

Of Crime and Place:
Practical Applications in Environmental Criminology
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I recently heard a comedian ask the question: “Why do people take their children to Wal-Mart to beat them”?

In addition to being funny, it has the added advantage of being a keen observation between ***place*** (or environment) and ***behavior***.

The earliest efforts to understand crime focused on the criminal and asked the question ***why***.

The subsequent theories concerning criminal motivation and predisposition ranged wildly from the ridiculous- phrenology (the size and shape of the head) by Gall and Lombrosoⁱ to the highly suspect “extra Y chromosome” theory, to the long lingering debate of “nature vs. nurture”.

While evolving theories may provide some ultimate deeper understanding of the root causes of criminal behavior, they do little to assist in the day to day, practical efforts of security practitioners in reducing or preventing crime.

By the late 19th century, attention began to be paid to the victim as well as the offender, providing valuable insight to and understanding of the dynamics of the offense, and addressing the question of ***who***. It has only been comparatively recently however, that attention has begun to focus on the critical question of ***where***.

Environmental Criminology evaluates a criminal event on a geographic basis:

“Criminal events must be understood as confluences of offenders, victims or criminal targets, in specific settings at particular times and places”ⁱⁱ

First proposed by the distinguished husband and wife team of criminologists Paul and Patricia Brantingham, Environmental Criminology has already proven to represent a transformational paradigm shift in the way academics, law enforcement, private security, and crime prevention practitioner’s view and respond to crime.

While earlier pioneers from such varied disciplines as city planners and architects had noted a connection between specific locations and behaviorⁱⁱⁱ, definitive connections between criminal acts and specific geographical terrain and place emerged in practical law enforcement application through the efforts of Jack Maple in New York, whose crude push pins on maps within the New York subway system identified criminal “hot spots”.

Subsequent efforts based on this intelligence of crime and location led to a reduction of robberies in the New York subway system from 1,200 a year to 12.

Maple was promoted to Deputy Police Chief under William Bratton and their work continued to revolutionize modern policing.

With the advent and development of sophisticated computer modeling, *GIS* or Geographical Information Systems created the ability to analyze crime and to identify “hot spots” or *Geographical bounded areas of varying size that are associated with heightened victimization risks and a proportionately greater number of criminal incidents than other similarly sized areas of the city.*^{iv} In a far more detailed and specific manner.

Regular review of this information has the potential to allow police departments and enlightened private security and crime prevention practitioners to “get ahead of the curve” in a pro-active manner.

Models of the practical and specific application of place based policing and resultant effective strategies in reducing crime include:

Problem Oriented Policing

Evolving from the 1979 article of the same name, Herman Goldstein observed that police departments were not focused enough on specific crime problems and real strategies and solutions.

Goldstein outlined an evolving, focused, process that called for “*Identifying these problems in more precise terms, researching each problem, documenting the nature of the current police response, assessing the adequacy of existing authority and resources, engaging in a broad exploration of alternatives to present responses, weighing the merits of these alternatives, and choosing from among them*”^v

As focused intelligence gathering was combined with geographical information tracking crime to place, some startling facts came to light.

In an initial mapping of crime in Minneapolis in 1987, it was discovered that **3%** of all addresses generated over **50%** of calls for police service.^{vi}

Identifying *problem properties* in a given jurisdiction means more than merely relying on geographical crime mapping; it also requires critical analysis and response based on the presence of *criminogenic conditions*. This specifically refers to crimes of disorder.

In their seminal work “*Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities*”^{vii} George S. Kelling and Catherine Coles made the analogy that “*If a window in a building is broken and left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. One unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more costs nothing*”^{viii}

Thus, reason the authors, attacking “*crimes of disorder*” like aggressive panhandling, street prostitution, public drunkenness, harassment, public urination, unlicensed vending and peddling, vandalism and graffiti become strong signals that a space is monitored, that it has rules, and that the rules are enforced. By attacking tolerance for “misdemeanor” crimes, the perpetrator is deprived of the opportunity to commit more serious and escalating crimes of violence.

When William Bratton began an aggressive campaign against the “squeegee” men in New York City, many wondered if the acts were good use of police time and resources.

What soon became apparent was, that the strong focus on the root activities that allowed criminogenic conditions to flourish, began to effectively reduce and transfer serious crime.

The end results in reducing crime in New York were transformational.

Broken Windows owes much of course, to the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design^{ix} model, which includes the critical component of “order maintenance”.

Problem Oriented Policing utilizes an important series of steps called the S.A.R.A model, consisting of:

Scanning: The identification of a problem location

Analysis: Details concerning specific vulnerabilities at the location

Response: The development of appropriate responses and strategies to attack the problem

Assessment: To evaluate and assess the effectiveness of the measures used in responding to the threat^x

CompStat

Recipient of the 1996 Innovations in American Government Award, CompStats is short for “computer comparison statistics” and has been implemented by an increasingly large number of police departments across the United States to great effect.

The process consists of one to two weekly meeting chaired by the police chief where statistics for crime by precinct are introduced by the department statistician. Each respective precinct captain or commander then reviews criminal activity within their respective geographic districts, and the collective (which often consists of other representatives of public and private sector entities) discuss cases specifically and in great detail. Patterns are often identified and collective strategies presented.

One of the chief advantages of this system is that clear “ownership” of crime rests with the individual captain or commander, who is responsible for addressing increases in activity and the effectiveness or lack thereof in reducing criminal incidents on a weekly basis.

An understanding of Environmental Criminology is crucial here, as detailed information includes *“information on the crime, the victim, the time of day the crime took place, and other details that enable officials to spot emerging crime patterns. The result is a computer generated map illustrating where and when crime is occurring citywide. With this high-tech “pin mapping” approach, the police can quickly identify trouble spots and then target resources to fight crime strategically.”*^{xi}

Like Problem Oriented Policing, CompStats also ultimately involves and holds accountable representatives of the private sector who may have ownership and control of properties identified as particularly problematic.

This involvement of the private sector is a critical element of Environmental Criminology.

It addresses head-on the issue of “the social contract” and responsibility everyone has in identifying, and responding to crime.

Crime Prevention is defined as: *“The anticipation, recognition, and appraisal of a crime risk situation and the initiation of action to remove or reduce that risk”*^{xii}.

The responsibility in recognizing a problem oriented property or criminogenic environment can not rest solely with law enforcement.

Retail stores are in the best position to reduce shoplifting; apartment owners are in the best position to prevent burglary or drug dealing on their property. Malls are best situated to reduce auto thefts in their parking lots.

Holding these entities to account is less costly than providing the policing personnel to cover their defaults, and an added benefit is it appropriately places the responsibility for crime control on those who have the most power, authority and ability to reduce it. Otherwise, everyone else is subsidizing their defaults.”^{xiii}

Private Sector Applications

“For a crime to occur the offender has to see the target, and with some additional decision steps, find the target suitable and within a crime template. It is overlapping lifestyles or spatio-temporal movement patterns or use of a common node activity area that is more likely to be the reason a person becomes a victim”^{xiv}

The coming together of offender and victim in a specific place or geographic location is greatly influenced by the perception of “opportunity” by the criminal.

Traditionally the criminal “triangle of crime” is based on whether a target is viewed as Quick to hit, Easy to hit, and affording Low Risk to the offender in the commission of the act.

Here again, we see that certain and specific geographic locales, May in fact, be seen as “criminal attractors” by providing a target rich environment.

When asked why he robbed banks, the prolific “gentleman” bank robber Willey Sutton is alleged to have replied; “I rob banks because that’s where the money is”

While the story may be apocryphal, it illustrates that certain locales, by their very nature, may be perceived as “crime attractors”

A “crime attractor” is defined as *“particular places which create well-known criminal opportunities. Examples might include large shopping malls, large insecure parking lots, bar districts (aka “entertainment zones)”*^{xv}

Certainly, today’s malls and shopping centers are viewed as potentially affording target rich environments to the opportunistic predator.

The mere fact that a particular and specific location or place may be a “crime attractor” does not necessarily mean that it is “problem oriented property.”

In 1992, I became Director of Risk Management for Valor Security Services.

Valor is one of the largest providers of security to shopping malls in the United States.

Beginning with the knowledge that malls are crime attractors^{xvi} and armed with a long-standing familiarity with Crime Prevention Practices and C.P.T.E.D. (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles, my task was to implement policies and procedures at shopping malls across the country that were intended to reduce criminal incidents and perceived criminal opportunity in a specific and unique landscape.

An in-depth analysis of serious crimes confirmed that the most dangerous events transpired in the parking lots.

Often viewed by offenders as a target rich environment, where vehicles are often left unattended for hours, and with an “at risk” population that demographically skewed female, it became clear that a strong signal had to be sent that the Perimeter and Exterior of the property (using the classical military “3 lines of defense approach) no longer afforded a potential assailant a “quick, easy low risk” target.

Obvious changes which yielded immediate and dramatic results included the deployment of uniformed officers patrolling the property in clearly marked security vehicles.

As technology became more affordable, strategic use of CCTV cameras, monitored in real time by security officers in a command center became “force multipliers” enabling them to observe aberrant or suspicious activity, and initiate rapid response to the location.

Other more subtle tools were the use of “traffic calmers” throughout the property in the form of speed bumps, speed humps, or speed ridges, which slowed the rate of speed at which vehicles travelled the property.

One unintended consequence was a reduction in the number of traffic accidents.

More importantly, however, by slowing rate of speed, we reduced or eliminated “drive by purse snatchings” a crime that was becoming rampant at some malls and which led to serious harm or injury to victims.

Using a system to track and evaluate incidents on the property by specific location, time, and day of week, staffing levels could be adjusted and patrol efforts focused.

Other important tools included signage in the parking lot and at the doors identifying the “private” nature of the property and uniform rules of acceptable conduct.

Officers were trained to begin to aggressively use local “criminal trespass” ordinances to identify bad actors, and ban them from the premises. Under most “CT” statutes, should the offender return, they are subject to immediate arrest.

At select malls where juvenile activity was found to be particularly problematic, policies were introduced that literally barred under age minors from frequenting the mall without being accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Since their introduction, most, if not all of these tactics have been widely embraced by The International Council of Shopping Centers and are a defacto standard.

Of course, every unique locale has its own set of potential problems.

What has been proven effective in reducing crime at a shopping mall, may not address specific problems at other environments that may be considered at risk.

Effective crime prevention measures used to “harden a target” and/or reduce risk to legitimate users of a specific geographic locale would vary dramatically based on a number of critical factors.

A motel that might be facing a prolific criminogenic environment would require a different set of measures to respond to criminal threat as opposed to a fast food restaurant, a liquor store or a hospital.

What should be clear to the contemporary crime prevention practitioner, however, is that in-depth and detailed study of the **place** is essential in order to implement appropriate tactics that result in meaningful changes.

Black letter law has also been a catalyst for positive change, exerting pressure on commercial property owners to live up to the social contract by maintaining that owners and operators of such premises have a

duty under civil law to provide a “reasonable standard of care” vis a vis the safety, security, and well-being of legitimate users of the premises, to include patrons and employees.

Threat of civil liability and the negative media attention that often follows can be a strong inducement to property owners and businesses to take a long look at their property and assess the risk of crime.

Determinants in evaluating risk of crime on a “micro” basis require a review of prior history specific to the locale and preferably conducted by a law enforcement or private security professional.

Such a review of prior police calls for service and general condition of the facility at the perimeter, exterior and interior, would evaluate “order maintenance” issues-i.e. is the property clear of trash and graffiti free? As well as lighting and “natural surveillance-i.e. the ability to see and be seen in a clear and unobstructed manner, together with a working knowledge of the nature of the operation- i.e. hours of operation, population served, etc.

What is clear, therefore, is that with the proper tools and training, today’s practitioner can conduct a far more detailed and thorough evaluation of risk of crime at a target location, and then render a thoughtful and measured series of collective recommendations to be put into place commensurate to the hazards that exist.

The distinguished place criminologist, Dr. Jon Eck at the University of Cincinnati has created a variation of the “triangle of crime” that creates emphasis on location and illustrates the necessity of private “ownership” of criminal activity at a particular location.

“This is really two triangles, one engulfing the other.

The Inside triangle has three elements that must converge for a normal crime to occur: the potential offender, the crime target, and the place setting for the crime. For a crime to occur, the offender needs to find a target in a suitable setting.

*The Outside triangle depicts three sorts of supervisors: the handler, the guardian and the place manager. A crime occurs when the offender finds targets free from guardians in settings **not watched by managers.**”^{xvii}*

The absence of active control or “capable management in place” can facilitate the presence and growth of criminogenic conditions on a given property, making violent confrontational crime foreseeable or inevitable.

Fulfilling the social contract by ensuring that a given location has undertaken reasonable and responsible measures to reduce the likelihood of crime and to enhance measures of safety and security for patrons, guests, tenants, and employees is essential.

I began this article with a quote by a comedian about Wal-Mart.

I will conclude with an observation about that organization and a cautionary tale.

In 1994, Wal-Mart did an internal evaluation of crime at 1,347 units for a one year total.

The results confirmed what I had previously determined as Director of Risk Management at Valor security: that the majority of serious and violent crimes take place in the parking lot.

Wal-Mart stores experienced 2,020 auto burglaries, 1,353 auto thefts, 375 assaults, 354 incidents of weapon violence, and 338 purse snatchings.

This number accounted for 80% of crimes at the properties.

Wal-Mart introduced security vehicle patrols at selected stores in Florida.

The results were documented in a memo by then Regional Loss Prevention Manager Tom Rinehart.

“The overall incidents reported by the supervisors in just 10 stores indicated the following:

<u>Before the Patrol:</u>	<u>After the Patrol:</u>
334 car thefts	7 car thefts
154 acts of vandalism	8 acts of vandalism
74 assaults or muggings	4 assaults or muggings
10 harassing solicitation	0 harassing solicitation
4 armed robberies	0 armed robberies

This would indicate a decrease in crime or 96.71 %^{xviii}

These results were confirmed, and a subsequent article concerning the positive impact of parking lot patrol in reducing crime was authored by then Wal-Mart V.P of loss prevention Dave Gorman in the peer reviewed publication Security Management in March of 1996 and entitled “Loss Prevention Racks Up Success”

In spite of these results, however, Wal-Mart has failed to standardize the use of security in its parking lots and continues to put its guests, patrons, and employees in harm’s way.

In 2009, I had the pleasure of lecturing at the Center for Problem Oriented Policing Conference in Seattle, Washington.

I was amazed after my talks to be bombarded by police officers both “beat cops” and line officers who complained bitterly about the disproportionate frequency of calls to service at Wal -Mart (a 24 hour facility in many locations).

By choosing to eschew responsibility for security on their property, Wal-Mart and other commercial property owners who may have criminogenic conditions on their premises, not only put people at risk, they also unfairly consume valuable police services- in some instances, even impacting on police response time^{xix}.

It is both clear and urgent that responsible and enlightened crime prevention practitioners make every legitimate effort to ensure that their clients undertake appropriate analysis of crime risks at their property, and initiate all reasonable measures to remove or reduce those risks.

A good understanding of “place” or Environmental Criminology is vital to achieve this end.

- ⁱ See “Lombroso” The Positivist School: Biological & Psychological Factors” Dr. Cecil E. Greek
- ⁱⁱ Environmental Criminology and Crime Analysis Wortley and Mazerolle Willan Publishing 2008
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Jane Jacobs *Death and Life of the Great American Cities also Defensible Space* by Oscar Newman
- ^{iv} *Crime Hot Spots: What they are, why we have them and how to map them* Eck 2005 US Department of Justice
- ^v *Problem Oriented Policing* Herman Goldstein, 1979
- ^{vi} *Repeat Calls to Police in Minneapolis* Lawrence Sherman Crime Control Institute Washington, DC
- ^{vii} Fixing Broken Windows Kelling/Coles Touchstone Publications 1997
- ^{viii} Ibid
- ^{ix} *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* Timothy D. Crowe Butterworth-Heinemann 1991
- ^x *Problem-Oriented Policing and Crime Prevention* Anthony A. Braga Criminal Justice Press 2002
- ^{xi} *The CompStat Paradigm Management and Accountability in Policing, Business, and the Public Sector* Vincent E. Henry LooseLeaf Law Publications 2002
- ^{xii} National Crime Prevention Institute University of Louisville, Louisville Kentucky
- ^{xiii} San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders from the forward to: *Effective Policing & Crime Prevention: A Problem Oriented Guide for Mayors, City Managers, and County Executives* Joel B. Plant Michael S. Scott Center for Problem Oriented Policing U.S. Department of Justice
- ^{xiv} Crime Pattern Theory Paul and Patricia Brantingham *Environmental Criminology and Crime Analysis* Wilan Publishing 2008
- ^{xv} Ibid
- ^{xvi} *Malls and Crime: A First Look* Paul & Patricia Brantingham
- ^{xvii} *Environmental Criminology and Crime Analysis* Wilan Publishing 2008
- ^{xviii} Memo from Tom Rinehart to Bill Fields Re: Parking Lot Courtesy Patrol
- ^{xix} Crime and Wal-Mart “Is Wal-Mart Safe”: An Analysis of Police Incidents at Wal-Mart Stores May 1st, 2006 WakeUpWalMart.com Washington, D.C.

Marking 30 years in the security industry, [J.R. Roberts](#) provides research, analysis, training, and support to a wide variety of clients across the United States of America. In matters concerning premise liability, inadequate security, negligent security, crime foreseeability, private security guard training, and industry standards of care, J. R. Roberts can make a significant difference in your legal case as a security expert witness. To schedule an initial free confidential discussion of the fact pattern of your case, or to obtain additional information, including [rates](#) and a current Curriculum Vitae, call our LAN Line at: (912) 441-2059 or Email jr@jrrobtssecurity.com.

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