

# Routine Activities and Opportunity Theory

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According to [www.quote-garden.com](http://www.quote-garden.com), there isn't much that opportunity doesn't do. Opportunity knocks, it flies by while we sit regretting the chances we lost and, most abstractly, opportunity is a bird that never perches. In this chapter we discuss an additional function of opportunity. Our aim is to demonstrate that opportunities cause crime; that this applies to juvenile crime; and to show what the implications of this are for crime prevention. This approach is not conventional criminology. Some advocates of opportunity theory consider its approach to be so different from that of the remainder of criminology that it no longer makes sense for it to be part of criminology at all. "Crime science" has been proposed as an alternative umbrella term to describe the work undertaken. It is clear that there is a family of closely related opportunity theories, which ask a distinctive set of questions (about crime events), tend to use a distinctive set of methods (emphasizing action research), look to different disciplines for their inspiration (notably engineering and the physical sciences), and use rather different criteria to distinguish better from worse work (prioritizing practical utility in reducing crime harms) compared with those of more traditional criminology. Whether this adds up to a new discipline or a new paradigm within criminology is rather moot. In practice, most scholars undertaking work within the opportunity framework publish their work in conventional criminology journals. Moreover, Frank Cullen's Sutherland address of the American Society of Criminology argues that opportunity theories are progressively coming into the mainstream of contemporary criminology (Cullen, 2011). It remains to be seen whether there is a rapprochement between traditional criminology and opportunity theories, or whether they go separate ways.

This chapter looks at the interface between opportunity approaches to crime and the more traditional perspectives that focus on what produces offenders. We begin with the proposition that opportunities cause crime. We then describe one of the most influential crime opportunity theories, namely the routine activities approach, as well as several allied theories of the same orientation. Next we turn to juvenile crime, which is the focus of this handbook, and explore how opportunity approaches make sense of juvenile involvement both in “terrestrial” and “virtual” crimes. We finish with ideas for future research.

### **On the Causal Role of Opportunities**

Criminology has traditionally focused on why people become criminal. Why are certain individuals or groups disposed to become involved in crime whilst others are not so disposed? What underlying psychological, biological or social factors are at work, and in what combination? In contrast, this chapter focuses on criminological approaches that have flourished only since the mid-1970s. These largely take dispositions to commit crime for granted. They are concerned instead with the immediate situations in which criminal dispositions, from wherever they may derive, translate into criminal actions: what social and environmental conditions are conducive to the commission of crime and what makes people liable to commit crime in those conditions? The omnibus term used here to encompass this form of criminology is “situational”, to emphasize those theories that use crime events as the unit of analysis, and which pay greater attention to the immediate situation in provoking or enabling the commission of specific crimes.<sup>1</sup>

That a situational perspective on crime causation did not surface until the 1970s should perhaps come as little surprise – it is not how we typically think of behavior. For some 50 years psychologists have known of the common tendency to attribute the behavior of others to dispositional factors and underplay the importance of situational causes. The so-called Fundamental Attribution Error (Ross & Nisbett, 1991) is a powerful and prevalent cognitive bias, and one that is frequently observed in lay and scholarly theories of crime causation. The term error should not be interpreted as meaning incorrect. In a criminological context, offender disposition and the factors underlying it undoubtedly *do* contribute to a fuller understanding of criminal behaviour. What the Fundamental Attribution Error emphasizes is the natural, everyday facility we have for coming up with dispositional explanations of criminal behaviour as against explanations that focus on situational determinants, a pattern that characterizes a large proportion of criminological theories.

A focus on the situational causes of behavior holds important implications for reducing undesirable behavior. The applied focus of traditional criminology lies in reducing criminal disposition. This is either in advance of criminal conduct, by identifying those liable to commit crime and intervening in ways that lessen their criminality, or after the event in the form of rehabilitation programs designed to alter offender motivations. The applied focus of situational criminology lies in

identifying situations where crimes are commonplace and figuring out ways to change them so that crime is reduced.

Offenses need offenders, of course! And proponents of situational criminology deal with them and their dispositions to offend in varying ways. One is to take the position that offender disposition is simply a different topic for others to investigate. This was particularly prominent among the first wave of opportunity theories as they attempted to distinguish themselves from prevailing theories, and in doing so get a foothold in theoretical criminology. Another way is simply to note that dispositions vary and to recognize that this will affect openness to temptation or provocation on the one hand, and deterrence or dissuasion on the other. A third is to treat disposition as a consequence of the immediate situation, through feedback mechanisms in which those drawn into crime by the immediate situation have their dispositions reinforced when they are rewarded by their criminal acts. As the title of one paper advancing this line put it, "Opportunity makes the thief" (Felson & Clarke, 1998). This reflects broadly behaviorist thinking, where the consequences of past behavior shape future behavior. A fourth position is that crime is perfectly normal (much of what counts as predatory crime in human society is rife in nature), so a better question than "What makes people criminals?" is, "What prevents crimes from being committed?", and the answer to this question falls within the remit of situational criminology. A fifth is to try to understand in some detail the socio-psychological ways in which individuals interact with situations, generating patterns of crimes and patterns of criminal involvement. A sixth is to take some simplified model of the human being (normally a more or less rational, utility-maximizing decision-maker), and to work through the way situational contingencies will inform the choices made about crime commission.

Debate ensues as to the appropriate model of the offender in situational criminology (see Ekblom, 2007). Suffice to say that the above ways of construing the offender are not necessarily inconsistent with one another, and the same situational criminologist may switch from one to the other depending on the issue being discussed. In this chapter, we are satisfied to note the diverse ways in which the offender has been conceived, and to pitch our discussion at a level where the offender is treated simply as someone who may commit crime and whose criminality is strongly affected by the situations they encounter.

Given the focus on crime events rather than offender disposition, what can opportunity theories tell us specifically about subgroups that are especially prone to involvement in crime or vulnerability to victimization? Most particularly, given this volume's focus, how can opportunity theories help explain juvenile delinquency? We begin by outlining the main opportunity theories of crime before moving on to their application specifically to juvenile delinquency.

### Routine activities

In a classic paper in 1979, Cohen and Felson devised *routine activities theory* to help explain the rise in crime rates in the US after the Second World War, notwithstanding improving social conditions, which most sociological theories at the time

expected to result in reductions in crime. Their starting point is deceptively simple. They ask what is crucial for a direct contact predatory crime to occur. Their answer is that a “likely offender” must encounter a “suitable target” in the absence of a “capable guardian”. In the absence of any one of these conditions – likely offender, suitable target, or capable guardian – a crime will not occur. This looks like a tautology: crime is by definition an event when likely offenders meet suitable targets and there is no one to intervene. As a tautology, on its own it would add nothing. However, looked at dynamically, changes in the supply, distribution, and movement of these three essential ingredients can help explain changes in both the rates and patterns of predatory crime. The substantive contribution of routine activities lies in accounts of the sources of supply, distribution, and movement of these ingredients and of changes in them over time.

The term “routine activities” refers to the rather prosaic features of everyday life that are emphasized as key influences on crime patterns. For example, post-war increases in participation in the paid labour market for working age women meant that more homes were left “unguarded” during the day, comprising an increased supply of burglary targets. Increasing affluence, improved transport (including cars and motorcycles), and reduced involvement in domestic chores meant that more young men went further afield as likely offenders. The proliferation of portable, small, anonymous, and high-value goods, such as handheld cameras, transistor radios, mobile phones, and laptop computers increased the supply of suitable targets for theft. Developments that are otherwise welcome can, thus, bring an unintended crime harvest by fostering increases in the supply of suitable targets, and/or decreases in the supply of capable guardians, and/or growth in the availability and mobility of likely offenders. What is novel about the routine activity approach is that it explains crime patterns and changes in them without recourse to factors affecting levels of disposition to commit crime, a focus which is the stock in trade of traditional criminology.

There have been developments in routine activities since 1979, both theoretically and when applied in the service of crime prevention. In terms of routine activity theory, for example, absence of “intimate handlers” has been added to the conditions needed for crime to occur (Felson, 1986). Whilst the capable guardian serves as an intermediary protecting the potential target, the intimate handler serves as an intermediary holding back the likely offender. To take a homely example, where predation may be at issue, a parent may act as an intimate handler, holding back an aggressive child who might be disposed to hit his sibling, while simultaneously acting as a capable guardian protecting the child who might be hit by his brother. Here, the same person plays both the intimate handler and capable guardian roles. This is not always the case. Teachers, parents and girl/boyfriends are archetypal intimate handlers. Police officers, park wardens and security staff are archetypal guardians, although citizens can also provide guardianship for one another.

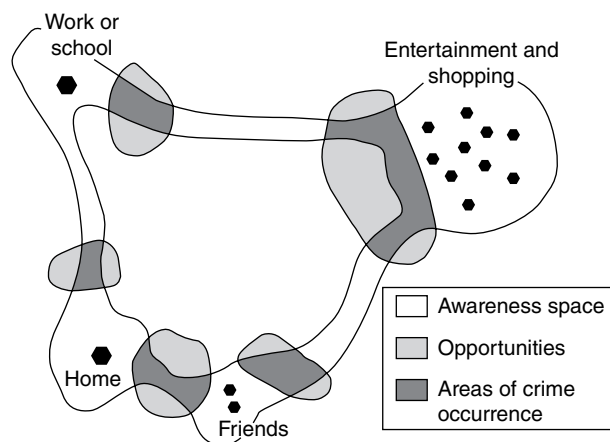
The routine activities approach is also commonly used to better understand and respond to specific crime problems. This is often achieved through the use of John Eck’s (2003) crime triangle, which usefully organizes the elements of routine activity

theory to draw attention to those components of a presenting problem that warrant attention and might be modified so as to reduce the probability of crime occurring. It comprises two triangles, one inside the other. Each triangle has a different meaning. The inner triangle is a direct translation of the routine activity approach and signals what needs to co-occur for a crime to happen: one side indicates that a likely offender must be present with no-one there to control him or her, another that there must be a suitable victim or target with no-one to protect them, and the third that the place must be bereft of anyone with the responsibility and capacity to provide for the safety of those who are there. The outer triangle refers to those whose addition to the situation would reduce the likelihood that an offense will take place: either a handler to hold back the likely offender, or a guardian to protect the victim, or a place manager to provide security to those in an otherwise risky location (Tillyer & Eck, 2011).

Testing routine activity theory empirically poses some problems. The starting point appears almost vacuous, albeit that prior to Cohen and Felson no-one had stated what subsequently seems self-evident. There are also several ways in which concepts such as guardianship and exposure to likely offenders can be construed and measured. Focusing on the former, Reynald (2009) described how many standard measures of guardianship, such as the proportion of owner-occupied households in a given area, are imprecise and fail to determine whether homeowners are, say, *available* and *empowered* to act as guardians. Miethe and Meier (1994) similarly pointed out that guardianship can refer both to physical guardianship (such as household locks and bolts) and social guardianship (such as the togetherness of a community). Lemieux and Felson (2012) provided a related discussion on the challenges associated with accurately measuring exposure to crime risks. Notwithstanding issues of measurement and operationalization, the routine activity approach has furnished the basis for a fruitful research program where specific changes in the supply, distribution and movement of likely offenders, suitable targets, capable guardians and intimate handlers have been proposed as explanations for changes in particular crime patterns, which are open to empirical test. For example, reducing the suitability of cars as targets for crime by making them more difficult to steal has been found to produce substantial reductions in car theft (Farrell, Tseloni, & Tilley 2011). More recently, empirical assessments of the routine activities approach have been extended to the use of agent-based computer simulations to determine how crime patterns vary according to manipulation of offenders, targets and guardians (Birks, Townsley, & Stewart, 2012).

### Crime pattern theory

Crime pattern theory has much in common with routine activities theory. It too emphasizes the importance of everyday life in shaping crime patterns, in particular spatial ones. It provides an explanation for how Cohen and Felson's requisite



**Figure 21.1** Crime pattern theory

elements of crime – offenders, targets and guardians – converge in time and space. According to crime pattern theory, crimes occur where there are opportunities within the offender’s “awareness space” (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981, 1984, 2008), and the offender’s awareness space is a function of their routine activities. Offenders’ routine activities are shaped in the same way as those of non-offenders: by the places they habitually visit and the routes between them, as illustrated in Figure 21.1. Our home, place(s) of work (or education) and where we spend our leisure time comprise the “nodes” between which we travel on a regular basis. We become familiar with the areas surrounding these nodes and the corridors between them. These corridors and the areas that border them comprise our awareness spaces. Within them potential offenders will know of available crime opportunities and be more comfortable with the known risks they face from committing crimes there. Geographical crime concentrations are therefore found in target-rich locations that are familiar to prospective offender populations, but where they expect the risks to themselves to be relatively low. These areas often comprise “edges” between well-protected areas where targets can be expected, but where the perceived chances of recognition and the detection of criminal activity are low.

### Lifestyle theory

Lifestyle theory was proposed around the same time as the routine activity approach (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofolo, 1978). It bears some resemblance to routine activity theory in that it emphasizes the association between vulnerability to victimization and patterns of everyday life (lifestyles that put some at high risk of encountering offenders). Many studies treat these approaches as one and the same, adopting what is commonly referred to as the lifestyle/routine activities perspective. Though

widely practiced, the two approaches are subtly different. The difference lies in their emphasis. As Allen and Felson (2014) put it:

[R]outine activity ideas emphasize the criminogenic effects of everyday routines, such as work, school and family life. In contrast, lifestyle theory gives more attention to personal lifestyle choices in leisure life. The two theories are not however completely distinct, since the former includes lifestyles and the latter includes work.

### Situational crime prevention

The above theories share a common conviction – that crime is caused by more than the presence of a criminally disposed individual: necessary conditions are required for criminal disposition to translate into crime commission. It follows that removing or reducing criminogenic conditions can reduce crime, without the need to modify deviant motivations. This is the rationale for situational crime prevention. It comprises a menu of techniques (shown in Table 21.1) to reduce crimes by focusing on the near causes that permit or stimulate them. The underlying thinking emerges from the headings used to list different techniques, which work in different ways. Three of the techniques assume some (albeit “bounded”) rational choice in the sense that they conceive of offenders as situated choice makers whose decisions are affected by the balance of expected effort, risks, and rewards (Clarke, 1997; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). This means that, other things being equal, crime is expected to drop (rise) when effort or risk rise (fall) and/or when reward falls (rises). One of the techniques assumes that prospective offenders are open at the margins to reminders of moral or legal rules relevant to behaviour they might otherwise engage in, such that crime will fall (rise) as the salience of rules proscribing it are reinforced (blunted). The last of the techniques assumes that prospective offenders may be drawn into crime they would otherwise not contemplate by the exigencies of the presenting situation. Hence relevant crimes will fall (rise) as provocations stimulating it are removed from (added to) the immediate situation in which the individual acts.

Situational crime prevention takes crime-commission to be open to the effects of immediate situations rather than being caused only by a set of dispositions that drive individuals to commit crimes whatever conditions they encounter. The image of all offenders as hell-bent on offending whatever the circumstances is rejected in favor of one where almost all are responsive to the presenting risks, efforts, rewards, provocations, and apparent permissibility of crime opportunities that are encountered. The least promising circumstances for situational crime prevention are presumably those where the offender is most emotionally or ideologically committed to the acts contemplated and hence least dissuadable. Yet even here there is convincing evidence that situational contingencies are important. The classic case is suicide, which of course is not a crime in most Western countries but is an unwanted act, and presumably requires a high level of emotional commitment. Even with this, rates have been found to be highly susceptible to changes in the situations furnishing

**Table 21.1** The 25 techniques of situational crime prevention

<i>Increase the effort</i>	<i>Increase the risks</i>	<i>Reduce the rewards</i>	<i>Reduce provocations</i>	<i>Remove the excuses</i>
<p>1. <i>Target harden</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• immobilizers in cars</li> <li>• anti-robbery screens</li> </ul>	<p>6. <i>Extend guardianship</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routine precautions: go out in groups at night</li> <li>• “Cocoon” neighborhood watch</li> </ul>	<p>11. <i>Conceal targets</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gender-neutral phone directories</li> <li>• off-street parking</li> </ul>	<p>16. <i>Reduce frustrations and stress</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• efficient queuing</li> <li>• soothing lighting/music</li> </ul>	<p>21. <i>Set rules</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rental agreements</li> <li>• hotel registration</li> </ul>
<p>2. <i>Control access</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• alley-gating</li> <li>• entry phones</li> </ul>	<p>7. <i>Assist natural surveillance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improved street lighting</li> <li>• support whistleblowers</li> </ul>	<p>12. <i>Remove targets</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• removable car radios</li> <li>• pre-paid public phone cards</li> </ul>	<p>17. <i>Avoid disputes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fixed cab fares</li> <li>• reduce crowding in pubs</li> </ul>	<p>22. <i>Post instructions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No parking”</li> <li>• “Private property”</li> </ul>
<p>3. <i>Screen exits</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tickets needed for exit</li> <li>• electronic merchandise tags</li> </ul>	<p>8. <i>Reduce anonymity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• taxi driver IDs</li> <li>• school uniforms</li> </ul>	<p>13. <i>Identify property</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• property marking</li> <li>• vehicle licensing</li> </ul>	<p>18. <i>Reduce emotional arousal</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• controls on violent porn</li> <li>• prohibit paedophiles working with children</li> </ul>	<p>23. <i>Alert conscience</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• roadside speed display signs</li> <li>• “Shoplifting is stealing”</li> </ul>
<p>4. <i>Deflect offenders</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• street closures</li> <li>• separate bathrooms for women</li> </ul>	<p>9. <i>Utilize place managers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCTV for double-decker buses</li> <li>• Two clerks in liquor stores</li> </ul>	<p>14. <i>Disrupt markets</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• monitor pawn brokers</li> <li>• licensed street vendors</li> </ul>	<p>19. <i>Neutralize peer pressure</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “idiots drink and drive”</li> <li>• “it’s OK to say NO”</li> </ul>	<p>24. <i>Assist compliance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• litterbins</li> <li>• public lavatories</li> </ul>
<p>5. <i>Control tools/weapons</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• toughened beer glasses</li> <li>• disabling stolen cell phones</li> </ul>	<p>10. <i>Strengthen formal surveillance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• security guards</li> <li>• CCTV in town centres</li> </ul>	<p>15. <i>Deny benefits</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ink merchandise tags</li> <li>• graffiti cleaning</li> </ul>	<p>20. <i>Discourage imitation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rapid vandalism repair</li> <li>• V-chips in TVs</li> </ul>	<p>25. <i>Control drugs and alcohol</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• breathalysers in pubs</li> <li>• alcohol-free events</li> </ul>

Source: Tilley, N. (2009). *Crime Prevention*. Cullumpton, Devon: Willan.



opportunities. In particular, the gradual switchover from toxic coal gas to non-toxic natural gas in British households in the 1960s was accompanied by a closely matched drop in overall suicide rates and suicides involving gassing, notwithstanding the many other possible ways of taking one's own life (see Clarke & Mayhew, 1988). Displacement to other suicide methods, a common criticism of situational crime prevention, was minor, as is often observed in formal assessments of crime displacement (Guerette & Bowers, 2009). Likewise, numbers of aircraft hijackings dropped dramatically with security improvements, making it much more difficult for would-be offenders (see Wilkinson, 1986, cited in Clarke, 1997). There is now overwhelming evidence from a variety of settings and for a diverse range of crime types to support the effectiveness of situational crime prevention (see Clarke, 1997; and <http://www.popcenter.org/library/scp/pdf/bibliography.pdf>).

## **Routine Activities, Opportunity and Juvenile Crime**

Because the main focus of opportunity theories has been on crime events rather than on offenders, research in this tradition has paid relatively little attention specifically to juvenile offending, save to note that juvenile males comprise a group of likely offenders whose supply, distribution, and movement are liable to shape crime event patterns. The remainder of this chapter will, however, indicate ways in which juvenile offending has been and might further be understood through opportunity theory. We focus on three areas: the age-crime curve, routine activities and patterns of criminal involvement, and routine activities and cybercrime.

### **The age-crime curve**

The age-crime curve describes one of criminology's best-established patterns. In differing jurisdictions and at different times, the same basic trajectory is found. Prevalence of participation in crime grows rapidly from around eight years of age, peaks in the mid-teens and then falls away, initially quite rapidly and then more gradually, until almost no-one in their 60s and older commits crime. The basic shape of the curve is the same for males and females, although the adolescent peak is much lower for females. Explanations for the age-crime curve abound (see Farrington, 1986). Such is the persistence of this pattern that any decent criminological theory must pass muster with respect to the age-crime curve. What, then, if anything, can opportunity theory contribute to understanding this general pattern or to understanding detailed variations of or changes in it?

An opportunity theory interpretation of the age-crime curve would focus on evolving routine activities as males and females age, and the changes that thereby occur in patterns of target encounter in the absence of either guardians or handlers. As adolescent males grow older they spend less time at home under the influence of the typical counter-crime intimate handling provided by family members, especially

mothers. Spending more time away from home, they become more likely to encounter suitable targets for crime, some of which lack capable guardians. This provides a setting for potential crimes. Whether crimes are actually committed will depend on the presence and orientation of the intimate handlers with whom they are associating. If these are pro-crime (as they are liable to be in some youth gangs), then crime becomes more likely. If they are anti-crime, then crime becomes less likely. As boys grow out of adolescence, many will form intimate bonds with significant others who then become their new (normally anti-crime) intimate handlers. They are also liable to enter paid employment and form new families, which reduces their availability to offend. Hence crime drops as those who had offended during the period in which they associated with crime-promoting handlers become less available for criminal acts and more controlled by their new families of procreation. Although this account has clear affinities with differential association and social control theories, what it may add is a greater emphasis on the changing routine behaviors of individuals as they age, which affects the level and nature of their exposure to influence, temptation and opportunity.

### Routine activities and patterns of criminal involvement

There have been changes in levels of crime and in juvenile criminality, which can also be explained using opportunity theories. The post-war expansion in the supply of suitable targets for theft was matched by a post-war increase in the leisure time available for young people to spend time with one another. More time for adolescents uncontrolled by intimate handlers, combined with an increase in the supply of goods for theft, led to a sustained increase in juvenile crime. For opportunity theories there is no need to invoke some change in the social climate, increasing the disposition of young people to commit crime. Rather, the situation changed to create a growth in opportunity, which makes sense of the crime increase. At a macro-level, social (e.g., less pressure to spend time with the family and therefore more for peer-group socializing), technological (e.g., more labour-saving devices, freeing youths from the need to help so much around the home), economic (e.g., more resources for recreation) and transport (e.g., affordable motorcycles) developments combined to increase the supply of young men who are liable to offend, whilst developments in technology and manufacturing provided a growing supply of suitable targets for crime (e.g., cars, computers, cameras, cell phones). To use Cohen and Felson's terminology, this provides a rich "chemistry" for crime. What is not explained so readily is why some but not other juveniles commit crime, and why some commit many crimes whilst some commit very few. For this a different criminology may be needed, one that is interested in distinctions between offending and non-offending subgroups, between early and late desisters (and non-desisters) from crime, and between prolific and occasional offenders.

Promising approaches relating to inter-group and interpersonal differences in juvenile criminal activity that draw something from opportunity theory are those

that emphasize “turning points” (e.g., Homel, 2005; Laub & Sampson, 2003). Though not always framed in terms of opportunity theory, they can be read in ways that are highly sympathetic to it. That is, where there is some fracture in the routine activities of adolescents, they may be drawn into new ones that can challenge previous criminal or non-criminal behaviours by exposing those affected to fewer or more criminal opportunities. Parental divorce or remarriage, change of school, and change of address can all alter the routine activities of potential offenders and put them in contact with new patterns of opportunity. Looked at another way, this partly explains why juvenile (and adult) recidivism rates are high when offenders are released into the community and social groups with which they are already familiar and initially offended, an emerging literature known as the ecology of recidivism (see Tompson & Chainey, 2013).

In practice, most of the work on turning points and trajectories, and most of that which has examined the everyday lives of young people to try to understand why some but not others commit crime, have looked at mechanisms influencing disposition, rather than opportunity. Laub and Sampson (2003) invoked routine activities theory and in doing so mentioned opportunity: they referred to their finding that “persistent offenders... have rather chaotic and unstructured lives across multiple dimensions (such as living arrangements, work, and family)”, noting that “Routine activities for these men were loaded with opportunities for crime and extensive associations with like-minded offenders... Thus situational variation, especially in lifestyle activities, needs to be taken into account when explaining continuity and change in criminal behaviour over the life course” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 39). When looking at situations, most interest in near causes has focused on disposition rather than opportunity. Laub and Sampson (2003) noted thus the ways in which, for many persistent offenders, their situations made crime “normative”, an expected everyday feature of their lives.

Situational action theory (SAT), as developed by Wikström (2009), comprises a major effort explicitly to build upon routine activities theory, combining it with self-control theory drawn from Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) to produce an integrated account of crime causation that focuses on the interactions between personal and environmental factors. As he puts it: “According to SAT, acts of crime are an outcome of a perception–choice process guided by the interaction between a person’s crime propensity and his or her exposure to criminogenic settings” (Wikström, 2009, p. 254). He adds that: “Acts of crime are regarded as moral action (action guided by what is the right or wrong thing to do in a particular circumstance).” These acts may be more or less “habitual” (automated) or “deliberate” (rational) depending on “familiarity with the setting”. Wikström is primarily interested in *criminal involvement* and explains this through the interaction of *criminal propensity* (a product of capacity for self-control and morality) and exposure to *criminogenic features of the environment* that are encountered in a person’s routine actions, the latter comprising features of the environment that foster criminality. What makes an environment criminogenic is the moral context (what the salient rules are and their enforcement), which will affect whether opportunities, temptations, provocations or frictions are

responded to through criminal acts. Hence where a person whose morals tolerate or encourage crime, and/or who has low self-control, meets a local situation where moral rules condone crime or are unenforced, he or she is liable to respond to criminal opportunities, temptations, provocations, and frictions by offending. Other things being equal, more crime will be committed where there is greater exposure to criminogenic situations. Broader social factors shape rates of exposure to criminogenic situations.

Much of Wikström's work on SAT has focused on juveniles. He has pioneered painstaking, detailed research into the everyday lives of a sample of young people in Peterborough, UK, using space-time budgets to discover where they were and with whom every hour of the day, to try to capture variations in exposure to criminogenic settings (unsupervised in the company of delinquent peers in places with low levels of collective efficacy), and to assess whether this is associated with expected variations in criminal involvement. He also measures crime propensity, as he conceptualizes it, focusing on morality and self-control. He finds broad support for both hypotheses (Wikström & Butterworth, 2006).

Wikström attaches little if any causal importance to the supply of opportunities, notwithstanding his invocation of routine activities theory, which stresses the supply of suitable targets as one of the crucial conditions for crime. Wikström's main interest lies in explaining variations in acquiescence to opportunity and the role played in this by exposure to situations encouraging acquiescence. Informal and formal social control remains important, of course, and these do relate to "intimate handling" promoting or inhibiting crime and to "capable guardianship". Wikström's work has some affinities with situational crime prevention theory, in embracing provocation and absence-of-rule reminders as conditions that encourage or permit latent criminality (propensity) to be released. However, what Wikström's account neglects (or assumes to be causally irrelevant) are the opportunities for acting on released propensities, those features of situations that speak to risk, effort, and reward. Thus, whilst the writings of those interested in opportunity theory have shown rather little interest in understanding the genesis of offender propensity and the conditions under which it might be activated to take advantage of opportunities, this has been Wikström's major focus of attention. Wikström, in turn, in his SAT, has paid rather little attention to the independent causal role of opportunity in generating crime patterns.

Other studies have examined the relationship between the variations in patterns of routine activities of young people and their involvement in criminal activities. Miller (2013), for example, controlling for other factors associated with criminality, found an association between self-reported criminal activities and routine activities amongst a sample of over 3,000 15-year-olds in Edinburgh. What was especially interesting in this study was that particular types of crime were associated with particular routine activities. So going to youth clubs and playing sport was associated with fare evasion and assaults, whilst hanging out with local friends was associated with shop theft and vandalism, and nightlife activities were associated with assault and drug abuse. Involvement in different settings seemed to facilitate involvement

in different crimes. Likewise, this time using police data from 1989 to 2002 in Seattle, Weisburd, Groff, and Morris (2011) found that in any given year, 50% of juvenile crime incidents were concentrated in just 1% of hot spots (street segments), and all juvenile crime fell within 3–5% of street segments, incidents being concentrated in public places where juveniles tend to congregate, such as malls, schools, youth centers, and restaurants.

A new synthesis may focus on the interaction between situationally released disposition (Wikström's propensity\*setting) and situationally provided opportunities and their sources. This would cast situations not as mere stages on which crime occurs, but as settings that may prompt disposition whereby they provoke crime propensity, rather than simply release it. Temptations comprise one form of provocation, where those with no particular propensity to commit crime are drawn into it and where feedback from the outcome of the offense may reinforce propensity. For example, a long line to wait to pay for a train fare where there are no checks on payment leads to non-payment that is then rewarded financially, leading to further fare-dodging. This relationship has been demonstrated experimentally going back as far as Hartshorne and May's classic study (1928) that showed that children could be induced into cheating by changing the situation.

### Routine activities and cybercrime

We mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the routine activity approach was developed in response to the failure of the then prevailing sociological theories to adequately explain the patterns of crime in a changing post-war America. Consideration of the shifts in the supply, distribution and movement of offenders, targets and guardians as a function of everyday movement patterns proved more satisfactory. In doing so, it highlighted that crime is intimately related to social, economic and technological changes – changes that are not classically assumed to be root causes of crime and in many cases are sought-after developments, such as increasingly portable products and greater gender parity in the workplace.

The internet is arguably the most recent significant development with implications for the routine activities of offenders, targets, and guardians. It has altered the way we live, be it through how we make and interact with friends, bank, purchase products or watch television. For many it has become an essential part of their lives. Consistent with opportunity theory, it has also had a profound impact on crime, facilitating new opportunities for “old” crimes such as fraud, theft, and pornography, as well as generating novel “computer-focused crimes” such as hacking and phishing (see Furnell, 2002; Yar, 2005). This is particularly relevant to juveniles, who often are the most voracious internet consumers, particularly in relation to social networking sites.

Several studies have explored whether patterns of cybercrime can be explained from a routine activities perspective, taken here to refer to “computer-mediated activities which are either illegal or considered illicit by certain parties and which

can be conducted through global electronic networks” (Thomas & Loader, 2000, p. 3). These studies typically attempt to adapt conventional measures of the routine activity approach and determine the association with risk of online victimization. For example, using self-report survey data from a sample of 974 college students, Reynolds, Henson, and Fisher (2011) demonstrate that online exposure, greater proximity to motivated offenders, decreased guardianship and elevated target attractiveness, as measured therein, were all positively associated with risk of cyberstalking, consistent with expectation. Similarly, focusing on online harassment of a sample of Kentucky school children, Bossler, Holt, and May (2012) find broad support for the routine activity approach, particularly for their measure of offender proximity. While some researchers have argued that there are sufficient incongruities between terrestrial crime and online crime to suggest that a high-fidelity transplant of the routine activity approach for cybercrimes is unwise (see Yar, 2005), where quantitative studies are available the evidence does suggest that variations in the mix of offenders, targets, and guardians influence the levels and patterns of cybercrimes.

The above studies speak to just one way through which the routine activity approach can be applied to cybercrimes, focusing mainly on offender, target and guardian-related correlates of cyber victimization. A further way concerns the effect of the internet on individuals’ routine activities, and by extension the supply and distribution of offenders, targets, and guardians.<sup>2</sup> There is mounting evidence pointing to a gradual shift away from outdoor activities among juveniles in industrialized countries, attributed in part to increased computer usage. A study comparing the performance of 10-year-old school children in England in 1998 with those from 2008 reported significant decreases in several measures of muscular fitness (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Trembley and colleagues (2010) reported similar findings using nationally representative samples of 6- to 19-year-olds in Canada. Both studies ascribe the observed patterns to, amongst other things, increased “sedentariness”. This is clearly a public health concern, yet it also holds implications for crime: if one assumes a standard level of crime, and if computer and specifically online activities are progressively replacing outdoor activities particularly for young people, a crime opportunity perspective would expect to see an increase in the levels of online crime and reductions in terrestrial crime. This is yet to be sufficiently explored. We think it should be. If true, it also has implications for the measurement of crime. We turn now to issues of method and measurement in relation to juvenile crime, routine activities and opportunity.

### Issues of method, measurement, and future research

Van Dijk (2012) notes that the launch of crime victim surveys coincided with the initial formulations of crime opportunity theories, including routine activities. He goes on to claim that this is more than mere coincidence: the information obtained through victimization surveys affords a broader look at crime’s causes beyond focusing solely on the offender. Detailed questions are asked about crimes

experienced by victims and about the precautions taken to try to reduce risk. The crimes asked about relate to those to which respondents may be vulnerable. Patterns of everyday life affect the types of crimes that may be committed or suffered, and victimization surveys need to be sensitive to variations in vulnerability by place and time to understand variations in opportunity structure.

In relatively undeveloped rural Malawi, for example, theft of livestock is a significant issue that is not relevant in the same way to denizens of Manhattan! Patterns of everyday life are different in Malawi compared with New York. These lead to different likely offender distributions and movements, awareness spaces, and guardianship and intimate handler availability, producing distinct youth and other crime patterns (see Sidebottom, 2013). Likewise, the emergence of the internet has led to cyberspace as a novel location for crime, with novel crime opportunities through new types of risky space, new types of awareness space, new forms of crime, and new challenges for guardianship and handling. Whilst there is growing evidence that fears of displacement from situational crime prevention are largely misplaced (Guerette & Bowers, 2009), the new forms of everyday life create changed conditions that opportunity theory predicts will alter crime event patterns. The changed conditions may lead, as indicated earlier, to reduced opportunities for some forms of crimes by some people against some victims, whilst increasing opportunities for other crimes by other people against other victims. There is a rich agenda for future research here, adapting victimization surveys to reflect changing and varying conditions, the better to grasp what patterns of crime are changing and how these are facilitated by changed opportunity structures reflecting alterations in routine activities.

With regard specifically to youth and crime, Wikström's use of space-time budgets comprises an important innovation to better capture systematic and quantitative details of the everyday activities of young people, to determine who they are with, where they are, and at what times through the day and week (Wikström & Butterworth, 2006). This promises much more precise estimates of juvenile exposure to criminogenic settings. Alongside background data on the young people and data on their criminal activities, this offers an exciting area of future research to test and refine opportunity theories and to better understand interactions between opportunity and individual attributes. Other data sources may also be used more accurately to estimate movement patterns, such as anonymous cell phone data (see Song, Qu, Blumm, & Barabási, 2010).

## Conclusions

"What causes crime" is arguably the most fundamental question in criminology. Different theories look to different sources of causation. Most are concerned with *criminality* and the presumed biological, social, and psychological factors that underpin it. In this chapter we presented a contrasting perspective, which uses *crime events* as the unit of analysis and which emphasizes the causal role of opportunities.

The routine activities approach is one of the most influential crime opportunity theories. It is fiendishly simple in reducing crime to three essential ingredients – offenders, targets, and guardians – but its apparent simplicity belies its impressive explanatory power, providing reliable explanations for macro-level changes in crime over time and micro-level variations in risk of victimization.

In focusing on crime events, researchers in the crime opportunity tradition tend to steer away from analyzing the offending patterns of particular population subgroups, such as juveniles. Yet as we have attempted to show in this chapter, many common youth offending patterns can be recast using an opportunity framework. We hope that in doing so, others will take up where we have left off to produce more fully worked up examples applying opportunity theory in the context of juvenile crime. We also see benefit in research that explores the interactions between opportunity and the individual, crossing the divide between the concerns of traditional criminology with the offender and those with crime event patterns focused on by the opportunity theories discussed in this chapter.

### Notes

- 1 “Environmental” is also a commonly used term.
- 2 We thank Noemie Bouhana for making this point.

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