**Routine Activities Theory**

Nicholas Branic  
*University of California, Irvine*  
nbranic@uci.edu

**Word Count:** 1,968

**Abstract**

Routine activities theory is an environmental, place-based explanation of crime, where the behavioral patterns and intersections of people in time and space influence when and where crimes occur. Introduced by Cohen and Felson (1979), routine activities theory suggests that when motivated offenders and suitable targets meet in the absence of capable guardians, crime is likely to happen. Conversely, the absence of any of these three conditions might be enough to prevent a crime from occurring. The authors also emphasize how overarching social conditions contextualize and define the everyday activities of people. Situated within the broader framework of environmental criminology, routine activities theory suggests that reducing criminal opportunities serves a key role in reducing the prevalence of crime.

**Main Text**

Unlike theories that focus on the individual characteristics of criminal offenders, routine activities theory examines the environmental context in which crimes occur. Routine activities is a theory of place, where different social actors intersect in space and time. The people we interact with, the places we travel to, and the activities we engage in influence the likelihood and distribution of criminal behavior. Specifically, routine activities theory focuses on the intersections of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. This entry begins with an overview of routine activities theory and elaboration of its core components, followed by examples of the theory’s application in research, discussion of related theories, and review of academic critiques.

Routine activities theory derives from Amos Hawley’s (1950) theory of human ecology, which explores the temporal aspects of human behavior in community environments. Hawley identifies three key aspects of collective human activities: rhythm (the normal recurrence of events), tempo (the number of events in a certain period of time), and timing (the coordination and intersection of behaviors in the environment). Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979) adapt these principles and introduce routine activities theory as an ecological perspective on criminal behavior. Their theory emphasizes three elements conducive to a crime event: a motivated offender who intends to commit a crime, a suitable target for the offender, and the absence of capable guardians who might otherwise prevent the crime from taking place. When these conditions converge in space and time, crime is likely to occur. Conversely, the absence of any of the three conditions may be sufficient to discourage a crime from happening.

It is important to note that routine activities theory offers suggestions about the probability of criminal behavior rather making definite claims about when crime will occur. The presence of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and a lack of guardianship does not mean that crime is inevitable. Instead, the theory argues that the likelihood of crime increases or decreases based on the existence of these three elements. Moreover, Cohen and Felson (1979) suggest how their theory applies to studying crime trends at varying macro and micro levels of analysis, ranging from national crime rates to a particular individual or location.
Cohen and Felson (1979) state that each successful crime event minimally requires an offender who is motivated to commit the crime and able to act on this motivation. Simple intent is not sufficient for a crime to occur -- a motivated offender must be capable of carrying out his desires. Routine activities theory does not explain why an offender is motivated to commit a crime, but instead assumes that motivation is constant. In other words, the theory presumes that some members of society will be motivated toward criminal behavior and will seek to act on these motivations when opportunities arise. If a motivated offender identifies a viable target, the question becomes whether the offender is able to carry out his intentions and commit the crime.

In order for a crime to occur, a motivated offender must also identify and engage a suitable target. Suitable targets can take a number of forms depending on the nature of the crime (i.e. the particular intent of the offender) and the situational context (i.e. the available opportunities). A suitable target might be an object, such as a piece of valuable property to steal or a home to burglarize. Or, another person might serve as a lucrative target, such as someone wearing flashy jewelry who catches the attention of a robber. As noted earlier, one might consider suitable targets at varying levels of analysis. Cohen and Felson (1979) suggest how large-scale societal changes influence the quantity of suitable targets nationally. At the micro-level, the evaluation of what is and is not a suitable target largely depends on the perceptions and preferences of an individual offender.

The final component of routine activities theory consists of capable guardianship, which bears the potential to dissuade or prevent crime even in the presence of a motivated offender with a selected suitable target. Capable guardianship is an expansive concept that researchers interpret and study in a variety of ways. Formal types of guardianship, such as police officers and other types of law enforcement, symbolize a well-recognized form of protection from crime and victimization. Routine activities theory suggests that the presence of these agents might prevent a crime from happening. Many potential offenders, despite being motivated to commit a crime, would be hesitant to engage in criminal behavior with a police officer nearby.

In a more informal sense, capable guardianship can include civilians as well. For example, the residents of a particular neighborhood might offer protection from criminal behavior within their community. Cohen and Felson (1979) suggest that common citizens provide more guardianship in society than the police because there are comparably fewer police officers patrolling neighborhoods than there are citizens. As a result, it is more likely that citizens will provide guardianship against potential criminal behavior. These individuals might patrol their neighborhoods (e.g. neighborhood watch associations), intervene during confrontations, or maintain surveillance in an effort to prevent crime and promote social order. Even a stranger on the street can serve as a potential guardian against crime, perhaps simply by passing through an area at a particular time.

A final point is that guardianship is not limited to people and can stem from tangible objects or ambient characteristics. A nearby security camera or a sign indicating a home burglary alarm might make an offender think twice before committing a crime. Similarly, walls around a community or fencing around a home might physically hinder an offender. One can intuitively consider a wide range of environmental characteristics that might inhibit offenders. Felson and Boba (2010) suggest that one can even physically and symbolically “design out crime” through proper planning and neighborhood layout in order to maximize local guardianship.

Routine activities theory also incorporates the role of social context as a descriptive background for understanding crime. Cohen and Felson (1979) explain how certain social conditions affect the nature of our day to day behaviors – our routine activities – and influence whether motivated offenders, suitable targets, and capable guardians will intersect in space and time. For example, the large-scale shopping that precedes major holidays means that malls will be overcrowded, money will be changing hands, and homes will be vacant. This shift in routine activities can offer motivated offenders increased
opportunities for crime (e.g. robbery, burglary) and an array of suitable targets (e.g. shoppers carrying money and valuables, unattended homes to burglarize).

In the original test of their theory, Cohen and Felson (1979) discuss two changing social trends with implications for national crime rates in the United States. First, the authors argue that the U.S. population’s routine activities shifted in the decades following World War II. As women began entering the workforce in greater numbers, many households were left vacant for longer periods of time. According to the routine activities approach, this general change in behavioral patterns explains the rising crime rates in the decades after the war because of increased opportunities for certain types of crime, such as residential burglary. As day to day activities increasingly shift into public domains, the likelihood of motivated offenders crossing paths with suitable targets also increases.

Cohen and Felson (1979) also demonstrate how the evolving nature of commodities influences aggregate levels of crime through the changing suitability of targets. Personal property and valuables serve as suitable targets for many offenders, although a target’s suitability largely depends on the feasibility of the crime and the anticipated reward. A thief would be more likely to take a wallet than a refrigerator because the wallet is more portable, more easily concealable, and more valuable per pound than a refrigerator. As technologies develop over time, many valuables such as televisions and portable electronic devices undergo a reduction in size and weight, an increase in monetary value, and greater prominence within society. In light of this observation, Cohen and Felson (1979) illustrate again how changing social conditions increase the opportunities for crime. Consider the computer as an example. At one time, a single computer would occupy an entire room, which would make theft extremely difficult. In modern times, computers are now so portable, commonplace, and valuable that they are much easier for thieves to steal.

A broad range of research utilizes routine activities theory as a framework for understanding patterns of crime and where crime is likely to occur. Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger (1989) analyze calls to police in Minneapolis and identify crime “hot spots,” where over 50% of all calls to police occur in 3% of places in the city. The authors’ findings illustrate that crime is not randomly distributed, but instead concentrates spatially in certain types of areas. Other scholars apply routine activities theory as a lens for understanding crime and deviance at the individual level. Osgood and colleagues (1996) examine the activities of 18 to 26 year olds and find that unstructured peer socializing in the absence of authority figures increases the likelihood of a variety of criminal and deviant behaviors. In light of the growing ubiquity and use of the Internet, some researchers now apply routine activities theory to online criminality as well.

The concepts and implications posited by routine activities theory coincide with a number of other theoretical perspectives that focus on minimizing criminal opportunities, bolstering social control measures, and reducing the likelihood of crime. Drawing largely on Oscar Newman’s (1972) notion of defensible space, this body of work is known as environmental criminology and includes perspectives such as situational crime prevention and the crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) model. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks emphasize proactive environmental techniques such as target hardening, controlled access, and effective surveillance in order to dissuade offenders and reduce opportunities for crime.

While routine activities theory provides valuable contributions to the study of space and crime, scholars critique the theory on a number of grounds. For example, while routine activities theory assumes the presence of motivated offenders, many researchers discuss how motivations vary across offenders (Clarke and Cornish 1985). Others argue that routine activities theory fails to properly address the role of criminal opportunity contexts – the circumstances in which motivated offenders and suitable targets converge in the absence of capable guardians (Wilcox, Land, and Hunt 2003).
SEE ALSO: Crime Mapping; Crime Prevention; Hot Spots Policing; Security

References


Further Reading


Author Mini-Bio

Nicholas Branic is a doctoral student at the University of California, Irvine and previously earned his Master’s degree from the University of South Florida. His research focuses on the neighborhood context of crime, including aspects of the built environment, neighborhood change over time, and social inequalities. In addition to his doctoral studies, Nicholas works as a research assistant in the Irvine Lab for the Study of Space and Crime (ILSSC) at the University of California, Irvine.

Keywords: crime prevention, ecology, environmental criminology, security, spatial analysis, surveillance