

Situational Crime Prevention

Paul Ekblom

Ekblom, P. (2001). 'Situational Crime Prevention' In E. McLaughlin and J. Muncie (Eds.) *The Sage Dictionary of Criminology*: 263-265. London: Sage Publications.

Definition

Crime prevention as a whole can be defined as reducing the risk of occurrence and the potential seriousness of criminal events, by intervening in their causes (Ekblom, 2000). Situational Crime Prevention (SCP) intervenes in those causes which the offender encounters, or seeks out, in the immediate circumstances of the criminal event.

Distinctive features

SCP methods aim to reduce a wide range of crimes. They commonly involve the design of products, services, environments or systems to make them crime resistant – a strategy implemented alone or in combination with certain social activities, such as surveillance and response to crimes by people in various roles: householder, passer-by, employee or security personnel, and the more strategic managers of places. The methods range from supplying toughened drinking glasses to reduce injury from fights in bars, to establishing rules for acceptable behaviour in shopping centres and football matches; from traffic enforcement cameras to anti-climb paint; from encryption of financial data to CCTV in banks; from better laid-out housing estates to hard-to-forge holographic labels to discourage counterfeit vodka; from airport metal detectors and security guards to Farm Watch and similar community-based schemes. Clarke (1997) sets out 16 generic techniques of SCP.

SCP does not rely on past improvements in society, treatment regimes for offenders or early interventions in children's socialisation to reduce current criminality; nor on the sheer aversive intensity of sanctions anticipated at some remote point in the future to deter or incapacitate present offending. It does not directly aim to change *offenders'* propensities or motives for crime at all. It takes these as given and, proceeding from an analysis of the circumstances engendering particular crimes, it introduces specific changes to influence the offender's *decision* or *ability* to commit these crimes at given places and times. These interventions usually act on the here-and-now of the immediate crime situation, removing or altering some of its components or preventing them coming together. (The generic components of the crime situation include a human, material or informational target of crime; a target enclosure such as a safe or a building; a wider environment such as a housing estate

or town centre; and people or institutions playing two opposing roles – preventers, who make crime less likely, and promoters, who carelessly or deliberately make it more likely.) The interventions may sometimes act on prior ‘scenes’ (Cornish, 1994) in which offenders prepare, or become primed for, crime (such as acquiring weapons, getting drunk or engaging in disputes over parking). Interventions may be implemented indirectly – for example helping people protect their own homes, or naming and shaming manufacturers of insecure vehicles so *they* are motivated to make them harder to steal.

SCP methods are widely adopted in society, shading into common-sense ‘routine precautions’ (Clarke, 1997). But only in the last 20 years has the ‘official’ world of government and police taken them seriously. In the USA, the approach developed through the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design movement (National Crime Prevention Council, 1997). In the UK, a programme of practical research directed by Ron Clarke at the Home Office inspired the search for a more theoretical foundation built around the concept of crime as opportunity. This was based (at a time of ‘nothing works’) on dissatisfaction with the limited effectiveness of crime prevention through conventional means, particularly attempts to change the disposition of the offender; and growing academic awareness of the general limits of ‘personality’ in explaining behaviour. Two main theoretical approaches now underlie SCP. Both take offender characteristics, including motivation, as given.

The *rational choice* perspective sees the fundamental causal mechanism of SCP as making the commission of specific sets of crimes more risky (deterrence), more effort and less rewarding (discouragement), or less comfortable (removing excuses) (adapted from Clarke, 1997). For SCP to work – at least in the short term – deterrence and discouragement need only be *perceived* barriers.

Routine Activity Theory (Felson, 1983) takes a wider causal view. Here, criminal events stem from the conjunction of a likely (motivated) offender, a suitable target and the absence of capable guardians. SCP is about changing the last two. A related approach, which attempts to understand and predict what brings these ingredients together in terms of spatial arrangements, patterns of travel etc, is *Environmental Criminology* (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1995).

Evaluation

The main practical criticism of SCP centres on *displacement* – where an offender, blocked by an SCP measure, seeks a similar target at another time or place, changes methods or changes target altogether. Clarke (1997) has, however, shown displacement to be limited in effect and sometimes even reversed (*diffusion of benefit*, where cautious offenders avoid more than just the officially protected site); but the possibility of displacement can never be ruled out in any specific circumstances.

Aesthetic criticisms centre on fears of ‘fortress society’, and ethical ones on loss of privacy or freedom. Both can be minimised through good design of products, environments and procedures to reconcile security with these potentially conflicting

requirements. Some practitioners – and criminologists – whose primary interest is in offenders and their motives find SCP trivial; some situationalists in their turn regard offender-oriented approaches as overoptimistic or misguided. Having ‘two cultures of prevention’ blocks practical and theoretical progress.

Theoretical criticisms highlight the limits to offenders’ rationality (see *rational choice*) – but these are neither fatal to SCP, nor contested by its protagonists. More recently (eg Ekblom, 2000) there have been attempts to integrate SCP with a wider understanding of offenders – their criminal predispositions, immediate motives to offend and resources for offending (tools, weapons, knowledge and skill). From this perspective, the concept of *opportunity* for crime is not simply a property of the crime situation, but is conjointly dependent on the offender’s resources to exploit it and cope with the risks (an open window 3 floors up is only an opportunity to someone with agility, courage and maybe a ladder).

Associated Concepts: carceral society, community safety, crime prevention, defensible space, geographies of crime, rational choice theory, routine activity theory, surveillance

Key Readings

Brantingham, P. and Brantingham, P. (1995), ‘Criminality of Place: Crime Generators and Crime Attractors’, *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 3/3: 5-26.

Clarke, R.V.G. (1997) *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies*(2nd Edn.). Albany, N.Y.: Harrow and Heston.

Cornish, D. (1994) ‘The Procedural Analysis of Offending and its Relevance for Situational Prevention’, in R. Clarke, ed., *Crime Prevention Studies*, 3: 151-196. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.

Ekblom, P. (2000) ‘The Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity – a Tool for Clear, ‘Joined-up’ Thinking about Community Safety and Crime Reduction’ in K. Pease, S. Ballintyne and V McLaren, eds., *Key Issues in Crime Prevention, Crime Reduction and Community Safety*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

Felson, M. (1983) ‘Linking Criminal Choices, Routine Activities, Informal Control, and Criminal Outcomes’ in D. Cornish and R. Clarke, eds., *The Reasoning Criminal*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

National Crime Prevention Council (1997). *Designing Safer Communities: A Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design Handbook*. Washington DC: NCPC.