

CRITIQUES OF SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION

Wortley, R. (2010). Critiques of situational crime prevention. In B. Fisher & S. Lab (eds) *Encyclopedia of Victimology and Crime Prevention*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Situational crime prevention has been a controversial development, and has struggled to gain acceptance within mainstream academic criminology. The concerns and approaches of situational prevention contrast in significant ways with those of traditional criminological theory. Where criminology generally seeks to understand offenders and the social and psychological forces that create them, situational prevention is concerned only with the immediate circumstances under which crime is performed. The situational approach promotes neither social reform nor offender rehabilitation, both central themes elsewhere in criminology. Instead, situational theorists and researchers actively engage with police and other governmental agencies to help tackle immediate crime problems. For these reasons, situational prevention is often treated with skepticism and suspicion by other criminologists, and is somewhat disparagingly classified as ‘administrative criminology’. Criticisms of situational crime prevention are of two broad sorts – those questioning the theoretical and conceptual adequacy of the approach, and those attacking the ethical foundations and social outcomes of situational interventions.

Theoretical and conceptual criticisms

Depending upon the disciplinary assumptions made, most criminological theories explain criminal behavior either as the response of offenders to macro-level, socio-cultural factors such as social disadvantage and economic disparity, or as an expression

of a criminal disposition created by each individual offender's biological makeup and life experiences. Situational analyses examine neither the sociological contexts of criminality nor the development of criminal dispositions, and theoretical criticisms of the approach center on these omissions.

The situational approach is sterile, simplistic, and atheoretical

It is claimed that the situational approach lacks the vigor, complexity and sophistication of other criminological theories and amounts to little more than common sense. Situational analyses might explain where and when crimes occur but contribute little to our understanding of why crimes occur. Situational crime prevention in turn relies on mindless target-hardening and is a simplistic response to a complex social problem.

In response to this criticism, it is argued that situational prevention is based on a fundamental tenet of modern psychology that all behavior arises from a person-situation interaction. Situations are not just places in which crimes occur but they play a causative role in initiating crime and shaping its course. Situational prevention is underpinned by rational choice theory, routine activity theory, crime pattern theory, and social and environmental psychology. Further, target-hardening is just one of 25 major techniques of situational prevention, and the selection of appropriate intervention requires a detailed analysis of the crime problem in question.

Situational prevention ignores the root causes of crime

It may be conceded that situational prevention has a theory base, but those theories do not examine factors such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, poor parenting, and so on, which are the root cause of crime. By focusing on the performance of criminal

behavior, situational prevention attacks symptoms and not underlying, systemic causes. It can at best provide a pragmatic, stop-gap solution to crime problems.

In reply, it is a fallacy that one must understand and change the historical causes of a behavior in order to change that behavior. Random breath testing of motorists significantly reduces drink-driving offences independently of the psycho-social dynamics of alcohol abuse. Moreover, situations are one cause of behavior and the distinction between root and non-root causes is arbitrary. One might equally criticize other theories for ignoring situations. Indeed, a counter argument can be made that those causes that are nearest to the performance of behavior have the most powerful effect and are also the most amenable to intervention. It is difficult to make parents love their children more but relatively easy to make houses more difficult to burgle.

Situational prevention will only displace crime

A related criticism is that situational prevention may succeed in displacing crime, but will not prevent it. Because situational prevention does not address offenders' criminal dispositions, if thwarted in one criminal endeavor, offenders will simply move on to other crime opportunities. They may seek out alternative crime locations, offend at different times, change to different targets, use different tactics, and/or commit other sorts of crimes. In some cases, situational prevention will make matters worse by encouraging offenders to escalate their crime efforts.

There is a superficial logic to this criticism, but its validity depends upon an overestimation of the role of criminal dispositions in crime and discounting the role played by opportunity and other immediate environmental factors. The flaw in this criticism can be seen by turning the question around. If everybody stopped taking any

security precautions – did not lock their houses, left their keys in their cars, gave out their credit card PINs, walked in dangerous neighborhoods late at night, etc – would crime increase? If the answer to this question is ‘yes’ then clearly taking routine precautions prevents rather than displaces crime. Empirically it has been found that displacement often does not occur, and where it does, it is invariably less than the amount of crime prevented. In fact the reverse effect has often been observed – that situational interventions targeting one location or crime can have preventative effects beyond the original target (referred to as diffusion of benefits).

Situational approaches are not appropriate for ‘irrational’ crime

Some critics concede that situational prevention may be effective for prudent crimes – that is, offenses such as burglary where there is a clear monetary gain involved – but maintain that it is not applicable to crimes of passion (such as acts of expressive violence), or ones involving strong drives and deviant impulses (such as sex offenses). These offences are seen to be caused by emotional and psychological deficits of the offender and are beyond rational control via situational intervention.

It is true that early situational interventions were largely applied to acquisitive crimes such as burglary. However, situational factors have also been found to be important in a range of ‘pathological’ behaviors including suicide, child sexual abuse, serial murder, and drug addiction. It has been shown that many so-called ‘irrational’ crimes involve decision-making by offenders that is sensitive to the perceived consequences of the contemplated action. Moreover, situational prevention is not limited to manipulating the costs and benefits of crime, but also takes into account situational factors that might provoke crime. Thus, expressive violence might be

prevented by altering situational conditions – crowding, frustration, excessive noise, etc – that elicit aggression.

Social and ethical criticisms

Along with a theoretical commitment to the social causes of crime, criminology generally embraces an ideological commitment social justice issues. Because situational prevention does not espouse a social reform agenda, and instead works hand-in-hand with government and law enforcement agencies, it is often cast as a politically conservative approach that promotes Orwellian solutions to crime problems.

Situational prevention uncritically supports the status quo

Situation prevention was originally developed in the British Home Office in the 1970s, and in the eyes of critics has remained a tool that the authorities use to manage social problems and to protect the interests of the rich and powerful. It focuses on the crimes of the poor and disadvantaged (burglary, thefts, and the like), while ignoring crimes of the affluent and crimes against women and minorities.

Situational prevention of crimes such as burglary may disproportionately target poor and disadvantaged offenders, but these crimes also disproportionately involve poor and disadvantaged victims. Moreover, situational prevention is increasingly being applied against a wide variety of crimes, including computer fraud, assault, and rape. The pragmatic focus on prevention of crime rather than on harsh punishment of offenders differentiates the approach from the political agendas of most on the political ‘right’.

Access to situational prevention will become the privilege of the rich

An alternative scenario with similar outcomes is that governments will increasingly withdraw support from publicly funded law enforcement and adopt a user-pay policy. Only the rich will be able to afford the necessary security to protect their property. This will not only leave the poor unprotected, but will increase the threat that they will be victimized as perpetrators seek out alternative targets.

It is obviously true that the rich can afford better security than the poor, but the significance of this is overstated. The rich still need to move about in the world at large, and like everybody they benefit from living in a secure and orderly society. There is little evidence that governments are withdrawing from law enforcement, and in fact 'law and order' has become a standard issue in most election campaigns. The charge of displacement has already been addressed.

Situational prevention blames the victim

Because situational prevention techniques often rely on citizens taking precautions against their own victimization, it is accused of blaming the victim. Shifting responsibility to victims is not only morally indefensible, it is another example of governments abrogating their role in law enforcement.

The evils of victim-blaming are most evident in extreme and emotive examples, such as blaming rape victims for wearing provocative clothes. However, as noted earlier, there are many routine security precautions citizens happily take in their daily lives, and situational prevention can assist them with advice on what measures are most effective. It is unrealistic to expect governments to take responsibility for all aspects of public safety. In some cases it is wholly appropriate to blame the victim. For example, businesses, which through their irresponsible practices generate crime

problems – like pubs that serve patrons to intoxication and then experience high levels of violence – should contribute to the prevention of these problems.

Situational prevention is invasive and oppressive

Situational prevention conjures images of Big Brother and insidious social control.

Situational prevention advocates increased surveillance of citizens through the use of CCTV, identity checks, and the like, and such techniques are an invasion of privacy and restrict personal freedoms.

It is true that situational prevention may involve increased surveillance.

However, in democratic societies there are checks and balances that generally ensure that personal freedoms are not unduly curtailed. People are prepared to tolerate the costs of increased surveillance if there are obvious benefits that are delivered. For example, the inconvenience of airport screening procedures is generally patiently endured by passengers who are more concerned about the threat of terrorism.

Likewise, most customers are happy for their banks to monitor their credit card usage if this helps detect unauthorized transactions.

Situational prevention will create a fortress society

For many critics, the logical endpoint of situational crime prevention is the creation of a fearful and distrustful society divided by locks, bars, walls, guards and other forms of obtrusive security. Communities will disintegrate as those citizens designated as undesirable are excluded from public spaces, while those with the financial means hide in gated communities.

As noted earlier, situational prevention involves more than target hardening.

Many situational techniques actually involve ‘softening’ the environment and

bringing communities together. For example, housing estates which incorporate situational principles will typically have designed-in opportunities for residents to interact with, and look out for, one another. Likewise, many situational measures – for example, improved street lighting – can reduce fear of crime. Situation prevention does not advocate the profiling of ‘undesirables’, arguing instead that security measures ought to be deployed on the basis that anyone might exploit crime opportunities. While the number of gated communities is increasing, most are built in low crime areas and security levels are often minimal.

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See also: Crime Pattern Theory; Crime Prevention; Displacement; Crime Science; Rational Choice Theory; Routine Activities Theory; Situational Crime Prevention.

Further Readings

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