

Opportunities for Crime and Routine Activities Theory

Developed by Garner Clancey

Introduction

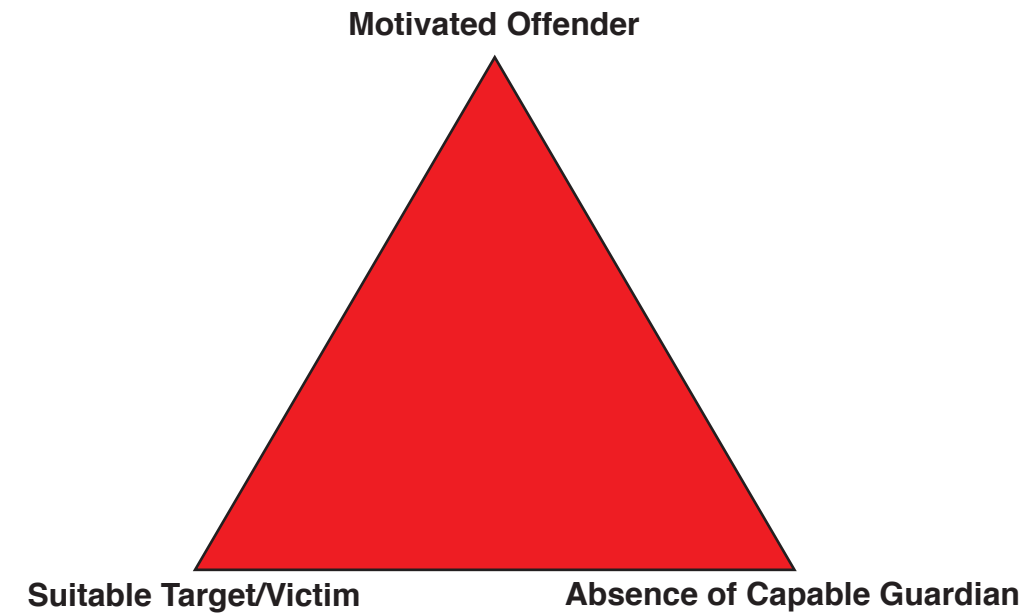
It is generally agreed that, despite the limitations of crime data, there were significant increases in many crime types across many countries in the last decades of the twentieth century. The following comments highlight the volume of some of these increases:

- “The transformative dynamics of late modernity had their most pronounced and dramatic effects in the two decades after 1960. That period coincided, more or less exactly, with a rapid and substantial, increase in recorded crime rates – not just in the USA and the UK, but in every Western industrialised nation. The growth of crime in this period is a massive and incontestable social fact, notwithstanding the evidentiary problems inherent in criminal statistics and the possibility that these statistics were affected by changes in reporting and recording patterns. Between 1955 and 1964, the number of crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales doubled – from half a million a year to a million. It doubled again by 1975 and yet again by 1990 ... In the USA, crime rates rose sharply from 1960 onwards, reaching a peak in the early 1980s when the rate was three times that of twenty years before, the years between 1965 and 1973 recording the biggest rise on record. Moreover, the increases occurred in all the main offence categories, including: property crime, crimes of violence and drug offending”.ⁱ
- “Between 1973/74 and 1988/89 (in Australia), the recorded rate of household break-and-enter rose 144 per cent, while the recorded rate of motor vehicle theft rose 105 per cent. Over the same period, the recorded rate of robbery rose 126 per cent and the recorded rate of serious assault increased by 376 per cent”.ⁱⁱ

Exercise: What caused these dramatic increases in crime in the latter part of the twentieth century?

Routine Activities Theory

Felson and Cohen suggest that “...any successfully completed violation requires at a minimum an *offender* with both criminal inclinations and the ability to carry out those inclinations, a person or object providing a *suitable target* for the offender, and the *absence of capable guardians* capable of preventing the violation”.ⁱⁱⁱ This can be demonstrated by the crime triangle below:



Felson and Cohen identified three macro social indicators which they believe may have affected the annual crime rates for the United States as a whole:

1. Proportion of young people
2. Proportion of people living alone
3. Weight of consumer goods^{iv}

They consider that our routine activities have provided increased opportunities for crime. For example, the following are just some of the changes to our routine activities that could be equated to increases in crime: dual-income families mean limited supervision of children after school and limited

guardianship of homes and motor vehicles; the increasing portability and value of consumer goods means that they are CRAVED (Concealable, Removable, Available, Valuable, Enjoyable, Disposable^v); increasing numbers of people living alone increases the possibility that homes will be left vacant for long periods; and the greater the proportion of young people in the community the greater the volume of crime because the most crime prone years are between 15 and 24 years of age. Taking this argument even further, it is suggested that many capable guardians that once circulated through neighbourhoods have mostly been removed. For example, bread and milk vendors, bus and train conductors and door-to-door salespeople are just some of the people who once provided a level of guardianship just by virtue of their presence in an area. Many of these informal agents of social control or capable guardians have been removed or replaced by formal agents of social control (i.e. rangers, local laws personnel, security guards). Promoting capable guardianship is an important element of many successful crime prevention strategies.

Exercise

1. Some routine activities promote natural surveillance and capable guardianship. List some of the ways of encouraging capable guardianship through routine activities.

2. The three elements of the crime triangle (i.e. motivated offender, suitable target/victim, absence of capable guardian) can be used to develop a plan to respond to a particular crime problem. Select an offence and apply the crime triangle to it – consider what motivates an offender and how these motivations might be tackled; consider what is attractive about a target or victim and ways to harden the target; consider how capable guardianship can be extended over the target/victim or area in question.

ⁱ Garland, D. (2001) *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, page 90.

ⁱⁱ Weatherburn, D. (2004) *Law and Order in Australia: Rhetoric and Reality*, The Federation Press, Annandale, page 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Felson, M. and Cohen, L. E. (1980) 'Human Ecology and Crime: A Routine Activity Approach', *Human Ecology*, Vol. 8, No. 4, page 392.

^{iv} Felson, M. and Cohen, L. E. (1980) 'Human Ecology and Crime: A Routine Activity Approach', *Human Ecology*, Vol. 8, No. 4, page 400.

^v Clarke, R. V. (1999) *Hot Products: understanding, anticipating and reducing demand for stolen goods*, Policing Research Series, Paper 112, Home Office.