THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF
SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION

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Introduction
One of Criminology’s parent disciplines is Psychology and I want to begin my talk by revisiting a well-established law of that discipline: “Behavior is a product of the interaction between person and setting.” When translated into criminological language, what this means is that crime, which is a form of behavior, occurs when someone who is criminally motivated finds or creates a criminal opportunity. In other words, both motivation and opportunity are needed for crime to occur.

This simple formulation enables us to divide crime prevention, which can be defined as “action designed to intervene in the conditions giving rise to crime”, into two basic types:

1. action to prevent the development of criminal dispositions
2. action to reduce criminal opportunities.

Situational crime prevention, which is the subject of my presentation, is concerned essentially with the second kind of crime prevention, reducing crime opportunities. Before describing it in more detail, I would like to explain why criminologists have until recently been skeptical about the
value of reducing opportunities for crime. The main reason is that they see
the principal causes of crime as lying in the genetic inheritance of individual
offenders, their psychological make-up, their homes and upbringing and the
social and economic circumstances of their lives. They believe that
opportunities for crime play a secondary role in causation. Opportunities
may influence where and when crime occurs, but not whether it occurs.
Whether crime occurs is determined mostly by motivational factors.

It follows from this belief that reducing opportunities for crime will, at best,
simply move crime around, and will “displace” it:

- from one place to another,
- from one time to another,
- from one target to another, or possibly
- from one kind of crime to another.

Since the motivation to commit crime remains untouched, reducing
opportunities is seen to be a largely futile exercise.

Of course, this view of crime causation crime neglects the interaction
between person and place which Psychology has identified as the central fact
of human behavior. In particular, it ignores everyday human experience --
that no-one is immune to temptation and that lack of caution and care can
result in more crime. A common saying in the English language is
“Opportunity makes the thief”. Similar sayings can be found in many other
languages, perhaps even in Mandarin or Taiwanese.
Not all popular wisdom is confirmed in scientific study, but especially in the realm of character and human behavior it is foolish to ignore widely held beliefs without evidence to the contrary. Unfortunately, many criminologists have made this mistake, but a more sophisticated view of crime causation is gradually gaining ground in the discipline, in which criminal dispositions and criminal opportunities are both seen to have an important part to play. This is the result of two related developments in Criminology:

1. more evidence has recently accumulated of the important role of opportunity in crime; and
2. new criminological theories have been developed, including the rational choice approach and routine activity theory, which give much greater importance to immediate environmental determinants of crime.

The role of opportunity in crime

I will say more about each of these developments, beginning with the role of opportunity in crime which I will illustrate briefly with results from three studies, two of which I conducted together with Mrs. Mayhew, who is also speaking at this meeting.

The first is not a study of crime but of suicide. I mention it because, like many serious crimes, suicide is usually seen to be a deeply motivated act, only committed by very unhappy or disturbed people. However, a strong and surprising opportunity component appears in suicide trends in England and Wales during the 1960s and 1970s (Clarke and Mayhew, 1988).
From Table 1, you should be able to see that in 1958 almost 50 percent of the nearly 5,300 people who killed themselves in England and Wales did so by the domestic gas supplied to their homes for cooking and heating. This gas contained high levels of carbon monoxide and was very poisonous. People would kill themselves by putting their head in the gas cooker or by lying down by the gas fire, having blocked up any gaps around doors and windows.

During the 1960s, domestic gas began to be manufactured from oil rather than from coal. As a result, it became less poisonous and the number of people killing themselves with gas began to decline. In 1968, gas made form oil began to be replaced by natural gas from the recently discovered North Sea fields. Natural gas is free of carbon monoxide and is almost impossible to use for suicide. By the mid-1970s when natural gas had been introduced throughout most of the country, less than one percent of suicides were by domestic gas, compared with about 50 percent at the beginning of the period. You can see this from the final column of the table.

What is deeply surprising is that suicides did not displace wholesale to other methods. Between 1968 and 1975, total suicides dropped by about one third from nearly 5,300 to nearly 3,700. This was during a time of much economic uncertainty when one might have expected suicides to increase and, indeed, was generally increasing in other European countries.

Why did people not turn to other methods instead? Why did they not overdose on sleeping pills, shoot or hang themselves, jump out of high
buildings, or put their heads on the railway tracks? The reason is that all these methods have disadvantages not possessed by gas. It is difficult to collect together enough pills to kill oneself and many people who take an overdose have their stomachs pumped and their lives saved. Few people in Britain have guns, and in any case these result in blood and disfigurement. Hanging oneself or jumping out of a tall building requires courage and resolution. Poisonous domestic gas, on the other hand, needed little preparation to use and involved no pain. It is easy to understand why it was the preferred method of suicide in Britain for so long. Nor is it so surprising that when the opportunity to use it was removed, the overall suicide rate declined.

The second study concerns motorcycle theft in Germany during the 1980’s (Mayhew et al., 1989). You will see from the first column of the Table 2 that thefts of motorbikes had drastically declined from about 150,000 in 1980 to about 50,000 in 1986. Those of you who do not know the reason, will be most surprised to learn it. It was because in 1980 it was made illegal to ride a motorbike in Germany without a safety helmet. This meant that anyone stealing a motorcycle without a helmet would be readily seen. The law was gradually enforced more strictly during the period and resulted in the large decline in motorcycle thefts. This suggests a much stronger opportunistic component in motorcycle theft than anyone would have thought.

The second and third columns of the table show the totals for car and bike thefts during the same years. These provide some limited evidence of displacement because thefts of cars went up from about 64,000 to 70,000.
Thefts of bicycles also increased between 1980 and 1983, but by the end of the period had declined again below the numbers for 1980. Altogether, it is clear that at best only a small proportion of the 100,000 motorbike thefts saved by the helmet laws were displaced to thefts of other vehicles.

Again, a little thought shows why this may not be surprising. Motorbikes may be particularly attractive to steal. Young men who comprise most of the thieves find them much more fun to ride than bikes. Even if the intention is only to get home late at night, it is much easier to ride a motorbike for a few miles than a bicycle. Motorbikes may also be easier to steal than cars since the latter have to be broken into before they can be started.

The third study comes from the United States and concerns the dramatic increase in burglary of homes during the 1960s and 1970s. A careful analysis by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979) showed that this increase could be explained by a combination of two changes that had occurred in society during this period, which together had greatly increased the temptation and opportunity for burglary. Temptation had been increased by the vast increase in light-weight electronic goods such as television sets (TV’s) and videocassette recorders (VCR’s) in people’s homes that could readily be sold. The opportunity to commit burglary was greatly increased as a result of far more women going out to work. This meant that far more homes were empty during the day and therefore left unguarded. The combination of more attractive goods to steal and more unguarded homes easily accounted for the increase of burglary without having to assume any increase in the criminality of the population.
Opportunity theories

As I have said, studies like these have helped to bring about a change in criminological theorizing. It is now more widely recognized that most traditional criminological theories are really theories of criminality or delinquency. They deal in behavioral tendencies, not behavior itself. Some newer theories are now being developed, however, which try to explain not just criminal tendencies but criminal behavior. These newer theories which are variously called “theories of crime” or “opportunity” theories include routine activity theory and the rational choice perspective.

Though complimentary, these two theories both deal with somewhat different questions. Routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 1998) seeks to explain how changes in society in the numbers of “suitable targets” for crime, or in the numbers of “capable guardians” against crime can lead to more or less crime. One example of the application of this theory is Cohen and Felson’s explanation, that I mentioned, for the increased burglary rate in the United States in the 1970s. This was due to the increase of “suitable targets” in homes (VCRs and TVs) and the decline of “capable guardians” (women no longer at home in the day).

The rational choice perspective (Cornish and Clarke, 1986), on the other hand, tries to understand crime from the perspective of the offender. It asks: What is the offender seeking by committing crime? How do offenders decide to commit particular crimes? How do they weigh the risks and rewards involved in these crimes? How do they set about committing them?
If prevented from committing them, what other crimes might they choose to commit?

It should be clear from these questions that the rational choice perspective is directly concerned with the thinking processes of offenders, how they evaluate criminal opportunities and why they decide to do one thing rather than another. Indeed, why they choose to obtain their ends by criminal and not legal means.

**Rational choice and situational crime prevention**

The rational choice perspective has played an important part in the development of situational crime prevention in at least three important ways. First, it has helped to explain why displacement does not always occur when opportunities for crime are reduced (think about the reasons I gave for suicides not switching to other methods and why motorcycle thieves did not begin to steal cars or bicycles). To be able to argue that displacement is not inevitable, and explain why this may be so, has been most helpful in persuading criminologists and policy makers to take situational crime prevention seriously.

Second, by starting with the offender’s purpose in committing crime, by closely examining the offender’s methods and the choices that he or she must make at each different stage of the crime, and by seeking to understand thoroughly the immediate setting in which these choices are made, the rational choice perspective has provided a methodology for practical crime
prevention action. This methodology is a version of the famous “action research” model and consists of five sequential steps:

1. The identification of a specific crime problem. This problem must not be so broad that it encompasses such a wide range of offenders, motives and methods that it is impossible to clearly understand the specific opportunity factors that permit that crime to occur. For example, a situational crime prevention project focused on bank robberies is much more likely to be successful than one focused on robberies in general.

2. An analysis of data about the situational conditions that permit or facilitate the crime in question. In most cases, this will involve the analysis of police data about the times and places where the crimes occur, and the characteristics of those arrested. But many other kinds of data can be obtained including direct observation of the settings where the crimes occur, and detailed interviews with offenders or victims.

3. Systematic study of possible ways to block opportunities for these crimes. This includes an analysis of the economic costs of the measures being considered, and an assessment of their practicality and their acceptability to the public. I should note here that there is never just one way to reduce opportunities. This means that if a particular measure is ruled out because of cost, or disagreements about its acceptability, it is nearly always possible to find an alternative.
4. Implementation of the most promising, feasible and economic measures. Without going into detail, I should note that the implementation stage may involve considerable difficulties of getting the measures introduced in the ways that are needed.

5. Evaluation of the results. If these are unsatisfactory, the process should start again, taking care to learn from the failures. Again, without going into detail, it can be difficult to evaluate the results of action research unless this leads to dramatic reductions in the problem. Fortunately, as you will see, dramatic reductions in crime are often achieved by situational prevention.

The third important contribution made by the rational choice perspective to the development of situational crime prevention has been in thinking about different ways to reduce opportunities for crime. Sixteen different ways to reduce opportunities for crime are described in situational crime prevention falling under four objectives, taken from the rational choice perspective. These are:

1. to increase the difficulty of crime;
2. to increase the risks of crime;
3. to reduce the rewards of crime;
4. to remove excuses for crime.
Situational crime prevention successes

The successful use of these opportunity-reducing methods has been documented in more than 90 published evaluative studies. Twenty three of these studies are reprinted in my book, “Situational crime prevention: Successful case studies” (Clarke, 1997). Some examples are listed in Table 3 and I would like to tell you a little more about five examples:

1. The first comes from New York. If any of you visited that city in the early 1980’s and traveled on the subway, you will know that the trains were almost entirely covered in graffiti. If you travel on the subway now, you will find them almost entirely free of graffiti. How was this achieved? Well, not by arresting and punishing those responsible for the graffiti. Such methods were tried but failed. Instead, the authorities embarked upon a systematic program of cleaning the subway trains and, once cleaned, removing them from service and cleaning them immediately again if they collected any more graffiti (Sloan-Howitt & Kelling, 1997). This “removed the reward” for graffiti because those who had written on the trains could no longer see their handiwork on public display!

2. My second example comes again from New York and also concerns a public transport facility, the Manhattan bus terminal which primarily serves those who commute into the city to work. In the 1980’s, this huge terminal acquired a bad reputation for all manner of crimes, including muggings, assaults, drug dealing and even rapes. One of the crime problems centered on the public phones of which there were
approximately 350. These phones had been taken over by “hustlers”, criminals who had discovered ways to gain access to the long distance telephone lines without payment, by using stolen credit cards and other methods. People wanting to telephone overseas at a fraction of the usual cost could go to the terminal, pay a small amount, and talk for many minutes to whomever they wanted. This became a huge problem involving millions of dollars per year. You may be interested to hear that of the nearly 270,000 illicit overseas calls made from the terminal in 1990, records show that 3,520 were made to Taiwan! Eventually the problem was dealt with by putting gates around the phones during hours when the terminal was not in use by commuters. A better solution was later introduced when the phones were electronically changed so that they could no longer be used for overseas calls (Bichler and Clarke, 1997).

3. The third example comes from Surfers Paradise, a large seaside resort on the Gold Coast of Australia, and concerns a persistent problem of rowdyism and violent assaults by drunken youths in the city’s night life district. This problem was substantially reduced in the mid-1990’s by persuading the managers and owners of the nightclubs and taverns in Surfer Paradise to adopt some measures to reduce drunkenness, including elimination of “happy hours” when drinks are sold at discount prices, selling smaller drinks, making food and low alcohol drinks available, and training bouncers and bar staff to deal with drunken customers. These measures not only worked at Surfers
Paradise, but also worked when repeated at other resorts on the Gold Coast (Homel et al., 1997).

4. My next example concerns an epidemic of robberies at Post Offices in London during the 1980’s (Ekblom, 1992). It was decided to improve the security screens separating staff from customers and to train staff in how to react when confronted with a robbery. These measures substantially “increased the difficulty” of robberies, which began to decline from a peak of 266 in 1982, soon after the measures began to be introduced, to less than half that number three years later. I should take this opportunity to mention that many other examples have been published of reductions in robberies at banks, convenience stores, and betting shops being achieved through the use of situational prevention.

5. The fifth example is again from England, and concerns a successful effort to defeat vandalism to a fleet of double-deck buses owned by one bus company. This was done by installing CCTV surveillance on the top deck of two of the buses and “dummy” CCTV cameras on another two. At the same time, one of the buses was taken round local schools to show children how anyone committing damage could be identified by the cameras. Vandalism declined dramatically, not just for the buses with the cameras, but for the whole fleet of 80 (Poyner, 1992).
Displacement and diffusion of benefits
I have talked about “success”, but what about displacement? The gas suicide and motorcycle theft examples have already shown that displacement is not inevitable. But what happened as the result of the measures that I have just been discussing? For example, did the Post Office robbers stopped by the anti-bandit screens in London begin to take customers hostage or attack the armored vehicles collecting money from the post offices? Did the phone “hustlers” find some other public phones where they could continue their trade? Did the measures introduced at Surfers Paradise simply drive the rowdy, drunken youths to some other nearby resort? And so forth.

In truth, it is difficult to make definitive studies of all these possibilities, but many evaluations have included some study of displacement. Four years ago, a review of the published literature on displacement was undertaken for the Ministry of Justice in Holland, in which 55 studies were examined (Hesseling, 1994). The results were very revealing. In 22 of the studies, no evidence of displacement was found. In the remaining 33 studies some evidence was found, but the displacement was often relatively small. In no case, did the crime displaced elsewhere equal the crime prevented.

In addition, researchers are now beginning to find evidence of the reverse of displacement so that focused situational prevention projects have produced wider reductions in crime beyond the direct reach of the prevention measures. I already gave an example when I mentioned that vandalism declined on all the 80 double-deck buses, not just the five with the CCTV cameras. It seems that the measures taken sent a clear message to the
children that vandalism of buses would no longer be tolerated. They may have also thought that the authorities had other ways to detect anyone who continued with this misbehavior.

This phenomenon, whereby the preventive benefits spread more widely, has been called the “diffusion of benefits” (Clarke and Weisburd, 1994) and is now being found regularly in a variety of studies. It greatly enhances the appeal of situational crime prevention. I have time to mention a second example (there are many others), which comes from a university campus in Southern England where CCTV cameras were introduced to protect the car parks from theft (Poyner, 1997). Car theft fell not only in the three car parks given surveillance by the cameras, but also in a fourth car park that the cameras could not monitor because the view was obstructed by buildings. It seems that potential car thieves were unsure about the coverage of the cameras and decided to avoid the university altogether.

**Summary and conclusions**
Before concluding with some general observations about the scope of situational prevention, let me summarize my presentation so far. I have argued that opportunity-reducing measures, such as situational crime prevention, have generally been ignored by criminologists who believe that the opportunity plays a relatively unimportant part in crime causation. This is because criminologists have generally failed to recognize that their theories are mostly concerned with the development of criminal dispositions, not the occurrence of crime. Growing evidence about the role of opportunity in crime has encouraged the development of some new “opportunity”
theories, including routine activity theory and the rational choice perspective. The latter in particular has provided the theoretical basis for situational prevention, which has now accumulated a solid record of crime reductions achieved in many different contexts. Displacement has not proved such a threat as once thought and there is growing evidence of diffusion of benefits from crime prevention projects.

Having laid out the theoretical background to situational crime prevention and having documented some of its successes, I will conclude by explaining why I think it will play an increasingly large part in crime control policy. Indeed, it already is an established, though still relatively small part, of official government policy in countries such as Britain, Holland, Sweden, Finland, Belgium and France. You will have noticed that my examples of its use are drawn from many countries. My one regret is that it is not yet an important part of criminal policy in the United States, perhaps because we have lagged behind Europe and some other parts of the world in thinking about prevention. Instead, the crime policy of the United States has been for many years excessively preoccupied with punishment of offenders and has only recently begun to take an interest again in prevention.

To my mind, the avoidance of punishment, which is an inefficient and costly means of changing behavior, is one of the great strengths of situational crime prevention. Situational prevention seeks not to sanction and deter, but to forestall the occurrence of crime. It seeks not to eliminate criminal or delinquent tendencies, which is very difficult, but merely to make criminal action less attractive to offenders. It does this not by wielding the blunt
instrument of the criminal justice system, but through fine-tuning of a host of specific design and management features of a wide range of society’s institutions and agencies, including schools, housing authorities, transit systems, shops and parking lots, pubs and entertainment complexes, businesses and manufacturers, and telephone and insurance companies.

Not only has situational crime prevention been used already in many of these settings it has been applied to a wide variety of crimes. When first developed it was mainly used in reducing opportunities for conventional “street” crimes of robbery, burglary, vandalism and car theft. Some of these crimes, such as bank robbery, are committed by hardened and determined offenders. It has since been applied in a wider variety of contexts. It has been used in commercial settings to reduce such crimes as shoplifting, fare evasion, and thefts by employees. It has helped to reduce drunkenness and disorder at sporting events, in nightlife districts and in city centers. And it has been deployed against crimes committed by ordinary people such as tax and welfare frauds, sexual harassment and driving offenses.

In my opinion, situational prevention can be used against all categories of crime since all crimes depend to some extent on opportunity. Even if it is not always possible to find a way of reducing opportunities for a particular form of crime, I am certain that human ingenuity and the development of technology will eventually yield an effective way of reducing the specific opportunities involved.
In closing, I should not leave you with the impression that situational crime prevention represents the only practical application of the new opportunity theories. Situational prevention is essentially a method of dealing with existing crime problems. It shares the methodology for doing this with problem-oriented policing, which is also focused on existing crime problems. However, it is possible to use similar opportunity-reducing principles to anticipate and avoid new crimes. This is the approach followed by “crime prevention through environmental design”, or CPTED as it is known (Crowe, 1991). CPTED seeks to make security an important consideration in the design of new facilities. An outstanding example of successful CPTED in America is the Washington Metro, which is an unusually safe and secure public transit system (La Vigne, 1997).

In addition, I believe that those making decisions in the future concerning a wide range of social policies will need to be informed about opportunity theory. Knowledge of opportunity theory may have helped avoid some social changes that have greatly increased opportunities for crime. I have in mind the tower blocks built for public housing in many parts of the world and the move to large, anonymous high schools, both of which I believe have reduced social control and expanded opportunities for crime.

Opportunity theory has already provided us with the means for solving highly specific crime problems through situational prevention and I now look forward to its making a wider, and possibly more valuable contribution, to crime prevention policy.
References


