

**SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION –**  
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**WHAT IS IT?**

Situational crime prevention (SCP) is an applied criminological paradigm founded on two distinct, complementary conceptions of criminal situations. The first is the rational choice (Cornish & Clarke, 1975, 1986) and routine activities perspectives (Cohen & Felson, 1979). In these approaches criminal situations are seen as presenting opportunities that an already motivated or criminally disposed offender rationally weighs up in terms of *effort*, *risk*, and *reward*. All else being equal, a crime is more likely to be committed when it requires little effort, when the would-be offender judges that there is a low risk of being detected and punished, and when he/she anticipates a highly desired reward.

The second derives from social and behavioural psychology. According to this view, and in contrast to the conscious, deliberative process assumed by the rational choice approach, situations can affect people in non-conscious ways so as to precipitate a behavioural response they may otherwise not have considered, at least not at that particular time or place. This second perspective aligns more closely with the person x situation interaction model whereby all human behaviour, including criminal behaviour, involves interactions of the characteristics of the actor with the characteristics of the immediate situation in which the behaviour is enacted (Mischel, 1969). This perspective accounts for why otherwise ordinary people, not just those who are especially criminally disposed, sometimes also commit crimes, even serious violent and sexual crimes (see, e.g., Zimbardo's, 2007, analysis of events involving US military personnel at Abu Ghraib). Wortley (1997) proposed four main ways in which situations precipitate criminal motivations. Situations can present cues that *prompt* a criminal response; they can exert social *pressure* to conform to situational norms or expectations concerning criminal behaviour; they can weaken moral restraints, and so *permit* a criminal response; and they can induce emotional arousal and thereby *provoke* a criminal response.

In practical terms, crime can therefore be prevented by reducing criminal opportunities, and also by removing the precipitating conditions of specific problem behaviours. SCP is most suited to very specific problems – the more specific, the better - so the starting point is to narrow the target of specific prevention measures. Taking sexual offending as an example, what is likely to work to prevent sexual abuse in schools will be very different from what is required to prevent sexual assaults in and around bars and clubs, which will be very different again from what is required to prevent Internet child pornography offending. Variations between similar types of setting are also expected – though the same SCP principles can be applied, preventing sexual abuse in an elite public school may require different strategies than preventing similar problems in a struggling inner urban state school, for example. For each specific problem and setting a micro-level situational analysis needs to

be conducted, from which a range of situational interventions are devised. Interventions are usually designed to make the problem behaviour more risky, more difficult to enact, less rewarding, less permissible or excusable, and less tempting. This is usually achieved by changing aspects of physical environments and the ways in which people routinely interact with these environments, for example by controlling access to the setting, increasing natural surveillance, eliminating blind spots, increasing capable guardianship, decreasing vulnerabilities of potential victims or other crime targets, clarifying rules and expectations, and so on.

## HISTORY

Situational conceptions of crime emerged in the 1970s as an alternative theoretical and applied approach to then-dominant dispositional models that sought to explain crime more or less exclusively as a function of individual criminality. From the outset, SCP was driven largely by practical concerns about crime prevention, and partly as a reaction to pessimistic conclusions about the apparent failure of offender rehabilitation efforts (Martinson, 1974). Criminological approaches of the time were seen as 'sinking under the weight of their own theorising', contributing little to practical outcomes concerning crime control and prevention (Wortley, 2012). SCP instead aimed to offer pragmatic solutions to crime problems, with methods underpinned by uncomplicated theoretical principles.

In SCP, the unit of analysis is the criminal event, not the characteristics of offenders. How the offender came to be the way they were at the time of the crime is of little practical relevance to SCP. Indeed in its original formulations the presence of a motivated offender was simply a given. Cornish and Clarke (2003) later outlined a typology of offenders according to variations in their criminal dispositions and their interactions with criminal situations. The *antisocial predator* has a stable criminal commitment. These offenders seek out and select situations based on cues that provide them with information about the risks, effort, and rewards associated with a contemplated crime. The *mundane* offender is ambivalent in her/his criminal commitment, less likely to invest significant effort in creating criminal opportunities, but responsive to criminal opportunities and susceptible to situational precipitators. The *provoked* offender has conventional prosocial values, but succumbs to a particular provocation or temptation, perhaps in a momentary lapse of self-control.

Though these conceptual developments have brought SCP into closer conceptual alignment with the person x situation interaction model, in practice SCP nevertheless maintains as its primary focus the characteristics of the situations in which specific kinds of offences occur. This follows from its pragmatic assumption that situations are more readily accessible and much easier to modify than the psychological characteristics of offenders, especially those who have not yet offended. There is now an extensive catalogue of case studies demonstrating the application of SCP principles to crimes ranging from theft from vehicles in parking stations (Poyner, 1991), to convenience store robbery (Hunter & Jeffery, 1997), to crowd violence (Madensen & Eck, 2006), to wildlife poaching (Pires & Clarke, 2012).

Wortley and Smallbone (2006; see also Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008) were the first to outline how SCP could be applied to the prevention of child sexual abuse. They proposed that sexual abuse prevention efforts can be organised according to four types of setting. Most sexual abuse occurs in *domestic settings*. Such settings are difficult to control, except in circumstances where child protection and other authorities are responding to incidents that have already occurred and been reported. In these cases SCP principles can inform safety planning and risk management.

A smaller but significant proportion of sexual abuse occurs in *organisational settings*. Such settings are especially conducive to SCP interventions because of the high degree of control that can be applied. In organisational settings SCP can be readily applied as a primary or secondary, as well as a tertiary, intervention.

Sexual abuse in *public settings* is generally less common, though adolescents may be more likely than adults to abuse in these settings (probably because adolescents have less control of domestic and organisational settings). In one sense public settings are especially conducive to SCP, but because of the low prevalence and high dispersal of sexual offences in public settings this can be a classic case of finding the 'needle in the haystack'. Nevertheless SCP could be used where certain hot spots are identified (e.g. particular parks or public toilets where problems have become apparent).

In recent decades a new problem has emerged with sexual abuse in *virtual settings*. Wortley and Smallbone (2012) have presented a comprehensive analysis of the production, distribution and use of Internet child pornography, for example, and how SCP can guide primary prevention efforts targeting these specific problems.

## **CURRENT PRACTICE**

Although otherwise influential theories of sexual offending (e.g. Finkelhor, 1984; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990) have recognised the importance of situational influences, this aspect of theory has had comparatively little impact on research, policy and practice. Current clinical approaches to sexual offending instead seem to maintain their historical connections to individual-level, psychopathological conceptions of the problem, rather than to contemporary ideas about crime, its causes and prevention. Criminal justice and child protection policies also seem driven by this clinical, individual-level conception of the problem.

It is only in the last few years that applications of SCP to sexual offending, particularly in organisational and virtual settings, have begun to emerge. A few relevant books, reports, and key articles are now available (e.g. Erooga, 2009, 2012; Kaufman, 2010; Smallbone & Cale, in press; Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008; Terry & Ackerman, 2008; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006; Wortley & Smallbone, 2012; Wurtele, 2012), and there seems to be a growing interest in this approach at a public and organisational policy level. These are very recent developments, and there are as yet no published

evaluations demonstrating the effectiveness of SCP in preventing sexual offending.

In Australia, the recently established Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse appears to be shifting the national agenda on sexual abuse in organisational settings. The old 'bad apple' argument (based on concepts of the defective and devious offender who infiltrates hapless organisations) is being challenged by a new 'what's happening in the barrel?' question (based on concepts of the crime event as an interaction of criminal disposition and crime-enabling situation). This is generating new interest in how SCP might be applied to the problem of organisational sexual abuse. Many child-serving organisations are now reviewing their policies and procedures, apparently in anticipation of new standards and concerns that organisations themselves may increasingly be held accountable for 'enabling' sexual abuse to occur by not giving proper attention to its situational determinants, over which organisations have much potential control.

SCP has had less influence on clinical conceptions of sexual offending. On one hand, some risk assessment instruments have been developed to focus on so-called 'acute dynamic' risk factors (e.g. Acute-2007) – transitory factors that may precipitate actual re-offences. On the other hand, risk assessment and risk management with already-detected offenders remain focused on individual-level conceptions and risk factors. Influential clinical developments, most notably the good lives model, have even pushed away from relapse prevention approaches focussed on the management and avoidance of high risk situations, calling instead for more intensive, extensive and complex individual-level therapeutic approaches.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Theories of sexual offending have to varying extents recognised the importance of situational influences. However this aspect of theory has had comparatively little impact on research, policy and practice. Clinical approaches to sexual offending, as well as associated criminal justice and child protection policies, tend to maintain a close adherence to individual-level, psychopathological conceptions of the problem. Developments can however be discerned at an organisational and public policy level where SCP conceptions are increasingly being applied in an effort to create and maintain safer organisational and 'virtual' environments for children.

It is very important that individual conceptions and situational conceptions of sexual offending are not framed as competing paradigms. Just as exclusively individual-level explanations provide an incomplete picture of sexual offending, so too would situational explanations alone be incomplete. The real challenge is to understand how the problem behaviour arises in the interaction of individuals with their immediate environments. These individual x situation interactions are probably best understood in the context of the wider ecological context in which (potential) offenders and (potential) victims develop and live, and of course in which sexual offences sometimes unfortunately occur.

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