Crime in time of disruption

How to think about it and what to do

ECCA seminar Stockholm 2023

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- Police/security agencies have tended to view disruption from a very specific perspective:
  - **Disrupting Organised Crime Groups** as a crime control strategy
- But recent events have forced society to look at disruption more broadly
  - COVID-19
  - Financial crisis of 2008
  - Migration crisis of 2015
  - Brexit, Gilets Jaunes
  - Climate change
  - Blockchain, WhatsApp
- Doubtless we will face **new** disruptions
- All of them will affect the **responses** required from the police/ crime prevention; some will disrupt **police** themselves
- So it makes sense to step back from immediate focus on handling the disruptions of, say, COVID-19, to see if there are **generic ways of thinking about disruption, and responding**, that can help us tackle present events, & better prepare for **future shocks**
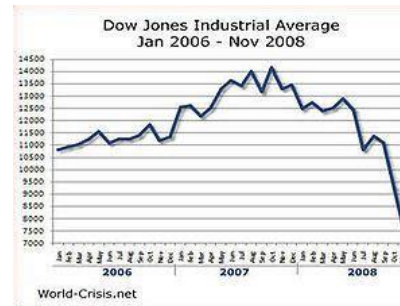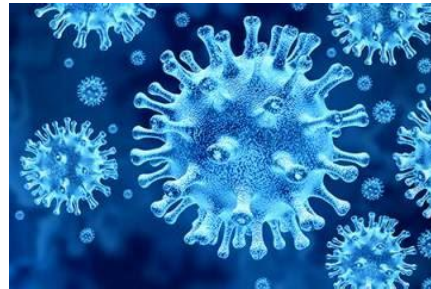
- **Dishing out disruption**

  – Disrupting Organised Crime

- **At the receiving end of disruption**

  – The nature of disruption

  – Disruption and crime science

  – Disruption and security

  – Disruption – how to cope with it

Dishing it out: disrupting organised crime

- In the control of **Organised Crime**, the term **disruption** is used very loosely

  - This mostly amounts to merely saying 'making what is organised, **dis**organised'.

  - With more force than reflection, the UK Government introduced the approach in 2013 with the phrase 'relentless disruption'

  - Skidmore (2023:2): '[The concept of disruption] has been subjected to little external scrutiny, with limited coverage in the existing research literature. The lack of conceptual clarity and gaps in empirical evidence are not simply academic concerns, they obscure the efficacy, accountability and legitimacy of disruption policies and interventions and their real-world value.'

  - He also observes that numbers of 'disruptions' achieved in police operations have come to serve as a **superficial performance indicator**

- UK College of Policing produced a massive **listing of individual disruption tactics**

  - But it's arranged around **domains of life** – e.g. travel, business, vehicle, lifestyle – not **causal mechanisms**, Scientific Realist fashion

- This lack of clarity & principles hinders our capacity to **focus** on specific problems and solutions, to **innovate**, to organise & share **knowledge** of what works, and to keep up with **persistent, adaptive and often well-resourced and organised offenders**

- We therefore have to **gear up** to outpace the organised offenders in the arms race – including by sharpening up our **concepts** and organising our own **knowledge**

- We can split disruption into several (overlapping) domains:

  - **Operational –** interferes with planning and performance of the 'everyday business' of organised crime

  - **Environmental –** reduces opportunities and boosts constraints generated by the operating environment in which organised crime groups undertake their everyday business

  - **Strategic/ existential –** threatens the existence and growth of the organised crime group or network

- We can get even more specific, by breaking these domains down in turn
  - Following the precedent of the **Ds framework** for focusing on **how interventions work as mechanism-based principles, by influencing the individual offender** – Deter, Demotivate, Deflect, Disconcert etc

- **Operational**

  - Disrupting **planning** by OCGs

  - Disrupting **execution** of OGC's operations [military's OODA Loop – Observe, Orient, Decide, Act]

  - Imposing *drag* of increased effort on OCGs obtaining, securing, storing, exploiting reward from their activities

  - Disrupting **communications** (electronic, or face-to-face) within OCG

  - Disrupting **OCG's own security measures**

- **Environmental** – opportunity structure and more

  - Disrupting the wider **ecosystem** of networks, criminal services and markets within which OCGs operate

  - Diminishing **demand** for illicit goods and services

  - Diminishing the existing attempts to **corrupt** regulators, law enforcers and other public institutions

  - Defending those institutions and individuals against corruption, intimidation and coercion by boosting their **resistance**

- Strategic and Existential

  - Disrupting OCG's **business models** – removing the social/economic **niche** they exploit, boosting **legitimate** business opportunities

  - Creating **distrust** within OCGs, across criminal networks, & between OCGs and their clients

  - Diminishing the **resilience** of OCGs – making it harder for them to recover from disruption

  - Diminishing the **adaptive/innovative capacity** of OCGs – reducing their potential for circumventing constraints, transferring to less challenging value chains (e.g. from drugs to wildlife crime), and expanding to exploit new opportunities

  - **Diminishing** OCGs (members leaving exceed members joining)

  - **Detaching** OCGs from supportive subcultures

  - **Dismantling** OCGs – breaking up the organisation

Society on the receiving end: disruption in broader view

- Disruption is a perpetual and pervasive feature of human existence – indeed of the struggle of all living things against **entropy**

- The more **complex and interdependent** society gets, the more we can expect it to be disrupted – and in many cases, the worse and more widespread the consequences

- Disruption effects can

  – Have **chains** or **cascades** of consequences (e.g. COVID > Conspiracy theories > destruction of 5G phone masts)

  – **Interact** with **one another**, with our **responses** (e.g. everyone stockpiles toilet rolls), and with **pre-existing issues & problems** within society (e.g. the status/ condition of ethnic minority citizens)

  – Lead to **wicked problems** that are hard to clarify and solve – e.g. physical health vs mental health and the economy

- Cyberspace

  – Fake news, fraud & other phenomena that **amplify disruption & worsen consequences** are facilitated/scaled up in cyberspace

  – Some future disruption could actually happen to **critical cyber infrastructure** itself, with **cascading** consequences affecting the whole of society

  – **Carrington Event** 1859 – global telegraph system zapped by huge coronal mass ejection

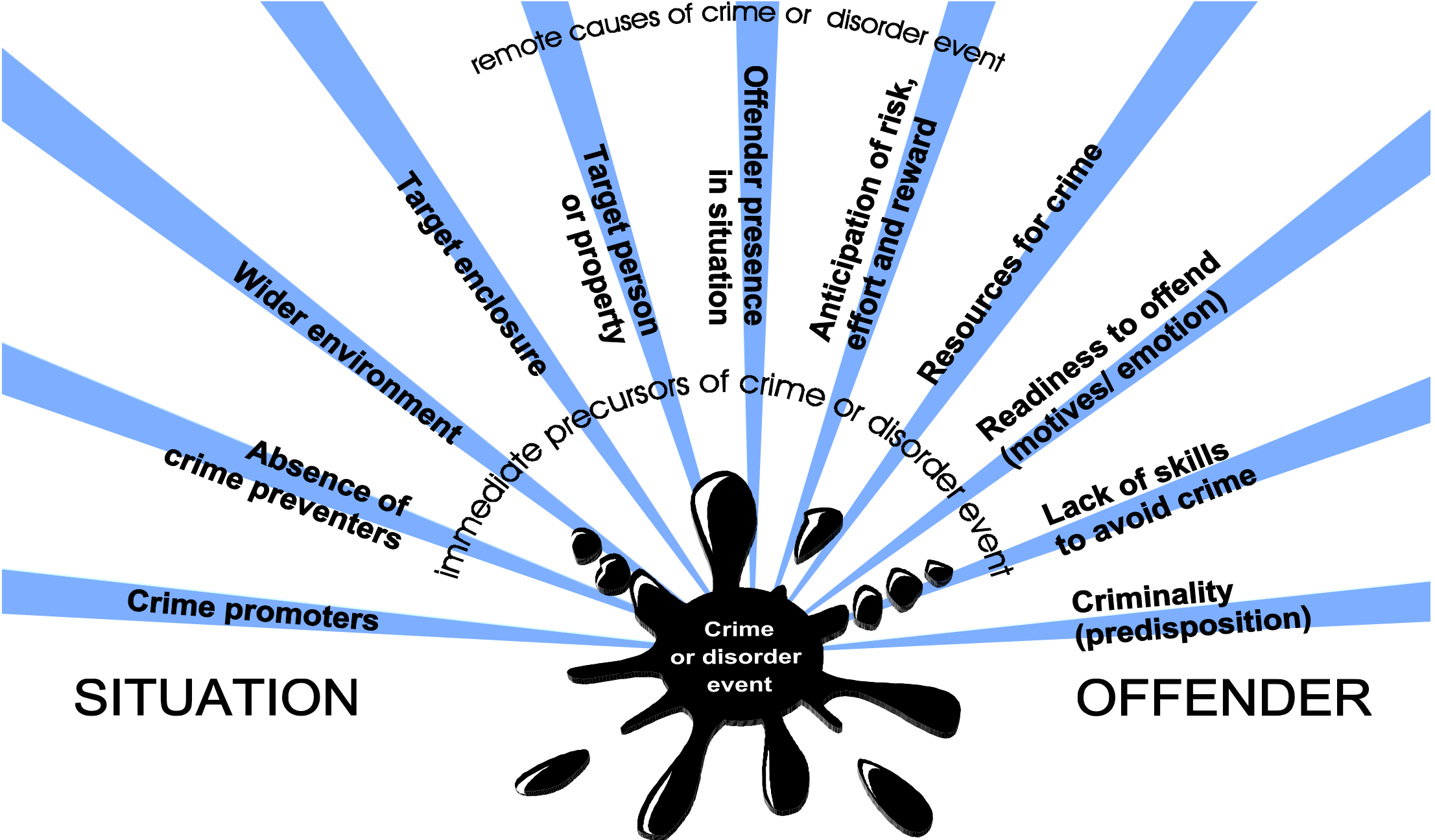The Machine Stops

E. M. Forster

DODO PRESS
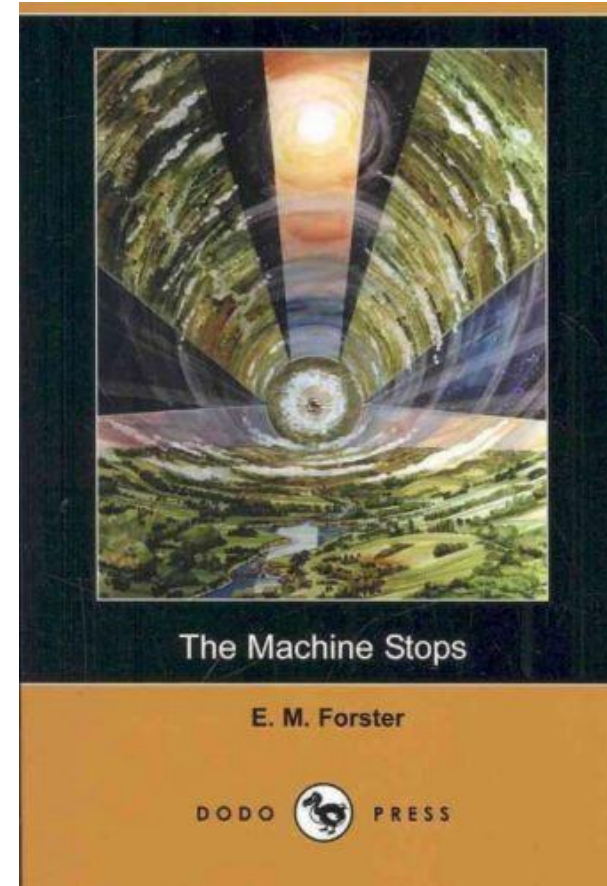
- So far, I've covered **society** deliberately disrupting **organised crime**

- Worth noting that disruption is fundamental to **crime prevention as a whole** – it **stops the causes of criminal events from coming together**

- But there's a multi-way relationship:

  - **Other kinds of disruptions** can disrupt crime – e.g. natural disasters can mess up narcotics supply chains

  - Crime can disrupt **society**, changing the **probability** of existing crime, generating **new forms** of traditional crime, or entirely **new types** of crime, and changing **harmful consequences** of crime

  - Crime can **exploit** other disruptions – e.g. looting after a hurricane

  - Crime can deliberately **create** disruptions then exploit them

- So it's important for Crime Science to take a broader look

I could go through all the familiar Crime Science perspectives one by one, but we can more systematically consider how disruptions affect risk, by using the **Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity** to bring together all the **immediate causes of criminal events** in a one-stop shop

remote causes of crime or disorder event

Offender presence in situation

Anticipation of risk, effort and reward

Target person or property

Resources for crime

Target enclosure

Readiness to offend (motives/ emotion)

Wider environment

immediate precursors of crime or disorder event

Absence of crime preventers

Lack of skills to avoid crime

Crime promoters

Criminality (predisposition)

Crime or disorder event

SITUATION

OFFENDER

On the **offender** side

- Disruption can influence a range of causes of crime, some of them **distal**, but always leading to **proximal** impacts (much of this from Agnew 2011 on climate change):

  - Adverse childhood experiences may lead to people growing up with increased **predisposition/ motivation** to offend

  - Gaps in people's education, or reduced experience of healthy social interaction, may lead to **lack of employment skills, inadequate social skills and weak self-control**

  - Short-term stress from financial problems, lack of exercise, subsistence needs etc may put people in a state of emotion/motivation which makes them **ready to offend**, and thus susceptible to situational **precipitators**

<u>On the **offender** side</u>

- Offenders misuse new, unfamiliar procedures, situations as **resources for crime**

  - E.g. to **deceive** victims

  - E.g. to **smuggle** drugs by concealing them in urgent medical supplies

  - Offenders' **preparedness/capacity for exploiting disruption may be important** e.g. ready to adapt/ roll out generic disaster fraud package, and paste in details of current episode

- Offenders may find it easier or harder to be **present in crime situations**

  - E.g. **paedophiles** can get among **disaster relief** workers

  - Lockdowns or travel disruptions may keep offenders away from certain opportunities and – short term – **invalidate** their **awareness space**; but travel diversions may help them **extend** it

- Offenders may be **present in sufficient numbers** to judge that there will be limited risks for individuals, as in looting

- Offenders may openly conceal their **identity** with face masks; but may be put at risk of identification e.g. by health tracking measures

- On the **situational** side

- Background factors which previously kept crime in check may disappear, releasing new **opportunities**

  - **Targets of property crime** may
    - **Increase in value** – as with shortages of computer parts – and this may increase theft
    - Be **less protected** by guardians e.g. in delivery chains
    - Emergency measures may have **vulnerabilities baked in** due to hasty implementation

  - **Human targets** of **domestic abuse** may be unable to escape offenders

  - **Enclosures** may be weakened (refugees living in tents)

  - **Wider environments** e.g. city centres may have reduced surveillance; alternatively, those few people present may be the focus of greater attention
    - May be many more situational **precipitators** prompting, permitting, provoking and pressuring people to offend – **conflict, looting or rioting**, for example, cover them all
    - **Crime attractors** may lose potency, so offenders' **foraging efficiency** may drop – though fresh ones will emerge if a **new normal** established

On the **situational** side

- With a disrupted **opportunity structure**, **decision-making** on basis of perceived risk, effort, reward, may be invalidated, if prior experience is no longer relevant

- **Crime preventers** – those who reduce the risk of criminal events – will be affected
  - **Informal guardianship** – people may have other priorities than reporting crime
  - **Self-protection** – desperate or disoriented people may drop their guard against fraudsters, thieves, who use shortages of medicine, availability of 'cures,' as resources for trickery

- **Crime promoters** – who increase the risk of crime by others, e.g. by
  - **Provocation**, e.g. dispute over lack of wearing masks etc
  - **Creating opportunities** e.g. by relaxing procurement controls for PPE

Dynamic factors bringing offenders and situations together

- **Disruption amounts to the absence of routine**, so Routine Activities that normally bring offenders and targets or victims together in the absence of capable guardians may no longer take place

  - Existing **crime generators** may be dispersed

  - But – disrupted routines or environments may make potential **victims/targets** of crime more **exposed** to passing criminals, and **guardians less present or capable of intervening**

  - If what brings RA triad together is **active offenders**, then impact on crime depends on **adaptability** of both parties

  - Offenders may exploit victims who stick to **routines that are now no longer safe**

- The whole **process** of doing security & crime prevention may get harder because of reductions in the police's **resources**, & changes in their **operating environment**

- Disruption can affect any of the tasks of **POP**

- Illustration using **5Is process model**, equivalent to **SARA** but in more detail

- **Intelligence** – gaining knowledge on offenders, crime patterns, causes & consequences
  - Data may become harder to obtain
  - Patterns of crime may undergo discontinuities – hindering inductive planning of interventions

- **Intervention** – action to interrupt the causes of crime & reduce risk of criminal events
  - Changes in contextual factors surrounding interventions may make what works now in crime prevention, cease to be effective

- **Implementation** – resources & practical considerations to make intervention happen
  - Fresh obstacles may impede security actions, or reduce their priority relative to urgent needs

- **Involvement** – the 'people' side of implementation:
  - Enforcement of measures e.g. lockdowns may be unpopular, & harm legitimacy needed for police to operate
  - Existing partnerships may fail; mobilising citizens/civil organisations to do security tasks may be challenging
  - But some disasters have engendered greater 'community spirit'

- **Impact** – outcome & process evaluation
  - **Security planning and response to disruptions themselves** clearly merit evaluation
  - **Disruptions to evaluation plans** are commonplace - these should be explicitly anticipated in planning rather than paring bids down to the bone

- Maintain a **risk register** of possible disruptions

- For each of these general risks, try to anticipate **specific crime risks**, and risks to **policing**, on local, regional, international scale, and plan a range of responses to cover uncertainties

  - **Systematically plot the disruptions against the crime risks**

- **Stress-test** systems and procedures in line with **anticipated risks** (known unknowns) and **wildcards** (unknown unknowns)

- Boost **resilience** and **adaptability** within police and other emergency services – general resilience is the only way to handle unknown unknowns

  - Arrange for **redundancy, upgradeability, flexibility of security, capacity for rapid prototyping** of new actions, & the **monitoring of performance** to give rapid feedback and enable quick adjustment

  - Argue against '**false economies**'

  - Look at **command structures** – are less hierarchical ones better in times of disruption? Consider military '**mission command**' – centralised intent with decentralised subsidiarity of execution

- Participate in wider **horizon-scanning** exercises with various stakeholders to identify future risks

- Plan to deal with **fake news**, develop wider social **media strategy**

- By changing the **contexts** of human action, **disruption can reveal the mechanisms** underlying patterns of crime or the workings of security

- It can generate **natural experiments** that could never deliberately be staged, ethically/practically – we should be ready to capitalise on this

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley

To a Mouse, On Turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November 1785

Thank you!

Sorry, I forgot the zombies!

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https://crimeframeworks.com