



National Crime Prevention Centre
Centre national de prévention du crime

SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION

Introduction

The annual cost of crime to Canadians is estimated to range between \$35 billion and \$46 billion.¹ The overwhelming majority of criminal justice system expenditures in Canada are related to police, courts, and corrections—the agencies that have been traditionally responsible for crime detection and control. However, since the mid-1980s, Canada, like many other countries, has shifted more resources to addressing crime through a balanced strategy.

The Government of Canada plays a key role in promoting crime prevention through the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention. The National Strategy is administered by the Department of Justice and the Ministry of Solicitor General Canada. It is designed to promote a “balanced approach” to reducing crime and victimization by focusing primarily on crime prevention through social development.

While there are many types of crime prevention strategies, most can be classified under two broad categories—situational crime prevention and crime prevention through social development:

- situational crime prevention strategies seek to reduce the availability and attractiveness of opportunities for criminal activity;

- crime prevention through social development focuses, in a holistic way, on the root causes of crime and victimization.

This fact sheet provides information about situational crime prevention. For information about crime prevention through social development, refer to the National Crime Prevention Centre’s fact sheet on Crime Prevention through Social Development.

Situational Crime Prevention: What Is It?

Situational crime prevention is an approach that encompasses a wide range of practical and common sense thinking about crime and its prevention. It reflects the everyday strategies that individuals and organizations use to protect themselves and their property.

A “Common Sense” Approach to Crime Prevention

Situational crime prevention practices often involve taking simple, “common sense” steps to reduce or eliminate opportunities for crime. For example, people usually lock their homes or offices when they go out. They do not leave valuable items lying around but rather store them in safe places. People do not leave their car keys in the ignition and lock their bicycles to prevent them from being stolen. Whether they live in rural or urban areas, people often “keep an eye” on each others’ homes and property through formal programs such as



“Neighbourhood Watch” or through less formal arrangements with their neighbours. At a community level, urban planners actually incorporate situational crime prevention into their plans by designing well-lit public spaces to promote safety and discourage crime.

Many of these types of activities are often taken for granted. However, they reflect the basic three premises of situational crime prevention:

- reduce the opportunity for crime;
- increase the risk of detection; and
- reduce the rewards of crime.²

Addresses Specific Crime Problems

Situational crime prevention strategies have been used by both the public and private sector to deal with specific crime problems. Some examples include the installation of steering column locks to prevent auto theft, the use of “robbery screens” to deter theft, and the use of closed-circuit television and improved lighting to prevent crime and victimization in parking areas.³ One example of a focus on a specific crime problem involved a community that was concerned about prostitution and “cruising” by male clients. Local residents worked with the police and municipal authorities to devise a plan that involved intensified policing coupled with strategic street closings. These strategies proved highly successful. They resulted in resolving the problem as well as in a “diffusion of benefits.” For example, other crimes in the community were also reduced. Women in the community felt much safer walking through their neighbourhood. Moreover, research showed that there was no “displacement” of the problem to surrounding communities.⁴

These examples highlight an important aspect of situational crime prevention. Each reflects an attempt by individuals and communities to address a very specific crime problem. The focus on responding to specific crimes distinguishes situational crime prevention from other, more broad-based approaches to preventing crime and victimization.

Incorporates “Action Research”

Situational crime prevention has been combined with an “action research” model. This means that in undertaking a situational crime prevention approach, researchers and practitioners work together to define and analyze problems, try out possible solutions, and repeat the process until a satisfactory solution is found. Clarke⁵ has specified the following five stages of a situational crime prevention project:

- collection of data about the nature and dimensions of the specific crime problem;
- analysis of the situational conditions that permit or facilitate the commission of the crimes in question;
- systematic study of possible means of blocking opportunities for these particular crimes, including analysis of costs;
- implementation of the most promising, feasible and economic measures; and
- monitoring of results and dissemination of experience.

A Brief History of Situational Crime Prevention Approaches

Situational approaches were developed initially in Britain in the late 1970s by researchers working in the Home Office Research Unit.⁶ Their review of crime prevention strategies suggested that only marginal gains could be made with existing rehabilitative approaches but that reducing opportunities for crime offered some promise. American researchers had already proposed several related ideas, (i) defensible space and (ii) crime prevention through environmental design. The defensible space idea was based on Oscar Newman's⁷ theories about the impact on people's behaviour of the design of public housing in the United States. Crime prevention through environmental design extended those theories by taking a broader view of the potential that environmental design could have in reducing the opportunities for crime. These ideas were incorporated and extended by Canadian researchers⁸ and implemented by many communities. Rational choice theory⁹ and routine activities theory¹⁰ provided further support for situational approaches by introducing a consideration of the motives and intentions of criminal actors as well as their perceptions of criminal opportunities.

Situational Crime Prevention Strategies

The following types of situational crime prevention strategies have been introduced in many Canadian communities:

Target hardening is the specific strategy most often associated with a situational crime prevention approach. It involves reducing opportunities by employing tactics that make it harder for crimes to take place. Installing more and better locks is the most obvious example of target hardening. Others

include placing bars or screens on windows, using safes and replacing glass with reinforced material. The objective is to obstruct potential criminals by making targets more difficult to access.

Problem-oriented policing is an approach that has been adopted by police agencies around the world to detect and deter crime. It is based on a detailed analysis of a specific crime problem and the development of a tailored response. The steps taken in problem-oriented policing include completing a detailed analysis, examining current responses to the problem and evaluating their effectiveness, assessing what resources are available in the community to address the specific problem, and devising alternative strategies for resolving the problem. Different alternatives are then tried and evaluated until a satisfactory solution is developed.

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) is based on the relationships that exist between people and their environments. Architects and planners apply specific design principles to enhance public safety by ensuring adequate lighting and clear sight lines, and by removing opportunities for crime. CPTED's aim is "identifying conditions of the physical and social environment that provide opportunities for or precipitate criminal acts . . . and the alteration of those conditions so that no crimes occur." CPTED is associated with the work of C. Ray Jeffery¹¹ and incorporates a broader set of techniques than those associated with Newman's notion of "defensible space."¹² It also extends the focus beyond residential communities to include schools and commercial sites.

Situational Crime Prevention Techniques

There are three basic types of situational crime prevention techniques. The first includes those strategies or programs that seek to reduce criminal opportunities by physically obstructing the criminal and making the target of crime more difficult to reach. The second type of situational crime prevention technique attempts to increase the risks of getting caught. The final situational crime prevention technique involves reducing the rewards of criminal activity. This typically involves removing the target or marking property so it is less attractive to thieves.

1. Techniques that Focus on Opportunity Reduction

Target hardening—installing more and better locks, bars on windows, protective shields, steering column locks, slug rejector devices, vandal proofing, toughened glass, tamper proof seals.

Access control—locked gates, fenced yards, parking lot barriers, entry phones, ID badges, PIN numbers.

Deflecting offenders—bus stop placement, tavern locations, street closures, graffiti boards.

Controlling facilitators—spray can sales, gun control, credit card photo, ignition interlock, server intervention, caller ID.

2. Techniques that Focus on Increasing the Risks

Entry/exit screening—border searches, baggage screening, automatic ticket gates, merchandise tags, library tags, bar codes.

Formal surveillance—police patrols, security guards, informant hot lines, burglar alarms, red light cameras, curfew decals.

Surveillance by employees—bus conductors, park attendants, concierges, pay phone locations, incentive schemes, closed circuit television systems.

Natural surveillance—pruning hedges, lighting bank interiors, street lighting, defensible space, neighbourhood watch.

3. Techniques that Focus on Reducing the Reward

Target removal—removable car radio, exact change fares, cash reduction, removable coin meters, phone cards, pay by cheque.

Identifying property—cattle branding, property marking, vehicle licensing, vehicle parts marking, personal identification numbers for car radios, steering wheel locks.

Removing inducements—graffiti cleaning, rapid repair, gender-neutral phone lists, park cars in secure garages.

Rule setting—public park regulations, customs declarations, income tax returns.¹³

Questions and Concerns

Critics of situational crime prevention charge that rather than preventing crime, this approach merely “displaces” it onto neighbouring or more vulnerable targets. This position suggests that those who have the time and resources to undertake target hardening may be better protected but this comes at the expense of those individuals or communities less able to protect themselves. In some cases, the displacement can involve a shift to more serious offences or offences that will have worse consequences.¹⁴

A second concern is that situational crime prevention programs are time sensitive and lose their impact unless routinely re-invigorated. Such is often the case with programs like Neighbourhood Watch, which may start with considerable enthusiasm but slowly lose momentum when the immediate crime problems are resolved.

Proponents of situational crime prevention argue that displacement is not inevitable since it depends on the perceived risks, effort, and rewards of engaging in criminal activity. A considerable body of research has examined the “displacement” issue. As Clarke notes, these studies “suggested that situational measures had achieved reductions in crime with little apparent displacement.”¹⁵ He points to the success that the airlines have achieved with preventing hijacking and the reduction in cheque frauds in Sweden as powerful examples.

In many cases, rather than displacing crime, the existence of a situational approach results in the diffusion of benefits. This involves a reduction in crime in the surrounding area, which has been called a “halo” or “spill-over” effect. For example, the announcement of an anti-shoplifting program in one grocery store may result in a reduction in shoplifting in other grocery stores in the community. The installation of closed-circuit television cameras in one parking lot may reduce crime in surrounding lots as well.

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- 1 National Crime Prevention Council, Economic Analysis Committee, *Money Well Spent: Investing in Preventing Crime* (Ottawa, 1996), p.14.
 - 2 Adam Crawford, *Crime Prevention and Community Safety: Politics, Policies and Practices* (London: Longman, 1998).
 - 3 Ronald V. Clarke, ed., *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies* (New York: Harrow and Heston Publishers, 1992).
 - 4 Roger Matthews, "Developing More Effective Strategies For Curbing Prostitution," in Ronald V. Clarke, ed., *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies* (New York: Harrow and Heston Publishers, 1992), pp.89-98.
 - 5 Ronald V. Clarke, ed., *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies* (New York: Harrow and Heston Publishers, 1992).
 - 6 Michael Tonry and David P. Farrington, eds., *Building a Safer Society: Strategic Approaches to Crime Prevention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
 - 7 Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (MacMillan, 1972).
 - 8 P. J. Brantingham and P. L. Brantingham, *Environmental Criminology* (Beverly Hills, CA., Sage, 1981).
 - 9 Richard V. Clarke and D. B. Cornish, "Modelling Offenders' Decisions: A Framework for Policy and Research," in M. Tonry and N. Norris, eds., *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, Vol. 6. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
D. B. Cornish and R. V. Clarke, eds., *The Reasoning Criminal. Rational Choice Perspectives on Offending* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986).
 - 10 L. E. Cohen and M. Felson, "Social Change and Crime Rate trends: A Routine Activity Approach," *American Sociological Review* 44:588-608.
 - 11 C. Ray Jeffery, *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1971).
 - 12 Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (MacMillan, 1972).
 - 13 Ronald V. Clarke, ed., *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies* (New York: Harrow and Heston Publishers, 1992), p.13.
 - 14 Adam Crawford, *Crime Prevention and Community Safety: Politics, Policies and Practices* (London: Longman, 1998), p.83.
 - 15 Ronald V. Clarke, ed., *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies* (New York: Harrow and Heston Publishers, 1992), p.22.