Routine Activity Theory Watch Point/CounterPoint Routine Activities Theory(opens in a new tab) The theory described below is taken from the Center for POP article "Routine Activity Theory."(opens in a new tab) The crime triangle (also known as the problem analysis triangle) comes straight out of one of the main theories of environmental criminology - routine activity theory. "Routine Activity Theory" provides a simple and powerful insight into the causes of crime problems. At its heart is the idea that in the absence of effective controls, offenders will prey upon attractive targets. To have a crime, a motivated offender must come to the same place as an attractive target. For property crimes the target is a thing or an object. For personal crimes the target is a person. If an attractive target is never in the same place as a motivate offender, the target will not be taken, damaged, or assaulted. Also, there are controllers whose presence can prevent crime. If the controllers are absent, or present but powerlessness, crime is possible. First, consider people who are influential in the lives of potential offenders. In the case of juveniles these might be parents, close relatives, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches, and other similarly placed individuals. In the case of adults these people may include intimate partners, close friends, relatives, and sometimes their children. These people are called "handlers" in routine activity theory. Crimes will take place where handlers are absent, weak, or corrupt. Next consider targets, or victims. Guardians try to protect targets from theft and damage and potential victims from attack and assault. Formal guardians include the police, security guards, and others whose job is to protect people and property from crime. Informal guardians include neighbors, friends, and others who happen to be in the same place as the attractive target. Parents, teachers, peers and others close to potential victims are also potential guardians. A target with an effective guardian is less likely to be attacked by a potential offender than a target without a guardian. If the guardian is absent, weak, or corrupt little protection is provided the target. Finally, consider places. Someone owns every location and ownership confers certain rights to regulate access to the site and behaviors of people using the site. The owner and the agents of the owner (e.g., employees) look after the place and the people using the place. Owners and their agents are called place managers. Place managers control the behavior of offenders and potential victims. Examples of place manager include merchants, lifeguards, parking lot attendants, recreation and park workers, janitors, and motel clerks. In the presence of an effective place manager, crime is less likely than when the manager is absent, weak or corrupt. All of the people in this theory use tools to help accomplish their criminal or crime control objectives. Tools that gang members use may include spray paint cans, guns, and cars. Offenders without access to tools are less likely to be able escape handlers, enter unauthorized places, and overcome victims, guardians, and managers. Guardians may use light to increase surveillance, engraving devices to mark property, and other devices to help reduce the chances of victimization. Place managers can use gates, fences, signs and other tools to regulate conduct. With effective tools handlers, victims, guardians, and managers will have a greater chance of keeping crimes from occurring. The tools used are often highly specific to the crime in question. The tools an offender needs for a burglary (e.g., a screw driver) are likely to be different from those needed for a robbery (e.g., a gun), for example. Crime Pattern Theory Crime Pattern Theory is based on the idea that predatory crimes occur when three specific factors are present: suitable targets, absence of capable guardians (watchful homeowners, neighbors, citizens, security, police, etc.), and motivated offenders. These opportunities are found in the repetitive motions of offenders and victims such as going to work, school, recreational activities, or socializing. Suitable targets can include unlocked homes and vehicles and easily-removed, valuable goods. Basic Assumption: Rational motivated offender searches for suitable targets within a space. Motivation: Diverse sources, strength, and character vary. Crime Commission: The end result of a multi-decision process. The theory described below is taken in part from the Executive Summary (POP Center(opens in a new tab)). Crime Opportunity Theory Crime theory can and should assist crime prevention. Recent "opportunity" theories of crime have emphasized principles which are close to the real world, easy to explain and teach, and ready to put into practice. They include the routine activity approach, the rational choice perspective, and crime pattern theory. These theories build on the old saying that "opportunity makes the thief." Ten Principles of Crime Opportunity Theory Opportunities play a role in causing all crime, not just common property crime. For example, studies of bars and pubs show how their design and management plays an important role in generating violence or preventing it. Studies of credit card and other frauds identify security loopholes that can be blocked. Even sexual offenses and drug dealing are subject to opportunity reduction. Crime opportunities are highly specific. The robbery of post offices depends upon a different constellation of opportunities than for bank robberies or muggings on the street. Theft of cars for joyriding has an entirely different pattern of opportunity than theft of cars for their parts, and different again from car theft for sale abroad. Crime opportunity theory helps sort out these differences, which need to be understood if prevention is to be properly tailored to the crimes in question. Crime opportunities are concentrated in time and space. Dramatic differences are found from one address to another, even within a high crime area. Crime shifts greatly by hour of day and day of the week, reflecting the opportunities to carry it out. Routine activity theory and crime pattern theory are helpful in understanding the concentration of crime opportunities at particular places and times. Crime opportunities depend on everyday movements of activity. Offenders and their targets shift according to the trips to work, school, and leisure settings. For example, pickpockets seek crowds in the city centre and burglars visit suburbs in the afternoon when residents are at work or school. One crime produces opportunities for another. There are many ways in which this can occur. For example, burglary tends to set up conditions for buying and selling stolen goods and for credit card fraud. Pimping and prostitution can bring assaults and robbery in their wake. A successful break-in may encourage the offender to return at a later date. If a youth has his bike taken, he may feel justified in stealing another one in replacement. (v) Some products offer more tempting crime opportunities. These opportunities reflect particularly the value, inertia, visibility of, and access to potential crime targets. For example, VCRs are high in value and low in inertia (they can easily be carried), and are often left in visible and accessible locations. This helps explain why they are so frequently taken by burglars. Social and technological changes produce new crime opportunities. Any new product goes through four stages: innovation, growth, mass marketing and saturation. The middle two stages tend to produce the most theft. Thus when laptop computers first came on the market, they were rather exotic machines appealing to only a few consumers. As their price declined and more people began to understand their uses, the market for them began to grow. At the same time, they began to be at risk of theft. These risks remain high at present while they are being heavily promoted and are much in demand. As their price reduces further, and most people can afford them, their risks of theft will decline to levels more like those of calculators and other everyday business aids. Crime can be prevented by reducing opportunities. The opportunity-reducing methods of situational crime prevention fit systematic patterns and rules which cut across every walk of life, even though prevention methods must be tailored to each situation. These methods derive from rational choice theory and aim, (i) to increase the perceived effort of crime, (ii) to increase the perceived risks, (iii) to reduce the anticipated rewards, and(iv) to remove excuses for crime. Thus situational crime prevention is not just a collection of ad hoc methods, but is firmly grounded in opportunity theory. There are approaching one hundred evaluated examples of the successful implementation of situational crime prevention. Reducing opportunities does not usually displace crime. Evaluations have usually found little displacement following the implementation of situational prevention. No studies have found displacement to be complete. This means that each person or organization reducing crime can accomplish some real gain. Even crime which is displaced can be directed away from the worst targets, times or places. Focused opportunity reduction can produce wider declines in crime. Prevention measures in one location can lead to a "diffusion of benefits" to nearby times and places because offenders seem to overestimate the reach of the measures. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that reductions in crime opportunity can drive down larger crime rates for community and society.