas neighbourhood disadvantage remained stable, with almost all neighbourhoods maintaining their disadvantage category from timepoint 1 to 3.

Study II evaluated an intervention aimed at improving fear of crime in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Malmö. The results show a reduction in fear of crime in the (disadvantaged) intervention neighbourhood. When the intervention neighbourhood was compared to the comparison areas, the reduction in fear of crime was larger in the intervention area, even though fear of crime also decreased in these other areas. When the intervention neighbourhood was compared to the city average, the intervention neighbourhood improved substantially, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for disorder and fear of crime, Study II

Variable	Intervention neighbourhood			Comparison area			Overall city comparison		
	Pre M	Post M	Mean value change	Pre M	Post M	Mean value change	Pre M	Post M	Mean value change
Physical disorder	7.93	6.55	-1.38	6.32	5.66	-0.66	4.46	4.58	+0.12
Social disorder	6.85	5.32	-1.53	5.56	4.70	-0.86	3.05	3.08	+0.03
Unsafe at night (%)	59%	46%	-13%	53%	50%	-3%	33%	35%	+2%
Afraid of people (%)	27%	20%	-7%	22%	19%	-3%	11%	12%	+1%

The descriptive changes reported in Table 2 are over a five-year trend prior to, and a five-year trend after, the start of the intervention. The decrease in fear of crime was also corroborated in the qualitative data, where key informants described a general increase in safety and that residents had reclaimed the space

of the neighbourhood. One key informant remarked that “the atmosphere is different”, explaining that residents greeted each other more often and no longer avoided the neighbourhood. Some key informants attributed this improvement to changes in the physical environment. Others suggested it was a result of particular individuals in the neighbourhood having caused fear among residents and having subsequently been apprehended by the police, which may be why the results of the community survey indicated less fear among residents.

The results from Study II furthermore found a general decrease in disorder in the intervention neighbourhood (see Table 2). In the quantitative data, levels of perceived disorder among residents were significantly reduced. The key informants corroborated this reduction and attributed many of the improvements in disorder to the results of activities implemented by the property owner organisation such as beautification of the neighbourhood, implementing traffic barriers, target hardening in some properties and the initiation of a cleaning patrol in the area.

One challenge, however, was to isolate the effects of the intervention as the cause for changes in fear of crime and disorder. When assessing the results between the intervention and comparison area, the comparison area showed a similar trajectory on all outcomes, even though the change was smaller. Nevertheless, since both the intervention and comparison areas consisted of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and since both received crime preventive initiatives, albeit different ones, it remains plausible that the intervention contributed to the positive changes noted.

Contextual and compositional effects on individual-level crime and fear of crime (Studies III and IV)

Another aim of the dissertation has been to assess the role of neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder in explaining involvement in crime and fear of crime on individual level.

When examining the self-report data in Studies III and IV and employing a multilevel approach with individuals nested in neighbourhoods, the study results provided the share of total variance in involvement in crime that is accounted for by differences between neighbourhoods, rather than within them. This is summarized in a statistical value called a Variance Partition Coefficient score (VPC). The VPC for the prevalence measure was less than 1%, which means that

less than 1% of the prevalence of involvement in crime was attributable to differences between neighbourhoods of residence, and prevalence was instead mainly explained by variation within the neighbourhood. For involvement in less serious crime (measured as shoplifting) the VPC was 1.3%, and for serious crime (measured as assault) it was 2.7%.

One notable finding in Study IV, however, was that when the individual factors were accounted for, neighbourhood disadvantage still mattered in predicting involvement in crime, although this effect went in different directions depending on the crime type: it appears that youth who report assault are more likely to come from neighbourhoods with high levels of disadvantage. By contrast, the results revealed that young people more likely to report shoplifting were from more affluent areas. Additionally, when the sample was split between neighbourhoods with low versus high levels of disadvantage, the results were generally consistent across young people at different ages, from 12- to 17-year-olds, in both shoplifting and assault.

As regards neighbourhood factors that predict individual fear of crime, the results from Study III, indicated that *both* neighbourhood disorder and individual-level disorder (i.e. perceived disorder) matter. This essentially means that those reporting fear more likely live in neighbourhoods with high levels of disorder while also themselves reporting high levels of perceived disorder. A noteworthy finding was that the association between young people with high levels of fear of crime and involvement in crime, which was found in neighbourhoods with both high and low levels of disadvantage. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate that regardless of neighbourhood disadvantage type, there is a similar pattern in perceived disorder: for example, the group of adolescents that expresses high levels of fear and involvement in crime exist in both neighbourhood types. This is followed by the group with the second highest score on perceived disorder ‘fearful youth with no crime involvement’. This group also existed in both neighbourhood types. However, in general, youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods on average had higher levels of fear of crime and reported higher levels of perceived disorder. Summarizing the results from Study III, neighbourhoods seem to matter more for fear of crime than for involvement in crime.

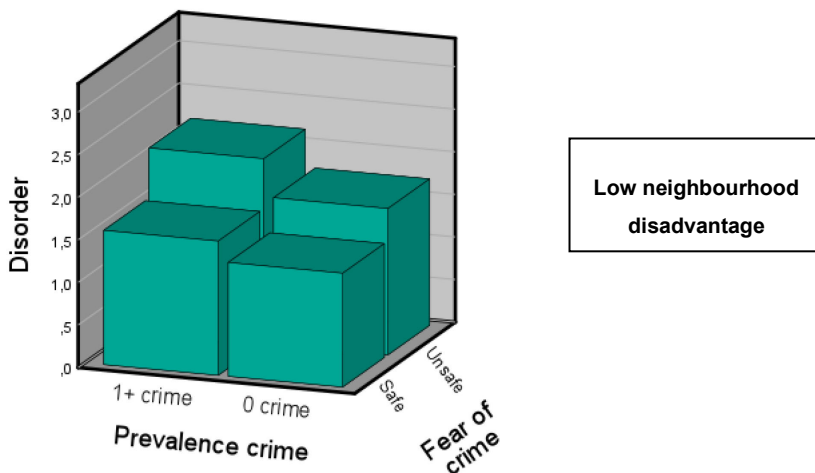


Figure 4. Prevalence of involvement in crime and fear of crime in relation to perceived disorder in neighbourhoods with *low disadvantage*

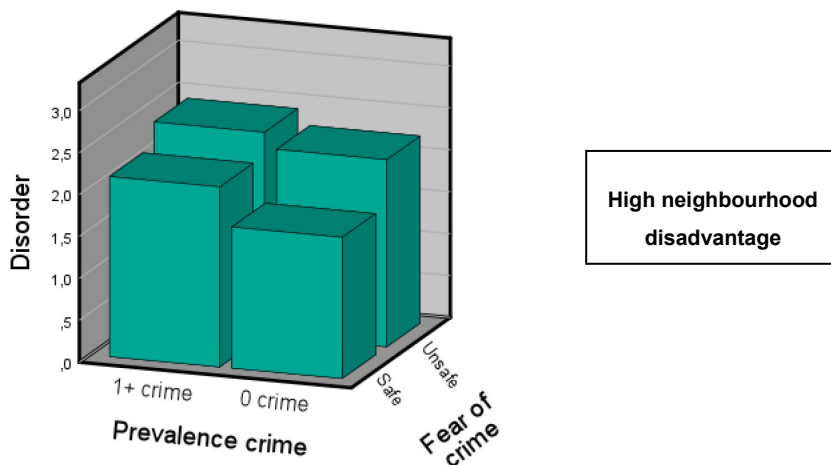


Figure 5. Prevalence of involvement in crime and fear of crime in relation to perceived disorder in neighbourhoods with *high disadvantage*

DISCUSSION

This chapter initially discusses the findings from the four studies in relation to theory and previous empirical studies. This is followed by an ethical reflection on these findings. Next, the limitations of the studies are highlighted, along with suggestions for future research. The final section presents practical implications and concluding remarks.

Reflections on the findings

Changes in neighbourhood fear of crime – findings from an ecological perspective

The overall aim of the dissertation has been to understand how neighbourhood disadvantage and disorder can influence neighbourhood-level fear of crime, and individual-level fear of crime and involvement in crime.

The findings from Study I illustrate how fear of crime can change across neighbourhoods, and how these patterns can be interpreted within an ecological framework. Consistent with prior research, levels of fear of crime were higher in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Ivert et al., 2016; Lagrange et al., 1992; Skogan, 1986) and remained relatively stable over time. In general, increases in physical disorder were associated with increases in fear of crime, as expected based on ecological theories. Moreover, decreases in collective efficacy were linked to increases in fear of crime. However, the largest increases in fear of crime occurred in neighbourhoods with low levels of disadvantage. In some of these neighbourhoods, the increases in fear of crime were not linked to changes in disorder, and thus most likely reflects influences that were not accounted for in the study. Some plausible explanations might be local events that can generate fear or broader factors such as increased media coverage (Chiricos et al., 2000),

or a general increase for worry about crime in society at large (Helldén et al., 2025). During the time-period of Study I, there was a sharp rise in immigration in Sweden, which may have affected levels of trust (Wallman Lundåsen, 2021) and might reflect the increases in fear of crime observed during the same years, which were also visible in the national crime survey (Helldén et al., 2025).

In addition, the results from Study II indicate that neighbourhood factors are not necessarily static: both disorder and fear of crime decreased following efforts to improve the physical environment in a disadvantaged area. The evaluation study of the BID organisation highlights both the strengths and limitations of place-based interventions: both the survey and interview data indicate that BID's may be able to improve the physical environment of a specific geographical space, such as levels of littering or traffic-related matters. However, even if an area becomes less disordered, the underlying factors that might explain why the high levels of disorder were there in the first place, such as structural conditions and limited access to opportunities, are not (usually) addressed by a BID organisation (Drakulich, 2025; Grander et al., 2021). Taken together, the findings from Studies I and II suggest that reducing disorder can contribute to improvements in neighbourhood level fear of crime. However, the role of disorder within the ecological framework remains a subject of conceptual and empirical debate. Some researchers argue that it is difficult to disentangle disorder from structural conditions and that it may overlap with minor forms of crime (Drakulich, 2025; O'Brien et al., 2019; Oberwittler & Wickes, 2025; Taylor, 2015). A narrow focus on neighbourhood disorder therefore risks overlooking the structural conditions that serve as proxies for processes that give rise to crime and fear of crime in neighbourhoods (Taylor, 2015).

Contextual and compositional effects on individual-level crime and fear of crime – findings from a socio-ecological perspective

Moving away from outcomes at the neighbourhood level, Studies III and IV examined the importance of neighbourhood factors on individual level outcomes.

Study III examined the role of disorder in relation to individual-level involvement in crime and fear of crime. The results indicated that neighbourhood disorder has some significance for fear of crime, but neighbourhood disorder was found to have no independent effect on involvement in crime. This heterogeneity in the influence of neighbourhood disorder on two separate outcomes within the same sample confirms previous research findings which suggest that people perceive disorder differently (Brunton-Smith & Sturgis, 2011; Wallace et al., 2015).

Perceived disorder was strongly associated with both crime and fear of crime. There were also differences depending on whether or not youths were themselves involved in crime or not: those who perceived the highest levels of *disorder* were those who reported involvement in crime. The crime-involved youth were also the most *fearful*. This was found in neighbourhoods with both low and high levels of disadvantage. Higher levels of fear of crime among youth who are themselves involved in crime may reflect an elevated risk of victimization in this group (Jennings et al., 2012; Lane, 2015). However, there was indication that this association was weaker in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which may reflect that these young people have become desensitized due to an increased exposure to negative neighbourhood conditions (Yuan & McNeeley, 2018).

The findings from Study III add to the empirical knowledge base on the associations and suggest that targeting neighbourhood disorder may not be as important for reducing individual-level *involvement in crime* as for reducing individual-level *fear of crime*. This suggests that interventions aimed at reducing neighbourhood disorder may contribute to lower levels of fear of crime at the neighbourhood level (as suggested by Studies I and II) and the individual level (Study III). However, given that individual-level factors also play an important role in fear of crime (Study III), reducing neighbourhood disorder is unlikely to eliminate this fear entirely (see e.g. Wallace et al., 2015). This highlights the importance of interpreting neighbourhood-level associations correctly, since inferring an association between a neighbourhood-level factor and an individual-level outcome would risk committing the ecological fallacy. This is something that has implications for both theory and policy, underscoring the importance of clearly specifying the analytical level at which a study is conducted.

The findings showing that neighbourhood factors can impact individual-level outcomes in various ways are supported in Study IV. Importantly, individual characteristics explained the majority of involvement in assault and shoplifting and the neighbourhood mattered less. The small impact of the neighbourhood was most pronounced for assault, where youth in more disadvantaged areas were more likely to report assault and this was true across varying age groups in adolescence. For shoplifting, by contrast, a higher level of youth from more affluent areas reported involvement. The results that the neighbourhood appears to have a greater impact on youth involved in serious crime aligns with findings that argue that disadvantaged neighbourhoods serve both as a setting with more crime opportunities and as a context that can negatively shape individual factors (Vogel & Van Ham, 2018; Wikström et al., 2024). A possible explanation for the contrasting associations in crime types may be that some adolescents in

disadvantaged neighbourhoods do not engage in crime at all, whereas those that do so engage in more serious crime (compared to the youth from more affluent areas who reported shoplifting). Since the study focused on prevalence, the youth reporting shoplifting once or twice are included in the crime involved group since involvement in a few minor crime incidents is common in adolescence. However, youth reporting assault might be involved in such crime acts more frequently (Moffitt, 1993). Hence, the results may differ if a frequency measure were used instead of a prevalence measure, since single-time offenders would then contribute less to the overall estimate. However, this is a tentative explanation that should be explored further. Overall, the findings in Study IV suggest that the impact of neighbourhood disadvantage is not uniform but rather differs depending on crime severity, and that certain groups of youth, in specific contexts, may therefore be more likely to benefit from crime preventive interventions (Martin-Storey et al., 2021; Sariaslan et al., 2013; Wikström & Treiber, 2016b). The findings in Study IV (and III) thus support the view that neighbourhood effects are probabilistic rather than deterministic (Sampson et al., 2002; Sharkey & Faber, 2014), where exposure to the same settings do not produce the same responses among all individuals, as individuals differ in their vulnerability as a result of social, environmental and biological factors (Diderichsen et al., 2019; Wikström et al., 2018).

Reflections on epistemology and level of analyses

Studying disorder and fear of crime requires an epistemological awareness since they are based on subjective perceptions and feelings (Drakulich, 2025; Jackson, 2004). Perceptions are subjective when people answer surveys about how they perceive their neighbourhood, but also when more objective systematic observations are conducted: regardless whether or not the person rating the disorder is a resident in the neighbourhood, perceptions are shaped by social norms, expectations and stereotypes (Drakulich, 2025; Janssen et al., 2022) and reflect an *interpretation* of disorder (this can be compared to e.g. the proportion of unemployed people in an area which represent an objective distribution). According to a constructivist approach, social phenomena are shaped through social processes and interpreted in the terms of the context rather than existing as objective truths (Drakulich, 2025). Indeed, the findings in Study III illustrate a variability in the way individuals perceive and interpret their environment, and point to the value of incorporating constructivist insights. Because disorder is in part socially constructed (Drakulich, 2025), even multi-level models that separate contextual and compositional effects may still capture *interpretations* of disorder

rather than objective conditions. This implies that it is difficult to assume that the neighbourhood factor, i.e. disorder, plays a role in increased fear among residents, since disorder may partly represent the way people interpret the environment.

Moreover, when evaluating neighbourhood-level crime preventive efforts, crime is often assessed by objective measures, such as recorded crime or arrest rates. This differs from evaluating neighbourhood fear of crime, since fear of crime refers to measurements of a subjective state (which is then aggregated to represent a neighbourhood-level factor). A pragmatic epistemological perspective instead acknowledges different understandings of reality where both a constructivist perspective and a positivistic (or more objective) perspective each have validity, and a practical stance is thus adopted where both epistemological positions are used (Heap & Waters, 2019). Transferring this to methodological choices, it aligns well with the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to develop a fuller understanding of fear of crime. One way forward in evaluations regarding fear of crime is thus to adopt a mixed methods approach that brings insights offered by both positivistic and constructivist positions.

Lastly, this dissertation constitutes a part of a larger debate in research concerning which levels of analysis are most appropriate for understanding social phenomena. It is to be expected that varying analytical levels will be found given the “pluralistic research” landscape that exists (Taylor, 2015), but the dissertation highlights the importance of transparency in analytical choices and interpretations. For example, a socio-ecological framework can provide a useful integrative lens linking neighbourhood conditions to individual outcomes, as it acknowledges multiple levels of influence, with no single analytical level being able to fully account for the dynamics (even though the research field is still underdeveloped and more work is needed in terms of theory integration (Taylor, 2015; Wikström & Sampson, 2006)). At the same time, an ecological framework is informative with regard to outcomes at the neighbourhood level and it captures neighbourhood conditions and processes that shape crime and fear of crime in neighbourhoods beyond what can be explained by individual-level characteristics. When the findings in the dissertation’s four studies are considered, it suggests that both of the links in Coleman’s Boat described in the introductory chapter (i.e. ‘neighbourhood level factors affect neighbourhood level outcomes’ and ‘neighbourhood level factors affect individual level outcomes’), may be at work simultaneously as suggested by Taylor (2015).

Ethical considerations regarding the study of disadvantaged neighbourhoods

A highly relevant issue when studying neighbourhoods concerns that of researching stigmatized places and populations. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods are not only associated with increased exposure to crime and fear of crime, but they are also considered problematic areas where “all people encountered in bad neighbourhoods are viewed as possessing the [low] moral liability of the neighbourhood itself” (Drakulich, 2025, p. 31), which risks extending stigma from places to people.

Drakulich (2025, p. 50) further writes that “inequalities also shape whether behaviour is defined as disorderly”, raising a fundamental question regarding the extent to which disorder is actually an objective feature of a neighbourhood (as discussed previously) and to what extent it reflects judgements about who occupies the public space. Certain behaviours that might be considered ‘ordered’ in some contexts may be interpreted as ‘disorderly’ when associated with marginalized groups, suggesting that disorder is, at least in part, socially constructed. These dynamics also relate to general structural inequalities in mobility and opportunity where residents with resources will leave a “bad area” while others cannot (Drakulich, 2025), for example. Or high public transportation costs can subsequently restrict movement and access to opportunities, which can further reinforce segregation for people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Höjemo et al., 2026). As such, the implications of the research presented in this dissertation extend beyond its immediate contribution to the scientific literature. According to Beauchamp and Childress (2019/1979) principle-based approach to ethics, the goal of research is to do good and avoid harm. However, researching stigmatized places or people can lead to ‘othering’, i.e. ascribing a negative label to groups as differing from the norm, which creates a level of inferiority (Lahman, 2018). This would perhaps not resonate well with Beauchamp and Childress’ ethical approach. Given that a large part of the dissertation concerns crime and fear of crime in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, there is a risk that this kind of research may inadvertently further stigmatize certain neighbourhoods and their residents. At the same time, not conducting research on disadvantaged neighbourhoods is not an ethically valid alternative since this would hinder progress. The ethical challenge instead lies in how to conduct this research responsibly. This involves careful consideration of dissemination of the findings, ensuring that the findings are accurately presented and that their limitations are addressed, which is particularly important in the contemporary context where

political discourse is placing an increasing emphasis on crime in disadvantaged areas (Örnlind, 2025).

Methodological limitations and directions for future research

The findings presented in this dissertation should be understood both in terms of general challenges linked to neighbourhood research and specific limitations associated with the four studies themselves. However, several methodological choices were made to mitigate some of the limitations and the study findings propose avenues for future research.

Sharkey and Ittner (2026) suggest that to increase neighbourhoods' capacity to combat violence, future work should integrate structural, individual and community perspectives, which includes the use of diverse methodological approaches and strengthening the connection to theory in community crime prevention efforts. In line with suggestions presented in the review by Sharkey and Ittner, the four studies included in the dissertation have utilized methodological approaches intended to overcome some of the limitations of previous research: longitudinal data to assess neighbourhood change over time (Studies I and II), combining a quasi-experimental design with quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate a crime prevention initiative (Study II) and the use of the total population design which provides full representation of the defined population (Studies III and IV).

However, one major limitation concerns the question of how neighbourhood disadvantage should be conceptualized and operationalized. As was noted in the introductory chapter, disadvantaged neighbourhoods are typically defined as areas characterized by structural inequalities, such as concentrated poverty, segregation and unequal access to institutional resources (Byrne & Sampson, 1986). However, this definition is not fixed or unanimously agreed upon. In the Swedish context, socioeconomic disadvantage is closely linked to ethnic segregation (Boverkett, 2025), something that further complicates the interpretation of indicators commonly used in disadvantage scales. Throughout the four studies in this dissertation, neighbourhood disadvantage has been operationalized using the indicators income, education, employment and the proportion of foreign-born residents. One or many of these indicators are often used as a means of capturing structural disadvantage (Boverkett, 2025). There are other potentially relevant indicators, but the decision to include these four

indicators reflects a trade-off between building on earlier research and access to available data. However, analyses based on the index of neighbourhood disadvantage employed in the studies indicated a clean single-factor structure with high internal consistency (see the separate studies for more details).

A related issue concerns the spatial definition of neighbourhoods, where the modifiable areal unit problem is a constant limitation in the field. This problem means that results may vary depending on how geographical units are defined (Wong, 2009). The studies included in the dissertation have relied on large areas that are based on administrative units created by the municipality. Using neighbourhoods offers advantages in terms of their being large areas that can be compiled to represent an entire city. The number of residents per neighbourhood is often also high enough for the issues of statistical power. However, the use of large geographical areas can also conceal important differences in crime and fear of crime that might be detectable on the basis of smaller units such as street segments (Kuen et al., 2022; Weisburd et al., 2024). For example, perceptions of physical disorder may refer to a very localized space, such as a single vacant and rundown building, but are interpreted as representing an entire neighbourhood spanning 1000m², leaving room for ambiguity in the way residents report neighbourhood conditions.

In addition to these general limitations associated with neighbourhood research, there is also the limitation of the generalizability of the results of the studies in the dissertation. Malmö is the study location in all four studies and is Sweden's third largest city but only has around 365,000 residents (SCB, 2025). Malmö can be seen to differ in several ways compared to other cities in Sweden (Salonen et al., 2019). It is spatially compact with few geographical barriers such as green spaces or rivers, as in Stockholm and Göteborg. This means that the distances between different parts of Malmö are small, and some of the neighbourhoods that can be considered disadvantaged are centrally located, which is not necessarily comparable to cities with a higher degree of spatial segregation. Moreover, it remains unclear whether the results are transferable to other Swedish cities that are much smaller in size than Malmö. However, neighbourhoods with varying levels of disadvantage are often present across all cities regardless of size, and theory would suggest that the results may be applicable to other Swedish cities as well.

A related concern is of course the transferability of theoretical frameworks and empirical findings in general. Much of the theoretical work and research in this field comes from the United States, where levels of inequality are often more pronounced than in Europe (Oberwittler & Wickes, 2025), which means that they

may not translate directly to Swedish settings. However, the results in Study I showed consistencies across two cities where fear of crime was related to changes in disorder, which is in line with international findings (Markowitz et al., 2001). Additionally, in Study III, the pattern showing which crime-involved youth to report the highest levels of perceived disorder and fear of crime was consistent across neighbourhoods with both low and high levels of disadvantage, indicating the presence of general patterns with regard to the way disorder operates on at the neighbourhood- and individual-levels in a Swedish setting. These findings should however be validated in future work.

Another limitation concerns the sample sizes. The large sample sizes used in the studies could lead to statistically significant findings without showing any meaningful effects. To reduce the impact of this limitation, the four studies have provided additional information such as confidence intervals and looked at substantive significance (such as results having theoretical importance) rather than relying solely on p-values (Jiroutek & Turner, 2016). Furthermore, attrition and response rates are relevant for all four studies given that they use survey data. While the studies had acceptable or high response rates in the context of contemporary survey research (see e.g. Helldén et al., 2025; Holtom et al., 2022), it is not possible to rule out that some groups, particularly in Studies I and II, remain underrepresented and that these may very well be the groups of most interest. In particular, this means people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In Study I, for Malmö, this limitation was partially addressed by the oversampling of residents in disadvantaged areas, but both in Malmö and Stockholm there was an underrepresentation of people from these areas, together with a lower proportion of men and younger people (which is consistent with other similar studies such as the annual Swedish Crime Survey (Helldén et al., 2025)). As a result, the study findings may underestimate the experiences and behaviours of people in disadvantaged areas, and in Studies III and IV of those involved in serious crime (Bernasco et al., 2022). This limitation speaks for the use of multi-method approaches, such as combining both survey- and register-data.

More specific directions for future research include for example building on the findings in Study III and investigating the relationship between involvement in crime and individual-level perceptions of neighbourhood factors since there is a limited amount of studies that have assessed this association. To examine fear of crime among those who offend, as well as the temporal order of the association between perceptions of disorder and involvement in crime, may be a meaningful step forward for research.

Practical implications and concluding remarks

To briefly summarize the findings, the two ecological studies in the dissertation offer further insights regarding how neighbourhood disorder and fear of crime can change over time. Complementing this evidence, the two socio-ecological studies support the use of an integrated perspective, with both neighbourhood and individual factors being found to be relevant to an understanding of individual-level crime and fear of crime. An important take away from these results is that since crime is not an intrinsic property of place (because it requires an offender), perspectives that rely on either neighbourhood- or individual level associations are limited. This motivates the use of a “(socio)-ecological perspective”, placed in brackets in the dissertation title which is meant to illustrate the need for both perspectives, but also the layered complexity of understanding crime and fear of crime. Moreover, neighbourhoods are not merely ‘physical entities’ or places: because perceptions of neighbourhoods are in part shaped by norms and stigmatized beliefs (Drakulich, 2025) this means that focusing solely on neighbourhood conditions risks overlooking how these places are interpreted differently by different people.

Further, the findings from the four studies presented in the dissertation highlight the importance of clearly distinguishing between analytical levels when interpreting and applying research results. This means that it is particularly important to pay attention to whether relations operate at the neighbourhood level, the individual level or across levels, since this has implications for how interventions should be designed and implemented. While this may represent a simplified interpretation, in essence, these results suggest that modifying neighbourhood-level outcomes may depend on addressing relevant neighbourhood factors, and instead individual-level outcomes that are influenced by both analytical levels, a combination of change at both levels may be warranted.

The distinction between analytical levels is not always explicit in empirical research and may be even less clear when findings are translated to policy and practice. Translating research into policy and practice is also complicated because of the realities of policymaking and with the lack of time and space for fully evidence-based decision making in political contexts: “within policymaking areas, the scientific evidence base actively competes with other real-world considerations, such as government priorities, public concerns and political agendas” (Piza, 2022, p. 8). Despite this complexity, decision-makers must act and prioritize among resources, often with only limited evidence, which gives

researchers a responsibility to produce and disseminate high-quality evidence that can inform these decisions. Thus, while *generating* scientific knowledge is a crucial first step, it is also essential to effectively communicate it in an accessible way to relevant stakeholders (Piza, 2022).

The purpose of this dissertation has not been to answer all the complex questions associated with neighbourhood research on crime and fear of crime but rather to make a small contribution to the cumulative knowledge focused on the understanding of crime and fear of crime in this context. The key take away is that while neighbourhood disadvantage is associated with higher levels of crime, fear of crime and disorder, this does not mean that this is true for *all people* in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Recognizing this variability is central to an accurate interpretation and the responsible policy application of the findings.

POPULÄRVETENSKAPLIG SAMMANFATTNING

När man forskar på bostadsområden kan man exempelvis summera antalet brott per område eller lägga ihop boendes enkätsvar kring hur otrygga de känner sig. Den här typen av forskning, även kallat ekologisk forskning, undersöker hur strukturella faktorer som till exempel socioekonomiska förutsättningar eller kollektiva processer kan påverka brott- och otrygghetsnivåer i bostadsområden. Det grundar sig alltså inte i vad en individ gör, utan mönster växer fram när många människor är tillsammans på samma plats. Tänk stämningen på en konsert: den skapas inte bara av en person, utan flera personer agerar på varandras energier och helt plötsligt ”lyfter arenataket”.

Inom kriminologin har forskning länge visat att brottslighet och otrygghet inte är jämnt fördelat utan att vissa typer av bostadsområden ofta har mycket högre nivåer av brott och otrygghet än andra. Dessa områden brukar ha höga nivåer av socioekonomisk utsatthet och kallas ofta för utsatta bostadsområden. Forskning visar också att ordningsstörningar, alltså hur signaler i omgivningen så som nedskräpning, trasig utemiljö, personer som bråkar och så vidare, kan påverka brott och otrygghet på områdesnivå. Däremot är forskningsläget mer begränsat kring hur otrygghet kan förändras över tid i samma bostadsområde. Detta är viktigt att studera eftersom otrygghet inte bara har en koppling till brottsnivåer och ordningsstörningar på områdesnivå men också för människors välmående.

Samtidigt kan mönster på områdesnivå inte på egen hand förklara varför vissa personer reagerar på olika sätt på samma omgivning, det vill säga att vissa begår brott, vissa upplever otrygghet och vissa inget av det. Forskning visar att vissa individfaktorer är starkt kopplade till att begå brott eller känna oro för brott, som till exempel att låg impuls kontroll är vanligt bland brottsaktiva personer. Detta innebär att det går att studera brott och otrygghet på flera nivåer: dels på *områdesnivå* genom att titta på hur bostadsområdets faktorer påverkar, dels på

individnivå som undersöker individuella förutsättningar. Genom att studera bostadsområden och de som bor där går det att komma åt båda nivåerna eftersom personer som bor i samma område till stor del delar samma omgivning samtidigt som personerna kan skilja sig mycket från varandra. Att ta hänsyn till både omgivningen och individfaktorer innebär att man använder ett socio-ekologiskt perspektiv.

Inom forskningen är det dock inte helt klart hur kopplingen ser ut mellan bostadsområden med varierande nivåer av utsatthet och hur det kan påverka enskilda människors benägenhet att begå brott eller känna oro för brott. Det här kan tyckas gå emot vad som stod innan, alltså att utsatta bostadsområden har högre nivåer av brott och otrygghet. Men den stora utmaningen när man forskar på bostadsområden är att man inte bara kan dra slutsatserna på områdesnivå till individnivå, det kallas att begå ett ekologiskt felslut. Ett samband på områdesnivå behöver alltså inte betyda att samma samband finns på individnivå. Det övergripande syftet med avhandlingen är därmed att undersöka hur olika faktorer på områdesnivå kan påverka otrygghet på områdesnivå samt brottslighet och otrygghet på individnivå.

Avhandlingen består av fyra delstudier. De två första delstudierna har ett ekologiskt perspektiv och undersöker hur otrygghet kan förändras över tid i bostadsområden. De två senare studierna har ett socio-ekologiskt perspektiv och tittar på hur områdesfaktorer kan påverka personers brottsdeltagande och otrygghet.

Majoriteten av datamaterialet i delstudierna bygger på enkätundersökningar där personer har fått uppge hur de upplever sina bostadsområden och hur trygga de känner sig i sitt område. I en av enkätundersökningarna ställdes också frågor om eget brottsdeltagande och andra individfokuserade faktorer som till exempel vilka attityder man har till lagbrytande beteende.

I den första delstudien så undersökte hur otrygghet förändras över tid i olika bostadsområden. Under en sex-års-period följdes ungefär 100 bostadsområden vardera i Malmö och Stockholm för att se hur otryggheten utvecklades. I tidigare forskning har trender ofta studerats på kommunnivå, men den här studien fokuserade på mindre platser, det vill säga bostadsområden med olika nivåer av socioekonomisk utsatthet. Resultaten visade, som väntat, att utsatta bostadsområden hade stabilt höga nivåer av otrygghet. Däremot så ökade de minst utsatta bostadsområden mest i otrygghet. Övergripande visade resultaten också att en ökning av ordningsstörningar i området var kopplat till en ökning i otrygghet.

Även delstudie två fokuserade på förändringar i otrygghet över tid på områdesnivå. Syftet med denna studie var att utvärdera en ideell förening som bland annat arbetade för att minska brottsligheten och öka tryggheten i ett utsatt område i Malmö. Föreningen bestod av fastighetsägare som tillsammans arbetade för att förbättra området och i samverkan med bland annat kommunen försöka åtgärda problem, till exempel klotter och störande trafik. Otryggheten studerades under en femårsperiod innan föreningen påbörjade sitt arbete och en femårsperiod under tiden arbetet pågick. Resultaten visade att otryggheten och ordningsstörningarna hade minskat i området. Resultaten stöddes också genom intervjuer som genomförts med flera nyckelpersoner som arbetade i området. En utmaning med studien var dock att isolera effekterna, det vill säga att utröna om det faktiskt var föreningens arbete som bidrog till förbättringarna i området. Den här utmaningen är inte unik för denna studie utan en utmaning för liknande brottsförebyggande initiativ, men genom att använda både enkätsvar och intervjua nyckelpersoner var det ett sätt att försöka få en helhetssyn kring förbättringarna i området och för att överkomma tidigare begränsningar inom forskningsfältet.

Till skillnad från de två första delstudierna som bara hade områdesfokus undersökte delstudie tre i vilken utsträckning bostadsområdets förutsättningar kan påverka personers otrygghet samt deras brottsbenägenhet. Med hjälp av ett datamaterial som Malmö stad samlat in, där samtliga skolungdomar i åldrarna 12-17 i kommunen bjöds in att besvara en enkät (totalt cirka 25 000 svar), visade resultaten vissa skillnader mellan bostadsområden. Skillnaderna tyder på att områdesfaktorer har större betydelse för otrygghet än brottsdeltagande. Även individfaktorer spelar en viktig roll, där unga som rapporterade höga nivåer av ordningsstörningar i sitt bostadsområde även var kopplat till otrygghet. Att uppfatta höga nivåer av ordningsstörningar var dessutom även kopplat till brottsdeltagande hos vissa ungdomar. Med andra ord innebär det alltså att ordningsstörningar kan uppfattas olika hos olika personer.

Den fjärde delstudien använde samma data med skolungdomarna och fokuserade specifikt på brottsdeltagande. Där visade resultaten att bostadsområdet spelar en liten roll i att förklara brottsdeltagande och istället spelar individfaktorer en stor roll bland de som begår brott. Ungdomarna som uppgav att de hade begått brott hade mer tillåtande attityder till lagbrytande beteenden och rapporterade högre nivåer av upproriskhet, till exempel att göra tvärtemot vad man blir tillsagd att göra. Det fanns vissa skillnader mellan brottstyper där unga som uppgav att de hade snattat kom från mindre utsatta områden i större utsträckning, medan de som uppgav att de hade misshandlat

någon i större utsträckning kom från mer utsatta områden. Det här mönstret var tydligt oavsett ålder hos ungdomarna.

Sammantaget visar resultaten i avhandlingen framför allt två saker: dels kan otrygghet på områdesnivå förändras över tid och dessa förändringar tycks delvis hänga samman med variationer i ordningsstörningar. Dels verkar bostadsområdet ha viss betydelse för individers upplevda otrygghet, men mindre roll för brottsdeltagande. Avhandlingens resultat illustrerar också vikten av transparens kring vilken analysnivå man undersöker eftersom det kan påverka tolkningen av resultaten.

Resultaten är också av värde när det kommer till brottsförebyggande och trygghetsskapande arbete där man bör använda insatser som är anpassade för den analysnivå där man vill åstadkomma förbättring. Samtidigt är det viktigt att poängtera att det rör sig om komplexa samspel och att många frågor återstår, till exempel: vad är det som gör att otryggheten ökar mest i minst utsatta områden även om det är låga nivåer av ordningsstörningar där, och bland unga som begår allvarliga brott verkar individfaktorer förklara en stor del, men finns det några systematiska skillnader i individfaktorer mellan olika typer av bostadsområden.

Avslutningsvis är det viktigt att komma ihåg att utsatta bostadsområden har högre nivåer av otrygghet och ordningsstörningar men det går att förbättra situationen. Likaså behöver det inte betyda att alla som bor i utsatta områden är otrygga eller begår brott. Metaforen ”fokusera inte bara på träden för då ser du inte skogen” är passande och likväl så stämmer ”fokusera inte bara på skogen för då ser du inte de enskilda träden” in, alltså för att kunna få en helhetsbild så krävs det att man studerar brott och otrygghet på både områdes- och individnivå.

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