The main problem with Situational Crime Prevention is that it
fails to address the root causes of crime: a critical discussion

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The goal of Situational Crime Prevention (SCP) is to explain and reduce criminal activity by examining the circumstances in which it occurs and then curtailing the opportunities for its recurrence. Parking your car on the street outside your house is an opportunity for car theft; parking it in the garage reduces that opportunity (Clarke and Mayhew, 1994). Placing gates across residential alleyways has been shown to reduce burglary by a significant amount (Bowers, Johnson and Hirschfield, 2005). The logic behind crime prevention programs that focus on opportunity reduction can appear compelling; however, ever since SCP emerged from research on crime in the 1970s, objections have been raised on both practical and theoretical grounds.

A notable and persistent charge levelled against situational crime prevention, often referred to as SCP, is that it fails to address the root causes of crime; however, in this essay I argue that a more serious problem for SCP is revealed by the growing range of criminal activity commonly aggregated as "cybercrime". This is crime that abuses and leverages digital technologies. This essay's argument is made by first examining the evolution of SCP, including objections raised by its detractors and defences offered by its supporters. A conclusion is presented after exploring the implications for SCP of the current digital crime wave.

A very different and non-digital crime wave struck both Britain and America in the 1960s. Both countries were experiencing rising rates of burglary, robbery, vehicle theft, and all manner of violent crime (Home Office, 2010; Farrell, Tseloni, Mailley and Tilley, 2011). These trends cast doubt on prior approaches to crime that were shaped by efforts to understand criminals and the conditions in which they lived (Clarke, 1980, 1997a, 2012; Hayward, 2007). As Jeffrey (1977, 9) declaimed: 'Deterrence and punishment are failures; treatment and rehabilitation are failures; the criminal justice system is a failure from police courts to corrections'.

The phrase "Nothing Works" was coined after American sociologist Robert Martinson published a bleak assessment of programs intended to rehabilitate criminals in the 1950s and 1960s: 'our present strategies … cannot overcome, or even appreciably reduce, the powerful tendencies of offenders to continue in criminal behavior' (1974: 49 as cited in Sarre, 2001). The phrase embodied frustration with the perceived impotence of the dispositional approach to understanding why criminals offend. This frustration was compounded by failed attempts to reduce delinquency through welfare programs. Although Martinson recanted his "Nothing Works" assessment in 1979 (Sarre, 2001), some crime researchers were already shifting their focus from the character of criminals to the nature of the criminal act, inspired in part by an assumption that

in any given situation the commission of a crime is essentially the result of a calculated decision about whether or not to offend.

While not a new perspective – Beccaria (2008 originally 1765) had articulated a similar view of crime in the eighteenth century – the idea that offending is based on balancing 'rational incentives and deterrence' was given new weight by Wilson's *Thinking About Crime* (1983). Analysing the situations in which the rational decision to proceed with a crime occurs frequently was a logical next step. Manipulating those situations to reduce the frequency of crimes became the goal of SCP, which identified location, opportunity, and reasoned choices as the key elements of criminal activity. This essay argues that the manner in which SCP blended these elements to focus on preventing physical crimes– committed in physical spaces – obscured important implications of its theoretical underpinnings.

The importance of studying the locations in which crimes occur, carried out with a view to preventing crime through manipulation of the physical environment, was articulated by American criminologist C. Ray Jeffrey in the 1971 and 1977 editions of his book *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (1977). Reflecting the shift in emphasis away from understanding why people offend, Jeffrey (1977) argued that studying the area in which an offense occurred was at least as important as analysing the area in which the offender lived. The significance of the physical locations in which crimes occur was also highlighted by the work of architect and city planner Oscar Newman who introduced 'defensible space theory' (Newman, 1972 as cited in Reynald and Elffers, 2009). The concepts of crime "hot spots" and the 'criminality of place' added weight to the argument that factors other than the disposition of the offender were giving rise to criminal activity (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1995: 1).

The connection between the physical location of crime and the choice to offend had been made in one of the founding documents of SCP: *Crime as Opportunity* (Mayhew, P.M., Clarke, R. V. G., Sturman A. and Hough, J.M., 1976 as cited in Clarke, 2012). Later publications would refine this view of crime (Felson and Clarke, 1998) by incorporating further developments in criminological thinking such as the drive to 'evaluate the structure of direct-contact predatory violations' (Felson and Cohen, 1980: 392). A critical observation made by Felson and Cohen was that social, economic, and technological factors drive increases in the opportunities for crime; they listed as examples: 'married women in the labor force, persons living alone, and lightweight durable goods' (1980, 1). From their analysis Felson and Cohen derived routine activity theory; this states that crimes occur when there is 'convergence in space and time of offenders, of suitable targets, and the absence of effective guardians' (1980, 1). For Clarke (1997b) and others this triangle of elements neatly defined criminal opportunity; adjustments to one or more elements had the potential to prevent crimes from occurring. A table of SCP strategies to make those adjustments was put forth to offer practical guidance, eventually evolving from the 12 original strategies to 16 and then 25 (Department of Criminology, 2014).

The eagerness to put SCP into practice and achieve documented reductions in crime may account for the lack of the attention paid to the warning sounded by Felson and Cohen in the conclusion to their 1980 promulgation of routine activity theory. After stating that 'opportunity for predatory crime appears to be enmeshed in the opportunity structure for legitimate activities,' they went on to warn that this could be true to such a degree that: 'it might be very difficult to root out substantial amounts of crime without modifying much of our way of life' (1980: 404). The notion that major and potentially unachievable modifications to a society's way of life would be required

to substantially reduce crime is a criticism that proponents of SCP have levelled against "root cause" approaches to crime prevention (Clarke, 1983).

Failure to note or heed this warning could be due to another critical factor in the evolution of SCP: the rough reception it received at the hands of many criminologists. The last line of the first review of *Crime as Opportunity* reads: 'It is a touching, if unworldly idea – like playing with one's toes. But it won't catch on.' (Beeson, 1976: 20 as cited in Clarke, 2012). Despite this reaction, SCP began to exercise considerable influence over official crime policy, notably in the U.K. In 1984 the Home Office declared that the best way forward for crime prevention, at least for the short-term, was 'to reduce through management, design or changes in the environment the opportunities that exist for crime to occur' (Home Office, 1984 as cited in Gilling and Barton, 1997: 67).

Even with this endorsement, proponents of SCP continued to feel both defensive and combative, but over time they were able to point to a growing number of programs in different communities that had achieved reductions in specific crimes through targeted opportunity reduction strategies (Clarke, 1983, 1997a; Guerette and Bowers, 2009). Nevertheless, many criminologists continued to voice scepticism, notably on the problem summed up in the title of one research paper: 'Does crime just move around the corner?' (Weisburd, D., Wyckoff, L.A. and Ready, J., 2006). If criminals do make rational choices, then a possible response to an opportunity reduction programme in one place is to commit other crimes elsewhere. This is the phenomenon of crime displacement, known as *spatial displacement* if crime just moves around the corner; however, four additional displacement possibilities were identified early on by Reppetto: changing timing, choosing alternative targets, applying different tactics, and trying a different type of crime (Reppetto, 1976 as cited in Gabor, 1990).

As government funding for SCP schemes became available, targeted crime prevention studies began to demonstrate the effectiveness of opportunity reduction. While studying the data for signs of displacement, researchers were able to document another phenomenon: diffusion of benefits, the 'unexpected reduction of crimes not directly targeted by the preventive action' (Clarke and Weisburd, 1994: 1). Two reviews of SCP programs argued that displacement was minimal and diffusion of benefits considerable, at times outweighing the negative effects of displacement (Weisburd et al., 2006; Guerette and Bowers, 2009). This view of SCP came to be widely accepted in some circles; however, a more recent secondary analysis of the literature has found that 'the orthodox view of crime displacement and diffusion of benefits is overall, based on a questionable weighting of the evidence' (Philips, 2011: 26).

Unfortunately, all of these studies were hampered by the focus of SCP on physical situations and thus proximal crimes. The possibility that a robber who was thwarted by increased police patrols in his neighbourhood might turn his hand to credit card fraud or selling bootlegged movies does not seem to have been considered. As robberies and motor vehicle thefts began to decline on a national scale, arguably as a result of opportunity reduction schemes, scant thought seems to have been accorded to that fifth form of displacement: trying a different type of crime, possibly something less physical. For example, by the late 1990s the Internet was providing many opportunities to sell counterfeit goods without leaving the house, a form of cybercrime that has plagued online shoppers, and the makers of the genuine articles, since the opening of eBay in 1995 (Computer Reseller News UK, 1997).

The essay will return to cybercrime after addressing another important criticism of SCP: potentially negative aesthetic and social impacts. For example, if you put bars on the windows of homes in a neighbourhood to discourage burglary you could affect the way residents perceive that neighbourhood. Does the area now look more "risky"? Will that increase fear of crime (FOC)? It will, according to Whattam who concluded that: 'the presence of SCP/security measures … is shown to contribute to heightening levels of fear amongst members of the public' (2011: 36).

Space does not permit a review of the deleterious effects of fear of crime on quality of life; however, the term "fortress society" seems an appropriate phrase to characterize this and related problems that SCP might cause if opportunity reduction is not balanced with awareness of its unintended effects (Wortley, 1996). Decisions about excluding from certain areas or activities persons who fit a certain profile of perceived security risk can lead to unwarranted discrimination and a sense of inequality, as can the erection of walls and gates around entire neighbourhoods, so-called gated communities (Garland, 2004).

Clarke (2005) has argued that gated communities are not an issue for SCP. He has also defended SCP against other objections, such as the claim that SCP does not address the root causes of crime (2005). Unfortunately, proponents of SCP have mounted two different and inherently opposing defences against this charge. First, it was claimed that ignoring root causes was a virtue because it enabled practical attempts to prevent crime through opportunity reduction to move forward unencumbered by larger issues. According to Clarke (1992: 3 as cited in Wortley, 1996) SCP 'relies... not upon improving society or its institutions, but simply upon reducing opportunities for crime'. Newman and Clarke (2003, 10) characterize the relationship between SCP and the causes of crime like this: 'the big sociological why, the why of "the causes of crime", is not addressed'.

Nevertheless, Felson and Clarke (1998) did claim that opportunity was a major cause of crime, although they stopped short of saying it was a root cause. Striking a middle ground, Pease and Farrell (2014: 67) assert that SCP is not a root cause of crime, but a 'compost cause', noting 'composts are quicker and easier to manipulate' just as 'situations are easier to shape than people'. On balance, this essay finds that while SCP does not address the root causes of crime, this does not undermine the practical value and versatility of SCP, which has been variously described as: 'the science of reducing opportunities for crime' (Clarke and Eck, 2003: 93); 'a form of risk management' (O'Malley, 1992: 262 as cited in Hughes: 1998); 'a highly effective means of crime control' (Clarke, 2012: p.7); and 'a viable strategy for reducing the occurrence of crimes' (Tonry and Farrington, 1995: 8).

SCP still has a serious role to play in crime reduction as well as security and risk management, so the question then becomes: if failure to address the root causes of crime is not SCP's main problem, what is? According to this essay the answer is: failure to fully address the phenomenon of changes in society producing new opportunities for crime, potentially at a faster rate than those opportunities can be reduced. This is the phenomenon that Felson and Cohen (1980:404) warned about in their early work on routine activity theory when they wrote: 'opportunity for predatory crime appears to be enmeshed in the opportunity structure for legitimate activities'. Indeed, the phrase "opportunity structure for legitimate activities" is an apt description of the place where a massive and global crime wave is currently in progress: cyberspace.

The rapid adoption of digital technologies over the past two decades has not only created innumerable opportunities for people, businesses, economies and countries; it has also created

many opportunities for cybercrime, 'crimes in which computer networks are the target or a substantial tool' (Koops, 2011). As Wall observes: '"cyberspace crime" would have been a more accurate descriptor' but 'the term "cybercrime" prevails as the accepted term' (2008: 863). Also accepted is the fact that computer technology has been creating crime opportunities since before companies and consumers embraced the Internet. Consider the title of the 1994 U.K. Audit Commission report: *Opportunity Makes a Thief* (Audit Commission, 1994). A key finding of that report, based on 1,073 organizations reporting computer abuse in 1993, was a 183% increase in the total value of reported incidents over a similar study in 1990. It is worth noting that in 1993 there were less than 30,000 domains on the Internet; today there almost 300 million (Hobbes, 2014).

Despite clear indications that the networking of computer systems greatly increases their potential for criminal abuse (Cobb, 1995), few calls for restraint in the adoption of network technologies were heard, at least on the basis of the criminal opportunities that they create. Today, despite a lack of reliable statistics about the amount of cybercrime, there is ample evidence that those opportunities have generated large numbers in four key areas: the number of incidents, the number of victims, the value of goods stolen, and the financial rewards to criminal participants (for a fairly rigorous analysis see Anderson, A., Barton, C., Bohme, R., Clayton, R., van Eeten, M. J. G., Levi, M., Moore, M. and Savage, S. (2010)).

To put cybercrime numbers in context, consider the 2013 attack in which 1,800 stores belonging to U.S. retailer Target were penetrated. Thieves compromised 40 million payment card records, impacting over 100 million people (Star Tribune, 2014). By taking advantage of the opportunity that Target gave its suppliers to manage orders online, criminals earned around $54 million, based on the amount of money they charged when they sold the stolen data in online markets; meanwhile, banks paid $200 million to replace compromised card (Krebs, 2014a).

Many cybercrime schemes employ proven business strategies such as division of labour, specialization, modularity, and marketing, including A/B testing; furthermore, a large percentage of cybercrime is enabled by a sophisticated system of virtual markets that facilitate the buying, selling, and renting of cybercrime tools, resources, and stolen data (Krebs, 2014b, Ablon et al., 2014). Cybercrimes are often executed by ad hoc groups of geographically dispersed individuals who have been developing virtualized trust mechanisms for at least ten years (Krebs, 2014b; Holt and Smirnova, 2010). A realistic assessment of the current state of affairs is provided by the Institute of Chartered Accountants (2014): 'there is a growing gap between business and cyber attacker capabilities … Many businesses are falling further behind and the risks are growing'.

The argument is not that SCP has been silent on fighting cybercrime. IT security practitioners regularly employ technique number one in the table of SCP strategies: target hardening. The cybersecurity concept of "kill chains" has valuable parallels in "crime scripts" (Cornish, 1994, as cited in Clarke, 2012). Some criminologists were quick to apply SCP to cybercrime (Newman and Clarke, 2003). Unfortunately, the speed at which their recommendations have been outpaced reveals the nature of the problem: it is hard to "follow the money" when today's cybercriminals prefer to take their profits in a crypto-currency like Bitcoin that did not exist in 2003 (Bradbury, 2013).

It is therefore concluded that the main problem with situational crime prevention is its failure to acknowledge the following: just as crime prevention that is based on addressing the root causes

of crime faces a daunting future because it requires fundamental changes in society, so too does any crime prevention approach based on reducing opportunities. Cybercrime is driven by the abundance of 'opportunity for predatory crime' that is clearly 'enmeshed in the opportunity structure for legitimate activities' (Felson and Cohen, 1979: 404). This makes it is hard to escape the conclusion that cybercrime will not be substantially reduced without either addressing the root causes of crime, or scaling back the use of cyber technology and thus 'modifying much of our way of life' (Felson and Cohen, 1979: 404).

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