

CRIME AND CONTEXT: A COMPLEX, CRUCIAL CONUNDRUM

That a special issue on crime might be useful, even essential, is unfortunate. In the world we all hope to inhabit, crime is a mere memory of the bad old days. But crime is very much with us and shows little sign of retreat. Many who will read this are relatively well shielded from crime, but personal violence and property theft are daily occurrences for millions of people everywhere in the world. Even those who are fortunate enough to avoid victimhood very often *fear* crime and, if they examine their own daily actions, will see that dozens of small acts are geared to crime prevention.

Environmental psychology is a problem-solving subdiscipline. As I have argued elsewhere (Gifford, 1987), environmental psychology tends to take on the most difficult tasks in the most challenging discipline, and the topic of crime epitomizes this brave or crazed proclivity. Readers of the articles in this issue will appreciate, if nothing else, how maddeningly complex crime-environment relations are. Like every other human activity, crime occurs in a physical context. This 'environmental backcloth', as the Brantinghams call it, is no mere decorative stage backdrop, but clearly serves criminals (sometimes) and potential victims (sometimes). The immediate site, connecting streets and paths, the broader neighborhood, the criminal, the victim, police, bystanders and neighbors all are inextricably linked as players in a drama that shifts with time of day, day of the week, season, and era; many of these patterns also vary across cultures.

Even so, the research described in these articles shows that certain qualified generalizations may be cautiously advanced. The history of crime-environmental research is littered with shattered oversimplifications, so today's researchers are very careful about claiming the discovery of simple and sovereign solutions. The opening article by the Brantinghams, which I believe will become a classic in this field, very admirably surveys both the almost imponderable complexities as well as the patterns in the swirling mosaic that they and others have begun to recognize. Their framework, which in-

cludes crime etiology as well as individual and aggregate patterns of criminal activity, will serve as a very useful structure with which to organize knowledge of crime-environmental relations as it cumulates.

The article by Perkins, Wandersman, Rich and Taylor is one compelling example of the valiant search for consistent patterns in a complex set of influences and outcomes. Multiple measures of the environment and of crime are investigated in a study of New York blocks. Crime indicators appear to be better predicted by objective measures of the environment, in contrast to some research and a long tradition in social psychology that favors perceptions of the environment over the environment itself as the best predictor of behavior. At least at the block level, the often-criticized defensible space theory receives support.

Brown and Bentley examine burglars' views of houses and discover that although burglars agree on the characteristics of a burgled house, their template is wrong: they are unable to reliably distinguish actual burgled houses from actual unbuilt houses. Nevertheless, their Utah study is a valuable addition to the literature on how burglars think, which of course is a crucial step on the road to learning how the residential environment might be modified to fight burglary.

Canter and Larkin tackle the serious problem of serial rape. Once again, if the environmental patterns of a criminal are understood, crime prevention will be enhanced. The study, done in London and southeast England, supports the idea that rapists are domocentric; they tend to commit their crimes in a defined area close to their home base rather than traveling to relatively distant areas. Such knowledge has immense practical importance if it does nothing more than greatly rescue the area police must (usually) search for a serial rapist, even if it is frightening information for residents of any neighborhood in which a serial rapist is operating.

In another examination of rape (and domestic violence), Cohn finds that weather and temporal

variables are better predictors of calls to the Minneapolis police for domestic violence than for rape. Again, such findings have practical import in that prevention efforts (such as public service campaigns or counselling) may be geared to changes in weather for one kind of crime but need not be climate-gearred for another.

These studies, valuable as they are, obviously will not blow away crime on the day this issue of the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* hits the streets. But each, in its own way, advances knowledge in the area in both theoretical and practical

ways. Each will stimulate other researchers to pursue understanding of the relations between crime and environment, and in that sense bring us closer to a crime-reduced, if not crime-free, world.

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Reference

Gifford, R. (1987). *Environmental Psychology: Principles and Practice*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.