

# The Rational Choice Perspective Theory and Prevention

By Ps 352 C. Magri - Part 2

## Situational crime prevention and 'target hardening'

The rational-choice perspective shows that criminal activity does not rely solely on the "psycho-biological" nature of criminal individuals, or on social and economic factors. However, these should not be completely ignored, still one has to deeply concentrate also on the situational factors which widely attract the offender to commit a particular criminal act, in that particular place and time, and on that particular victim.

This approach is mostly important for the development of crime-control and prevention, which tend to tackle the problem from the very roots, by altering the conditions and circumstances under which crime is originated. Felson, (1987) explains that to obtain positive results, the community must be involved in providing to its own security. Researchers have detailed how crime prevention could be accomplished through alterations in the situational and environmental design, without sacrificing society's prosperity, freedom and customs.

Situational crime prevention consists of a wide range of preventive measures and activities, including defensible space architecture, target hardening and neighbourhood watch programmes, designed to reduce those multiple opportunities for, and increase the risks of, committing specific sort of crimes (Clarke, 1983).

Repetto, (1976) and Gabor, (1981), argued that despite the achieved evidence of the utility of these preventive measures, critics have seized upon one apparent weakness of the approach, that preventive measures which increase the difficulties and risks of a particular crime will merely result in criminal activity to be displaced to other

vulnerable targets, places or types of crime.

Brantingham & Brantingham, (1984) assume that certain neighbourhoods (NHs) are chosen as a criminal target more than other (NHs) because these are likely to provide opportunities for such activity, these areas comprise the "awareness space" of the criminal. Therefore it should be no surprise that familiarity with a (NH) is a central consideration in the decision to commit a crime in a particular part of town. In fact criminals rarely travel into "unknown" (NHs) to engage in illegal activities.

Experience has indicated that criminals base their activities into those areas of the city in which they have been able to make observations and gather information, Repetto, (1974). Hence insituations when the (NHs) is threatened, the community may, "Coalesce in a limited action to protect the common possession... internal conflicts and differences are set aside as the entire population rises to meet the threat," Hawley, (1950).

As Felson, (1986) has argued, "a tight community - where people know people, property and their linkages - offers little opportunity for common exploitative crime." Bursik and Grasmick, (1993) suggested that crime prevention may be attained by securing the (NH) with capable guardianship "the general level of protectiveness exhibited by neighbours and their willingness to utilize formal and informal mechanisms of control." (ie. Police surveillance, neighbourhood watch programmes). To this effect Felson, (1986) remarks that the essential elements which lead to a criminal activity are: a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a capable guardian.

The elimination of any one of these three elements from a particular situation, is sufficient

to prevent the successful completion of a crime. Therefore, when (NHs) are equipped with "formal and informal mechanisms of control" the community would be "protected" from criminality. Felson, (1986) forwarded the following example, "imagine a situation in which a neighbourhood has a large number of unsupervised youths, all of whom are motivated to rob a convenience store. If that community has a strictly residential composition, then it is impossible to commit such robberies in the area owing to lack of suitable targets."

In Felson and Cohen, (1980) the authors suggest that suitable targets are composed by at least four dimensions. Value (either monetary or symbolic), visibility, access and inertia (ie factors that are difficult to overcome for illegal purposes, such as bulky property).

Such dimensions would surely attract the scrutiny of a potential offender in the selection of the target and ignite his mechanism of "rationality". At this stage, when such dimensions are visible it is inevitable to provide to some sort of security to eliminate opportunities, increase the risks of apprehension and decrease the chances of victimization. This is commonly done by the installation of objects such as burglar alarm, locks and barred windows.

Cohen and Felson, (1979) suggest that offenders consider with particular attention the victim's way of living and analyse the elements which decrease the level of property guardianship and increase the possibility that victim and offender might converge in "time and space". These elements as Cohen et al, (1979) remarked are the timing of work, home, shopping, schooling and leisure. All these factors contribute to the amount of time that persons spend away from home in these activities, thereby increase the possibilities of victimization. Due to the increase in the rate of women enlisting in the labour force and the growth of single-adult households, properties have

become more vulnerable to criminal activities.

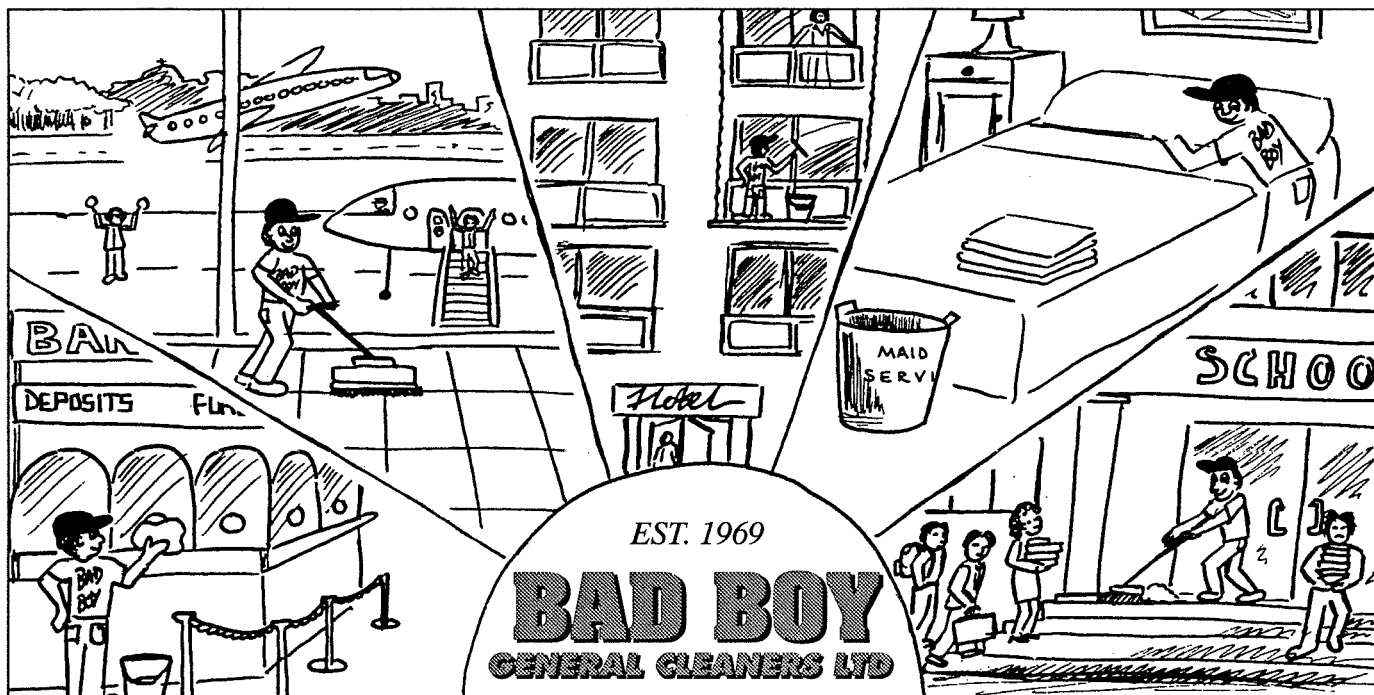
A community may undergo a dramatic change in its population composition, which in turn leads to a decreased change in its population composition, which in turn leads to a decreased ability to exercise social control which is fundamentally vital for its own security. In such cases it is necessary to provide for and focus on neighbourhood family structures to act as agencies of social control and supervision to provide more protection to themselves, their families, their neighbours, their own properties, public property, more alertness to risks, decrease fear of crime, contribute to reduce crime rate and assist in crime solving solutions along law enforcement agencies.

### **Community policing programmes**

Crime prevention programmes are essentially a task to be handled by law enforcement agencies with the complete cooperation of the community. These community policing programmes are important to foster a strong relationship between local neighbourhood groups and law enforcement agencies, directed towards one unique scope, that of "community protection".

This sort of social control has been tested in the Northern Region of Malta in 1992. It started on an experimental basis in various zones where the rate of criminal activity was quite alarming. As the region was a notorious target for household and tourist establishment burglaries, the community showed an amazing response and cooperation with the law enforcement agency to initiate this crime-prevention strategy. These (NH) watch schemes were fostering a greater community spirit and some formed a victim support team to offer prompt assistance to victimized people, such as repairs to doors and windows where a household was burgled.

As households in the region became more secure, property prices increased. Thus it meant that insurance agencies made greater profits.



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These were therefore encouraged to sponsor these (NH) watch schemes in their activities. In fact most agencies provided stationary and other items which promoted such schemes, and the insurance company concerned printed its advert on the (NH) watch stationary.

The most important element in these schemes to reach the expected results is that the spirit among the members is to be kept high and that the police have to react promptly and efficiently to every information and call for assistance.

It is believed that since the introduction of the (NH) watch scheme in this region the crime rate decreased by 25%. This was achieved, thanks to Dr. Angelo Farrugia LL.D. Police Superintendent who infatigably promoted and supervised this anti-opportunist crime crusade.

Skolnick and Bayley, (1986) argued that it is essential that in order to reduce the crime rate of a region it is important to involve the community in policing strategies on a permanent or temporary basis, which emphasizes on police and community reciprocity. This reciprocity represents the belief that the citizens have something to contribute to crime control.

"... community organizations have actively been courted to work with the police to solve the crime-related problems of the neighbourhood." Skolnick and Bayley, (1986).

To encourage full reciprocity, law enforcement agencies in Houston and Newark instituted "Police-Community Stations" which created outreach programmes accompanied by a series of community meetings, regularly patrolled "problem areas", worked with school officials, instituted identification programmes, distributed newsletters, opened a "safe house" for children, started a neighbourhood beautification committee, and invited local representatives to ride with officers on patrol. Moreover, efforts were made to introduce an intensive enforcement

programme, which focused on eliminating signs of social and physical disorder from the neighbourhood. These efforts consisted of "street sweeps" to diminish loitering and disruptive behaviour, drug sales, purse snatching and harassment. In this complex programme, Skolnick and Bayley, (1986) added that attention was given also to enforcement of traffic regulations by installing radars in road automobile-related problems such as stolen cars and driving under the influence of intoxication.

These programmes had mixed levels of success and the effort seemed to be effective in lowering perceptions of physical and social disorder and in producing increase in local satisfaction with the neighbourhood and police services, which significantly decreased victimization.

