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Cohen, Lawrence E., and Marcus K. Felson: Routine Activity Theory

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Routine activity theory—also sometimes referred to as lifestyle theory—has proven to be one of the more useful theories for understanding criminal victimization and offending patterns in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This theoretical explanation, which has primarily focused on providing information regarding who is more or less likely to be a crime victim, was originally formulated by Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus K. Felson with the 1979 publication of their seminal article “Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach.”

In this research, Cohen and Felson examined temporal changes in U.S. crime rates from 1947 to 1974. They highlighted the dramatic increase in predatory crime over that time period, especially that during the decade of the 1960s. At the time, most scholars attributed the rise in crime to an increase in the number of those willing to break the law—a group that Cohen and Felson called “motivated offenders.” Taking an alternative approach, they suggested that beyond the supply of motivated offenders, crime could have escalated due to profound changes in the availability of criminal opportunity. For Cohen and Felson, opportunity itself comprises two components: the availability of an attractive target (e.g., something to steal, a person to rob) and the lack of guardianship over the target (e.g., a burglar alarm, a burly companion). Crime rates thus can increase not only if society produces more motivated offenders but also if it produces more attractive targets and less guardianship. In short, Cohen and Felson posited that, between 1960 and 1970, Americans and their households became more suitable and less capably guarded targets. They further suggested that it was the changing routine, daily activities of U.S. residents that created increased opportunity in the form of increased target suitability and diminished guardianship. Particularly opportunistic activities, according to Cohen and Felson (1979), were non-household activities.

Major shifts in the labor force participation of women occurring between 1960 and 1970 were thought to underlie much of the increase in levels of non-household activities. Women's increased participation in the labor force had substantial implications for the public exposure of women and the lack of guardianship provided to households during the daytime. For instance, Cohen and Felson presented data showing that, in 1960, about 30 percent of households were unoccupied by someone 14 years or older

between the hours of [p. 187 ↓] 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. By 1971, that figure exceeded 40 percent. As a result, more and more households lacked capable guardianship, thus providing increased opportunity for a crime such as burglary. At the same time, women were spending more time outside the house, commuting to and from work, resulting in increased exposure to “street” predatory crime, including robbery.

Beyond work-related activities, Cohen and Felson theorized that routine leisure activities were also changing in the United States between 1960 and 1970 among both men and women. With an increasing percentage of U.S. households consisting of two working adults, there was more disposable income to be spent on leisure pursuits outside the home and on the purchase of household durable goods. This proliferation of public leisure activities and household items (especially valuable but lightweight items) also increased opportunities for crime. From the routine activity theoretical perspective provided by Cohen and Felson, these leisure and consumption patterns simply made it more likely that motivated offenders would encounter suitable targets in time/place contexts that lacked adequate guardianship.

Cohen and Felson tested their theory by examining whether a “household activity ratio” was related to the changing rates of predatory crime in the United States. They measured the household activity ratio as the proportion of U.S. households that were either “non–husband-wife” households or households that could be classified as “married, husband-present, with a female labor-force participant”(Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 600). They hypothesized that increases in such households would be associated with increases in U.S. predatory crime rates under the assumption that such household structures served to approximate routine activities that would increase exposure to motivated offenders, increase target suitability, and decrease guardianship. They found strong support for this hypothesis.

Routine Activities and Individual Victimization

Following Cohen and Felson's landmark study, later work extended routine activity theory's application beyond changing national rates of crime. Subsequent work often

applied the theory to variation in individual risk of victimization instead. Today, routine activity theory stands as one of the most influential and policy-relevant theories in the field of criminology. The focus of this theory is on explaining the dynamics of criminal events, patterns in criminal victimization, and predictions of victimization risks/likelihood.

Again, at the core of routine activity theory is the contention that there are three necessary locational elements that must be present for crime to occur: presence of potential offenders (individuals seeking/able/willing to commit offenses), presence of suitable targets (individuals or property that is vulnerable or available), and an absence of capable and willing guardians (a lack of protection/supervision or individuals/devices able to ward off an offender). With the assumption that these three elements are present in a situation, the theory is based on two central propositions: First, lifestyles or routine activities create criminal opportunity structures by increasing the frequency and intensity of contacts between potential offenders and suitable targets. Second, potential offenders likely assess the perceived value of a target as well as whether there are any available forms of guardianship (or lack thereof) present when considering when, where, and upon whom to commit their crimes. Routine activity theory differs from most other criminological theories in that it is not primarily interested in identifying or specifying reasons for crime commission but instead shifts focus on the differing risks for victimization that individuals and locations possess.

Additionally, routine activity theory not only provides insights regarding when, where, and upon whom criminal events are more likely to be perpetrated but also explains how various aspects of individuals' lifestyles (e.g., their routine activities) are correlated with these differential patterns of victimization. It is in this respect that the theory derives its name; it is centrally interested in identifying that typical behaviors of persons and that characteristics of situations are associated with increased and decreased likelihood of criminal victimization.

The theory has implications for advancing crime prevention efforts. Theoretically, even though persons may be willing to commit crime given sufficient opportunities, if those opportunities never arise, the crimes will not occur. Opportunities may not arise for multiple reasons. It may be that potential offenders cannot find persons sufficiently vulnerable, or possess property [p. 188 ↓] sufficiently valuable, to merit interest. And, even if valuable or vulnerable targets are present, it may happen that these persons or

items are accompanied by guardians that are capable and willing to stop the impending crime from happening. As such, both structural aspects of specific environmental contexts (where one lives and works, and the conditions and structures that are present in those locations that may increase the number of potential offenders and/or the types of guardianship that is available in the general area) and individual choices (where one goes, what one does, with whom one associates, and any self-protective measures one takes to increase or decrease one's vulnerability/suitability as a target) are important for understanding where, when, and to whom criminal events happen (Miethe & Meier, 1990; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1997).

Further, by identifying characteristics of persons, their behaviors and the settings in which these activities take place, routine activity theory research can be used not only to expand our understanding of the interactions and locations of criminal events but also to develop and implement crime prevention programs. Once the actions, places, and types of people who are more likely to be victimized are known, it may be possible (1) to develop concrete strategies to enhance the number and quality of capable guardians in particular types of settings; (2) to reduce the suitability of targets that are present; or (3) to educate people about actions and places that are more dangerous for them and why, so that they may make smarter decisions about their routine activities. Further, routine activity theory can suggest ways in which communities and individuals can prevent crime through the reduction of criminal opportunities, and how they can utilize law enforcement the most efficiently to increase the guardianship present. Additionally, routine activity theory can guide the continued social development of communities in order to provide greater crime prevention.

Lifestyle Factors that Correlate with Victimization

There are five important components of lifestyle that have been identified by research as contributing to opportunities for, and likelihood of, criminal victimization. While each of these categories of factors has important influences on crime, it is the combination of these of factors, as indications of "lifestyle," that may best explain criminal victimization; only rarely does one type of factor provide a robust explanation for criminal events. The

factors that are important in routine activity theory explanations of criminal victimization and events are demographics, social activities, alcohol and drug use, economic status, and structural aspects of communities.

Demographics

The earliest focus, and today the best established type of risk factor for criminal victimization, concerns demographic aspects of individuals. Research has consistently shown that victimization rates are highest for men, adolescents and young adults, African Americans, those who have never been married, and persons who live in central cities.

Within a routine activity theory approach to explaining crime, demographic factors are not taken on their own but instead are interpreted to be indicators (or proxy measures) of lifestyle activities. For example, research usually finds that married individuals are less likely to be victimized than single people. The explanation for this is that single persons usually live lifestyles that take them out of the home, especially at night, to places that attract potential offenders, such as bars or nightclubs. The links between demographic factors and their presumed lifestyle factors are theorized, not proven, and as such should be viewed with some degree of skepticism. Presuming what people do and where they do these things based on demographic characteristics provides, at best, weak links to policy and practice. While knowing the personal characteristics of criminal victims is useful, it may not be as useful as understanding their actual lifestyle activities, particularly if one considers possible crime prevention efforts. Therefore, demographic variables should be included in research but should not be relied on exclusively.

Social Activities

Whereas demographics are used by researchers as indirect/proxy measures of activities, it is also possible to use variables in research that directly measure what social activities people engage in, as well as when, where, with whom, and in what [p. 189 ↓] types of contexts/settings these activities occur. Uses of these types of measures have been shown to be frequently the most salient predictors of criminal

victimization, and as such social activities measures are significant influences on victimization risks. Maintaining the focus on the routines of people's lives, research suggests that some relatively common and mundane social aspects of life (such as going to shopping malls, eating out frequently, participating in school-related clubs and organizations, and going to a gym or playing team sports) are related to some types of criminal victimization. Summarizing some of the early findings in this line of investigations using routine activity theory, Robert Sampson claimed that "an active lifestyle thus appears to influence victimization risk by increasing exposure to potential offenders in a context where guardianship is low" (1987, p. 331). The types of social activities in which an individual engages, and where and with whom they do these actions, are clearly related to victimization risks.

Alcohol and Drug Use

One type of social activity that garners special attention in routine activity theory is the use of alcohol and illicit drugs. This should not be surprising in that alcohol and drug use is perhaps the most well-established correlate of both criminal offending and victimization. Regardless of the specifics of place and time, alcohol and other drugs are strongly related to violence. When the alcohol/drug use is placed in the context of young adults, there is an overwhelmingly strong association between alcohol/drug use and (most often violent) criminality. From the perspective of routine activity theory, this relationship can be explained in several ways.

First, since alcohol is so closely associated with criminal behavior, engaging in activities, or frequenting places where alcohol is present, would increase one's exposure to potential offenders; or, said differently, in places where people are imbibing substances that seem to trigger crime, simply being in that setting is risky. Further, drinking alcohol may reduce individuals' ability to protect themselves and their belongings; in this way, guardianship is reduced and perceived vulnerability of targets is enhanced. Here, it is the effect of alcohol on the nature of the routine of activities that is important, not merely the social act of being around alcohol and drug use. Research has also found that the type of people one is with when in these substance-enriched settings is important (e.g., people who drink alcohol with others who are younger are more likely to be victims of crime than people who drink with older others). Also, the

type of setting in which one imbibes is relevant, in that drinking out in public is more dangerous than drinking at a party at a friend's house.

Economic Status

Although crime affects all segments of society, and no persons or parts of society are immune to crime, it remains that crime is disproportionately found among lower socioeconomic segments of communities. While at first this may seem counterintuitive to routine activity theory (how desirable are poor people and their things to a criminal?), it actually fits very well with the theory. In lower-income neighborhoods and among lower-income persons, there are fewer guardians or instruments of guardianship (burglar alarms, sturdy locks and doors, personal awareness of dangerous situations); this can make potential targets seem more attractive to potential offenders. Also, since potential offenders (for at least some types of offenses) are more prominently found among the lower-income classes, being in the presence of such less-advantaged persons or places (e.g., in the same physical locations) makes one more exposed and therefore more vulnerable.

Further, although employed persons are more likely to be crime victims, this may be due to increased exposure to potential offenders because they must leave the home every weekday. However, unemployed persons are more likely to be victimized than individuals who remain in their homes. Routine activity theory suggests that unemployed persons are more likely to be victimized because they have characteristics (or at least one characteristic) in common with many motivated offenders. Simply stated, both unemployed persons and many motivated offenders lack sufficient activities to occupy their time and also lack a ready pool of financial and materials resources. These facts are likely to lead them to encounter one another throughout the course of each's daily routines of activities.

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Community Structural Variables

In general, once someone leaves the home, his or her risks of being a victim of crime increase. Being out and about—moving in and among a variety of (typically unknown) other persons on a daily basis—exposes an individual to more potential offenders. When leaving the home, individuals typically frequent a number of different types of physical settings (domains) and will interact with a wide range of others and social events. For example, the research has shown that community aspects, such as the physical appearance of a neighborhood or the ways that neighbors interact, either civilly or not, have an effect on property crime and some forms of violent crimes. Also, neighborhoods with businesses that attract potential offenders have higher rates of crime and criminal offenders. For example, the presence of bars/taverns in a community has been related to increased rates of crimes—as are high schools, fast food restaurants, public parks, and liquor stores. These are places where potential offenders may be more likely to gather and where guardianship may be low (or absent). Also, alcohol is often present in and around many of these types of settings (at least at some points in time), and the frequent coming and going of people may also increase the chances of crime happening (as a means of reducing consistent observation of those present, or guardianship).

In routine activity theory, it is not only the objective presence and quality of various structures in a community that are important, but also individuals' perceptions of community safety and quality of life. When residents of a particular neighborhood have higher levels of fear of crime and/or perceive that crime rates are high, there is often a corresponding objectively measured high rate of crime. Whether this is a self-fulfilling prophecy has yet to be adequately assessed, however.

Unique Research Challenges with Routine Activity Theory

In the pursuit of assessing the validity of the claims of routine activity theory, two specific issues regarding the focus of studies have been identified and serve to guide

the structure of many research projects. First, the issue of where crimes occur (their domains) has received very little attention from routine activity theory researchers. This is a weakness of the theory; a theory that hinges on the idea that actual activity of people are critical for understanding their victimization experience must account for variations in the behavioral expectations associated with types of settings where people engage in their routine activities. Second, the way researchers define and measure activities or routines has been criticized for being less than precise (recall the use of demographics as common proxies for behaviors). Each of these issues is explained in more detail below.

Domain-Based Research

One of the clearest problems with routine activity theory is the need to include consideration of where crimes actually occur. This is also one of the great promises of routine activity theory. Rather than simply trying to explain crime in a universally applicable way, routine activity theory argues for a more direct focus on identifying criminal behavior patterns as they exist within specific settings. Routine activity theory can look both at differences in the sources and patterns of victimization across different domains (school, work, home, leisure settings) or between characteristics of individuals within a particular domain.

Domain-specific research is a significantly underdeveloped area of routine activity theory. However, starting in the late 1980s, researchers have applied routine activity theory to crimes in specific settings. The result of this focus is the recognition and validation of the fact that certain types of crimes have similar types of offenders, victims, and patterns in all types of settings, while other types of crimes have different participants and relationships that are domain specific. When research highlights one particular domain, it becomes possible to provide more complete and precise definitions and measurements of activities within that domain. In order to effectively accomplish this, however, it is important to account for (1) variations in persons and activities within specific domains, and (2) the movement of offenders and victims between domains. When attention is directed to domain-specific investigations, relationships become more obvious between victimization and daily activities. This means that domain-specific research allows for a much higher level of confidence and specificity in theory.

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Definitions and Measures

When researchers critique the work that has been done to evaluate the validity and utility of routine activity theory, there are typically two issues that stand at the center of such critiques: imprecise measurements of core concepts and a reliance on indirect rather than direct measures of routine activities.

In regard to the first issue, questions of what constitutes a “potential” offender, a “vulnerable” potential target, or a “capable guardian” have not been satisfactorily resolved by theorists or researchers. This leads to a number of different definitions being used in the research, and consequently a body of research findings that may or may not be fully compatible. This same issue also holds true, although not at such a high level, for many of the specific social activities (how is “going out for leisure at night” defined?), alcohol and drug use (what does “getting drunk regularly” mean?), or other activities variables that are centrally important to the theory.

In regard to the second common criticism, despite the centrality of lifestyle to routine activity theory, many of the issues that are presumed to represent lifestyle have not had solid, direct means of measurement identified. For example, most (if not all) routine activity research finds that married (or widowed) people lead safer lifestyles than single people (including divorced or separated). But what exactly is it about being married that decreases one's risks for criminal victimization? Is it that married people do not go out drinking alcohol at bars for nighttime leisure as often as single people do? Is it that married people tend to have children, and their increased vigilance for the safety of their children rubs off to increase their own safety as well? Is it that married people tend to be older than single people, thus that age is the real characteristic that is associated with increased safety? The answers to these questions are not known. In turn, researchers are forced to speculate regarding the rationale for their association, which is less valid than direct assessment of relationships.

Additionally, it is important to include demographics in assessments of the theory because there are real differences in the victimization risks of individuals based on who

they are or their social statuses. For example, sex is one of the few consistently strong relationships between criminal behavior as offender or victim. Men simply are involved in criminal behavior and criminal events far more than women. As such, it is important to assess the differences between male and female victimization patterns, particularly those arising entirely to being one sex or the other. In the end, scholars must continue to examine the influence of demographic characteristics as well as continue to specify more precise and direct measures of the lifestyles/routine activities of people in seeking to predict their risks of victimization.

Practical Uses of Routine Activity Theory

Routine activity theory has several important practical implications, primarily focused on the development of crime prevention programs. Routine activity theory is most useful, and makes important contributions to social policy, by predicting conditions under which victimization risks are enhanced and identifying patterns of social events associated with criminal incidents. Specifically, the first general implication of the theory is on programming efforts targeting potential victims' vulnerability (e.g., "attractiveness" as possible victims). This can be determined by understanding when and where particular types of persons may be more likely to fall victim to crime. If we understand that, in a particular domain, persons who engage in behaviors X, Y, and Z are more likely to be victims, it becomes possible (1) to educate persons into being more careful or securing guardianship present when they are engaging in those dangerous behaviors, or (2) to structure settings so as to minimize these persons' exposure to potential offenders.

Prevention efforts may also focus on increasing guardianship efforts. This can take the form of increasing law enforcement presence in certain places at certain times and also of altering the structural aspects of environments. Called "crime prevention through environmental design," these types of crime prevention programs may include simple measures such as increasing lighting (to make offenses more easily observed), removing hidden blind spots in settings, or simply using more and more effective means of protecting one's person and property (carrying a weapon for protection or installing new and stronger locks on doors).

Regardless of the specific actions that are taken to better separate motivated offenders and [p. 192 ↓] vulnerable targets or to diminish the perceived vulnerability of particular persons or places, routine activity theory is behind many efforts to reduce criminal victimization risks. However, where crime prevention efforts spawned by routine activity theory differ significantly from the efforts borne of other criminological theories is that the focus is not on eliminating or removing motivated offenders but instead on reducing such persons' opportunities and attractions to criminal events. Simply put, routine activity theory gives a theoretical foundation to crime prevention. This can only enhance societal efforts in this area.

Conclusion

Routine activity theory is unique among theories in that it seeks to explain varying victimization risks among individuals and the role of criminal location in the incidence of criminal events. At the core of routine activity theory is the idea that crimes can only occur when three elements of a situation are present: potential offenders, suitable targets, and incapable, unwilling, or absent guardians. When these three situational elements come together in place and time, the likelihood of a criminal event occurring is greatly increased.

Since its inception, routine activity theory researchers have tested many elements of the criminal incident to fully identify which lifestyles and lifestyle components are associated with higher risks for victimization. Researchers have identified five general categories of factors that increase risk: demographics, social activities, alcohol and drug use, economic status, and community structures.

Additionally, by identifying when, where, and under what conditions crime is more likely to transpire, researchers can develop greater understandings of how crime occurs in patterned ways in society. In this respect, routine activity theory allows for more informed efforts to prevent and intervene in crime. Using the concepts, principles, and findings of routine activity theory research, criminologists can begin to identify how individuals in various settings can take steps to protect themselves and their belongings from criminal victimization.

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See also

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