Crime Prevention: What do the theories tell us?

According to Cohen and Felson (1979), there are three components involved in the commission of a crime. First, there must be a "motivated offender." Second, there must be a "suitable target" against which the criminal motivation must be aimed (for example, homes to break into, items to shoplift, goods to steal). Third, there must be an "absence of capable guardianship," meaning that the motivated offender must meet the suitable target in the absence of anything or anyone that may prevent the crime from transpiring. For Cohen and Felson, illegal activities must be understood as behaviors that depend on, and thrive off, the "routine activities" of the population. In other words, illegal behaviors will prosper if the context that permits the commission of this crime go unguarded. By reducing the opportunities that encourage or facilitate crime, we can conceivably decrease the motivation of the offender to commit crime.

Clearly, the event conceptualization of crime emphasizes the significance of opportunity in understanding where and when crimes occur. Only when people who are ready, willing, and able to offend experience conditions favorable to offending are criminal events likely to evolve. From a policy standpoint, therefore, actions that control the appearance or accessibility of opportunities to engage in crime may help to prevent crime. The important implication of this approach is that we can manage the risks of crime without changing the character of offenders. Because the importance in opportunity reduction is on changing the situations in which crimes occur. Crime prevention through opportunity reduction is sometimes referred to as situational crime prevention (Clarke, 1993).

Situational prevention (opportunity reduction) is based on two important premises. The first is that crimes are most effectively prevented when we are cognizant of their specific characteristics (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1990; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1995). Therefore, the first step in opportunity reduction is methodical crime analysis; Who commits these crimes? When are they committed? Where do they most commonly take place? What do offenders hope to accomplish by committing crimes? How might certain attributes of the physical environment contribute to these incidents? Are there natural forces of guardianship that might be activated in the situations in which crimes typically occur? The answers to these questions assist crime prevention planners design particular solutions to particular crime problems.

The second key premise is associated to the character of the offender. Opportunity reduction approaches reflect the model of the rational offender (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). In other words, offenders' decisions are grounded in their evaluation of the particular costs and benefits attached with a specific course of action. How effortlessly can a crime be perpetrated? Is anyone who might take action to prohibit the crime standing guard? Are there less risky methods of procuring the rewards that the commission of the crime promises? Offenders will pursue answers to such questions and conduct themselves in ways that reflect their best interests. If the opportunities favorable to crime can be made less appealing or less plentiful, numerous types of crimes (particularly those that are largely opportunistic in nature) may arise much less frequently. According to Clarke (1992), situational prevention entails heightening the risks and decreasing the rewards related to crime. As offending situations become more difficult, riskier, and less rewarding, rational offenders will be discouraged from offending.

Opportunity crime reduction is based on the following premises: (1) crimes are most effectively prevented when we are attentive to their particular characteristics; (2) since offender's weigh the costs and benefits of committing crime, opportunity reduction strategies must reflect those decisions by increasing the costs and risk associated with committing a crime. Offending situations must be made to be more difficult, riskier, and less rewarding, rational offenders will be discouraged from offending.
The event conceptualization of crime stresses the importance of opportunity in elucidating where and when crimes occur. Only when people who are ready, willing, and able to offend encounter conditions favorable to offending are criminal events likely to occur. Therefore, actions that control the appearance of accessibility of opportunities to engage in crime may help to prevent much crime. If we cannot change the character of offenders, then it is necessary to modify the situations where crime occurs.

One apparent method in which people increase the complications associated with crime is through target hardening, which refers to those measures that reduce the vulnerability of personal or household property. Entry into a house with locked doors and windows is more problematic than entrance into a house in which such measures have not been taken. Diverse forms of access control, such as locked gates and entry phones, also increase the degree of exertion required to perpetrate certain crimes.

The hazards involved in the commission of crime may be increased by measures that make it more probable (or, at least make it appear more probable) that the offender will be detected and apprehended. An increased level of surveillance by security guards, citizen patrols, and security cameras clearly are designed to serve this purpose. Conceivably, less obvious is the role performed by other types of crime prevention measures, such as locks, architecture, lighting, and other technologies.

Newman (1972) further supports the ideas of opportunity theories in arguing that the most efficient way to decrease crime is to redesign public and private areas in such a way that opportunities for crime are eliminated. The "defensible space" concept suggests that one can "harden" targets by installing locks or improving surveillance, such that a criminal is discouraged from committing the crime, either for fear of getting caught or simply because the target has been made inaccessible.

In a similar vein, Sherman, Gartin, and Beuger (1989) distinguish high-crime areas as "hot spots." These places may be public (bars) or private (households). The solution to decreasing or eliminating these hot spots is to elevate surveillance or to remove them altogether. The notion that crime will be prevented through defensible space or through target hardening endorses the theory that offenders are motivated by opportunity. If we do not target the opportunity component of doing crime, we simplify and facilitate the act of doing crime. The development and objective to implement computerized pawn systems in Regina has been grounded on the tenets of these opportunity (situationally)-based theories. The following discussion outlines the multilevel opportunity reduction envisaged by target-hardening pawn shops, second-hand stores, and other business based on converting goods into cash.


The issues of property crime, organized crime, fraud, and shoplifting have become major issues at all levels of the criminal justice system, including the Regina Police Service. The 1996/1997 Criminal Justice Statistics indicate that city of Regina has the highest rate of property crime in Canada. Alarming national statistics and outrageous local crime problems signal a need to develop more innovative and effective crime prevention strategies.

Two particular locations inextricably interwoven in many opportunistic crimes (break and enters, fraud, insurance fraud, shoplifting, armed robbery) are pawn shops and second hand stores. Police, insurance companies, and other retail businesses have long been aware of the freedom these establishments have in thriving off and supporting crime. These businesses have been allowed to operate with little or no accountability and token compliance for the last 20 years. In Ontario the Pawnbrokers Act has not been changed since the early 1960s, when it was authored by pawnbrokers themselves. These establishments have and continue to be used directly and indirectly as a vehicle to convert property obtained illegally into cash. Pawn shops and similar businesses have been described as a "criminal's ATM machine."

What will electronic pawn systems address? "Any entity in the business community which by definition buys, sells or converts property for cash or reward. This will currently include but is not limited to Pawnbrokers, Second Hand Dealers, Rental Agencies, Precious Metal Dealers, and Auctioneers." An
An electronic computer program provides an alternative to an already antiquated system of collecting personal information regarding pawners and descriptions of items being pawned. Current bookkeeping systems employed by pawn shops and second hand stores make monitoring and tracking stolen goods virtually impossible. Monitoring pawn shops has become so labor intensive and investigations passive that it has created an economic opportunity for both owners of these businesses and criminals who conduct business with them. As a result, many pawnshops and second hand stores financed via dealing in stolen property are content with existing methods of bookkeeping. Automated pawn systems at these sites would provide a secure repository of data so that police can more effectively monitor and track property and criminals.

The implementation of electronic pawn systems will target the opportunity element of doing crime and at the same time target harden the victim. These automated pawn systems assist in monitoring the activities of these establishments and their clientele. The advantages of employing an automated pawn system are numerous. Not only do these systems work to prevent illegal conversion of stolen goods into cash, they can also reduce a number of other crimes and social problems.

The principles of CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) are applied to all Regina Police Service (RPS) crime prevention tools and strategies, including the concept of a computerized pawn system. The fundamental goal of CPTED is to prevent crime through modifying physical environments that influence behavior -- routine users view the area as protected and would-be criminals perceive it as a highly risky place to commit crime. While physical space or environment can be a parking lot, school ground, back yard, or alley, it can also include other locations where activities occur such as pawn shops, second-hand stores, and other businesses that deal in the exchange of goods for cash. The application of CPTED principles to RPS crime prevention initiatives are further grounded in the assumptions advanced by opportunity theories -- that in order for a crime to occur, there must be a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the lack of a capable guardian.

The idea of M.O.R.A. (Multi-level Opportunity Reduction Approach) originated with the application of CPTED principles to the conceptualization and development of a computerized pawn system and database. Unlike crime prevention strategies previously developed and implemented by our police service, the potential benefits of this system were far from linear. By target hardening these businesses, we could have a multi-level impact on decreasing other crimes and social problems. A computerized pawn system minimizes both the opportunities to commit crime beyond one specific location (personal residences, stores, other businesses) and one form of crime (break and enter, shoplifting, insurance fraud).

The Multi-level Opportunity Reduction Approach to crime is achieved by creating a capable guardian at the site where stolen goods are converted into cash or other rewards. This begs the question: what is the difference between CPTED principles applied to a personal residence, commercial business, or other physical locations, and these same principles applied to pawn shops, second-hand stores, and other similar businesses? The difference is this -- the rational offender will assess the risks of detection associated with committing a crime at a certain location. They will simply move to another location until they find one that is less risky. However, if you employ a capable guardian at pawnshops and second hand stores you reduce the opportunity to perform this illegal transaction but at the same time reduce the opportunity to commit other crimes that occur prior, during, and after this transaction. By target hardening this location, it is more difficult for people to acquire money illegally. It makes pawning less inviting for persons who use these businesses to quickly dispose of illegally obtained property into cash. An automated pawn system is an equal opportunity crime prevention strategy. This system does not discriminate against one specific criminal, but all persons who use pawn shops to support their crimes.

Another level where an opportunity reduction will be experienced is in terms of crimes committed at the time of an illegal pawn transaction. This includes illegal fencing where a financial relationship exists between the pawn shop owner and the person pawning. Illegal fencing is often connected to organized crime. In many cases, associates acting on behalf of street gangs or other organized crime groups steal goods to procure money for their gang. In other words, pawn shops can support the activities of organized crime. Other crimes that can be reduced include illegal pawning (converting stolen goods into cash) and illegitimate consumers; (purchase goods in order to launder cash).
Making pawn shops and second-hand stores defensible spaces can have a ripple effect. The benefits of these systems are extremely timely when most police agencies are concerned about organized crime and how many pawn transactions can be traced or connected to organized crime activity. It would not be difficult to suggest that an electronic pawn system can be a useful tool in the battle against organized crime.

Another level where an opportunity reduction can be experienced is in terms of the crimes that are committed after an illegal pawn transactions. These crimes may include the purchase of drugs, illegal gaming, prostitution, etc. One can take this a step further and suggest that the electronic pawn system can also decrease the likelihood of other secondary crimes such as domestic violence, assaults, auto thefts, etc. Quite frequently, many secondary crimes are precipitated by drugs and alcohol that are purchased with money attained from illegal pawn transactions. In a 1996-1997 RPS Assault Study it was concluded that of the approximately 3,000 reported incidents or assault, over 85% involved alcohol and drugs.

The advantages of a computerized pawn system and database are not reducible to preventing persons from converting stolen goods into cash, but can have a much larger social impact. As it becomes more difficult to perform illegal pawn transactions, the integrity of these businesses increases, drawing legitimate clients and consumers. When these businesses operate completely legitimately the actual physical environments and social conditions of the neighborhoods where these businesses operate begin to change and improve. As we mend one broken window at a time, people in these communities begin to take pride in their neighborhoods. Members of these communities begin taking responsibility for protecting their neighborhoods and support the application of other crime prevention strategies. In the long term these communities will begin to see crime decrease and fear of crime lessen. Moreover, electronic pawn systems establish inhibitors and relatively immediate detection of illegal pawning. This may decrease the rates of first time offenders and first time juvenile offenders. The likelihood of being caught the first time will influence some offenders to think twice about committing crime.

Lastly, an automated pawn system provides an invaluable database of information that is both useful to investigators and crime analysts. The pawn database is filled with generally up-to-date information regarding individuals that have pawned items and descriptions of pawned items. Since every pawn transaction is supposed to be authorized with a couple of pieces of personal identification, pawners usually give out current addresses, and phone numbers. This type of information is extremely useful in investigating various types of crimes beyond property offenses.

**M.0.R.A -- Issues and Concerns**

Unquestionably, opportunity reduction has proved to be an effective in a variety of specific settings (Clarke, 1993, 1994). However, this approach is not without its critics. Some have suggested that removing the opportunity is more likely to displace crime than to prevent it (Gabor, 1990b). In other words if we make it difficult for a motivated offender to offend in one situation, he or she might simply find another situation more conducive to offending. That may be particularly true in for property crimes where offenders will keep looking for a site that is less risky to commit their crime. However, if we make it virtually impossible for criminals to fence stolen goods, there is little point to commit these opportunistic crimes in the first instance. Furthermore, Brantingham and Brantingham (1990) argue that many forms of opportunity reduction do in fact prevent crimes rather than just displace them.

One of the major weaknesses of opportunity theories is that they tend to overlook the impact of crime on victims. However, with the implementation of automated pawn systems and possible links to other data bases such as CPIC (Canadian Police Information Centre which enters all stolen goods into this database), victims have a greater chance of recovering their stolen goods. Police will now have the possibility of interfacing these two databases, allowing for greater capability to locate stolen items and return them to their owners. The implementation of this system can restart property identification programs and allow the general public an opportunity to engage in activities that assist in their own crime prevention. Markings that identify individual ownership of property can discourage the conspicuous use of stolen merchandise and seriously hurt the chances for resale. There is nothing to say that an automated pawn system cannot function in conjunction with other CPTED applications. Instead, it is crucial that crime prevention strategies be designed to be mutually reinforcing. If
homeowners, businesses, police, security companies do their part in crime prevention, the outcome of reducing crime can only be positive.

Another criticism made of this approach is that by merely removing the opportunity does not necessarily presuppose a reduction in the desire to commit crime -- it may simply displace it to some other location. That, in fact, can happen. However, if the application of an automated pawn system is pursued as a national strategy, habitual pawners and other criminals might either find other illegitimate ways of making money, or look for more legitimate means to make money. Either way, we do make the act of doing crime more difficult and possibly have an impact on decreasing crime in the long term.

While a computerized system can have a multi-level impact on reducing some crimes, it cannot reduce all crimes. Such systems must work in conjunction with other crime prevention strategies that focus on other factors that motivate or facilitate crime. Electronic pawn systems work well with other community-based policing initiatives. According to a 1996 report submitted to the United States Congress: Crime Prevention: What Works. What Doesn't What's Promising, any reduction in crime must be grounded in a comprehensive crime prevention program. As crime prevention strategies are employed to correct the problems encountered in communities, police and other institutions have a greater chance of motivating residents to take ownership of their communities. Ultimately, as communities improve, fear of crime lessens and crime itself decreases.

According to this report, the community context of crime prevention requires a critical mass of institutional support for informally deterring criminal behavior. Without the critical mass, neither families, nor schools, labor markets, nor places, nor police can succeed in preventing crime. Each or these institutions may be capable of achieving minimal success on their own.

Not all communities, however, share universal features. From small to large neighborhoods, from suburban developments to urban public housing, both the physical and social characteristics of communities vary widely. So too, does the effectiveness in preventing crime through informal social controls. Some communities average more than two incomes per family, others average none. Some communities have more churches than bars; others have more drug houses than grocery stores. Some have more renters than homeowners. In some communities, residents know each other by name and face, while in other communities this would be extremely uncommon. Variances in communities are matched with differences in crime. Statistically, it has been determined that a large proportion of crime in society occurs in a few areas. In other words, crime is not evenly distributed throughout all Canadian communities. To a large extent, crime manifests itself in areas that experience tremendous social deprivation. These communities experience a number of "criminogenic conditions" such as poor housing, broken families, illegitimate births and low levels of education (Nettler, 1984).

While both American and Canadian communities seem to offer adequate levels of institutional support for crime prevention, most crime problems are geographically concentrated in a small number of communities that do not. As a result the ability to lower national rates of crime requires programs involving several institutions working together. There has to be a mobilization of all institutional crime prevention strategies, initiatives, and programs working as part of an integrated whole. If the application of a comprehensive crime prevention strategy works to reduce and prevent crime in a community characterized by crime, it will likely prove successful at preventing crime anywhere.

It has been theoretically implied that until the "root causes" of crime are cured, no crime prevention program can work. However, there is no scientific basis for that conclusion -- and substantial evidence against it (Sherman. 1996). Sherman, a leading American criminologist, suggests that inundating communities lacking in "informal social controls" (family, religion, schools, etc.) with crime prevention programs may positively inspire community members to be more responsible and adhere to the law. Crime prevention programs give communities a reason to conform when other informal social controls are lacking. Since the presence of strong family and community are crucial to conformity, in their absence other bonds are needed to discourage persons from acting out criminally. The police in cooperation with other social agencies, businesses, and community groups can assist in filling this void.
Unlike crime prevention programs that are locally specific, comprehensive crime prevention programs should address a wider variety of community factors simultaneously. Communities that lack informal social controls would be supported and protected by the presence of other concerned institutions and programs. The role of the police would be instrumental in filling this void. The implementation of automated pawn systems would be just one crime prevention strategy among many working together to help decrease crime and reduce public fear of crime.

References


