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Reorienting Crime Prevention Research and Policy: From the Causes of Criminality to the Context of Crime

A paper presented at the 1996 conference on criminal justice research and evaluation

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
633 Indiana Avenue N.W.
Washington, DC 20531

Janet Reno
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice

John C. Dwyer
Acting Associate Attorney General

Laurie Robinson
Assistant Attorney General

Jeremy Travis
Director, National Institute of Justice

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David Weisburd

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Jeremy Travis
Director

David Weisburd is Associate Professor of Criminology in the Faculty of Law, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel, and Senior Research Scientist at the Police Foundation.

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Introduction

Crime prevention research and policy have traditionally been concerned with offenders or potential offenders. Researchers have looked to define strategies that would deter individuals from involvement in crime or rehabilitate them so they would no longer want to commit criminal acts. In recent years crime prevention efforts have often focused on the incapacitation of high-rate or dangerous offenders so they are not free to victimize law-abiding citizens. In the public debate over crime prevention policies, these strategies are usually defined as competing approaches. However, they have in common a central assumption about crime prevention research and policy: that efforts to understand and control crime must begin with the offender. In all of these approaches, the focus of crime prevention is on people and their involvement in criminality.

Although this assumption continues to dominate crime prevention research and policy (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1990; Felson, 1994), it has begun to be challenged by a very different approach that seeks to shift the focus of crime prevention efforts. The new approach developed in large part as a response to the failures of traditional theories and programs. The 1970s, which saw a shattering of traditional assumptions about the effectiveness of crime prevention efforts (see, e.g., Lipton et al., 1975; Martinson, 1974; Sechrest et al., 1979), led to a reevaluation of research and policy about crime prevention (Visher and Weisburd, 1997). For many scholars and policymakers, this meant having to rethink assumptions about criminality and how offenders might be prevented from participating in crime. But others suggested that a more radical reorientation of crime prevention efforts was warranted. They argued that the shift must come not in terms of the specific strategies or theories that were used but in terms of the unit of analysis that formed the basis of crime prevention efforts. This new crime prevention effort called for a focus not on people who commit crime but on the context in which crime occurs.

This approach, which is often associated with situational crime prevention, looks to develop greater understanding of crime and more effective crime prevention strategies through concern with

the physical, organizational, and social environments that make crime possible (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1990; Clarke, 1980, 1983, 1992, 1995a; Cornish and Clarke, 1986). The situational approach does not ignore offenders; it merely places them as one part of a broader crime prevention equation that is centered on the context of crime. It demands a shift in the approach to crime prevention, from one that is concerned primarily with why people commit crime to one that looks primarily at why crime occurs in specific settings. It moves the context of crime into central focus and places the traditional focus of crime—the offender—as one of a number of factors that affect it.

This Research Report argues that reorientation of crime prevention research and policy from the causes of criminality to the context of crime provides much promise. It also suggests that much more work must be done before it can be assumed that this shift in focus will lead to more successful crime prevention policies. To place these issues in context, this Report:

- Reviews the factors that have hindered development of a situational approach to crime prevention research and policy in the past and those that have contributed to its growing influence in recent years.
- Compares the relative strengths of this approach with more traditional approaches to crime prevention.
- Identifies areas where situational crime prevention has generated new insights about the crime problem and potential responses to it.
- Discusses the strength of evidence that supports situational crime prevention strategies.
- Recommends development of a research agenda that permits a critical exploration of the assumptions of situational prevention by improving evaluation methods and expanding the boundaries of study beyond applied crime prevention problems.

Why Crime Prevention Research and Policy Have Traditionally Ignored the Context of Crime

At the core of situational prevention is the concept of opportunity (Clarke, 1995b; Cornish, 1993). In contrast to offender-based approaches to crime prevention that usually focus on the dispositions of criminals, situational crime prevention begins with the opportunity structure of the crime situation. By opportunity structure, advocates of this perspective are not referring to the broad societal structure of opportunities that underlie individual motivations for crime (see, e.g., Merton, 1938) but to the immediate situational components of the context of crime. Their approach to crime prevention is to try to reduce the opportunities for crime in specific situations. This may involve efforts as simple and straightforward as target hardening (e.g., Poyner et al., 1988; Webb and Laycock, 1992) or access control (e.g., Matthews, 1990; Poyner and Webb, 1987) and often follows a commonsense notion of how to deal with crime problems that has long been accepted by citizens and practitioners who deal with crime prevention at the everyday level of protecting property or reducing victimization (Tonry and Farrington, 1995). But there has been resistance to this approach almost from the outset among scholars and policymakers who craft crime prevention research and policy.

This resistance is often stated in reference to the problem of displacement (Farrington et al., 1993:4; Laycock and Tilley, 1995), which refers to the shift of crime in terms of either space, time, or type of offending from the original targets of crime prevention interventions (Repetto, 1976). Based on assumptions about the large number of crime opportunities available in modern societies and the highly motivated nature of much offending, crime prevention scholars have traditionally assumed that most of the crime control benefits of situational prevention strategies would be lost due to displacement. Some early studies of displacement appeared to support this position (e.g., Chaiken et al., 1974; Lateef, 1974; Mayhew et al., 1976; Press, 1971; Tyrpak, 1975). However, careful review of these findings as well as a series of

recent studies of displacement in the 1980s and 1990s has led to agreement that displacement of crime prevention benefits is seldom total and often inconsequential (Barr and Pease, 1990; Clarke, 1992; Eck, 1993; Gabor, 1990; Hesseling, 1994).

Evidence suggesting that displacement is less of a problem for situational prevention than had originally been assumed can be understood only by abandoning simplistic assumptions about opportunity and crime that have been predominant among crime prevention scholars. The idea that criminal opportunities are indiscriminately spread through urban areas has been challenged by a series of studies showing that crime is concentrated in time and space (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1981; Sherman et al., 1989; Weisburd et al., 1992; Weisburd and Green, 1994). Moreover, criminal opportunities are differentially distributed, both in terms of the benefits they offer and the ease with which they can be seized. In one study of situational measures used to prevent bank robberies, for example, little displacement was noted to other types of targets (convenience stores and gas stations), primarily because they did not offer enough financial reward for the criminal gangs that had victimized the targeted banks (Clarke et al., 1991). Using the example of homes and cars, Clarke (1995a:106) suggests that what appears at first glance as an endless quantity of criminal opportunities may be bounded by issues of guardianship and significant variation in the value of goods that can be stolen (see also Hesseling, 1994).

The portrait of offenders as driven to criminality has also been replaced in good measure by one that recognizes the situational, often serendipitous, character of much offending (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). Evidence shows that situational characteristics may lead to a dampening of displacement impacts, even for crimes that have been assumed most vulnerable to them. For example, in an evaluation of a crackdown on prostitution in Finsbury Park, London, Matthews (1990) found little evidence of displacement. He explains this fact by noting that the women involved were not strongly committed to prostitution but looked at the targeted locations as easy areas from which to solicit. In studies of drug markets, similar crime prevention benefits without displacement have been noted (Weisburd and Green, 1995a; Green, 1995). Taking into account evidence that drug offenders

are responsive to situational factors (e.g., Cromwell et al., 1991) and the importance of such factors in the "geography of the illicit retail marketplace" (Eck, 1995), such findings are not difficult to understand. Indeed, in studies in Jersey City, New Jersey (Weisburd and Green, 1995a), and Oakland, California (Green, 1995), evidence of a completely different type of unanticipated consequence of situational prevention has been documented. In these cases investigators found improvement in areas close to but not targeted by crime prevention efforts.

Clarke and Weisburd argue that this phenomenon is general enough to be deserving of a standard term, which they define as "diffusion" (Clarke and Weisburd, 1994). Elsewhere investigators have described it as the "free rider" effect (Miethe, 1991), the "bonus" effect (Sherman, 1990), the "halo" effect (Scherdin, 1986), and the "multiplier effect" (Chaiken et al., 1974). Diffusion is the reverse of displacement. It refers to the diffusion of crime control benefits to contexts that are not the primary focus of crime prevention initiatives. Diffusion has been documented in crime prevention strategies as diverse as police crackdowns (e.g., Sherman, 1990; Weisburd and Green, 1995a), book protection systems (e.g., Scherdin, 1986), electronic surveillance (e.g., Poyner and Webb, 1987), and enforcement of civil regulations at nuisance locations (e.g., Green, 1996).

Some situational crime prevention scholars have seen the growing critique of the displacement hypothesis and the concurrent growth of evidence of diffusion of crime control benefits as leading to an end to the overall academic skepticism that has surrounded situational approaches (Clarke, 1995a; Laycock and Tilley, 1995). But irrespective of the growing confidence of situational prevention scholars, many crime prevention experts still view the context of crime as of secondary importance in the development of crime prevention research and policy. Many mainstream theorists (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) and researchers (e.g., Earls, 1991) now recognize that situational components of crime cannot be ignored. However, they place these in the context of their relationship to the motivations and actions of individual offenders. Situational prevention is, for the most part, viewed as a stopgap measure that is necessary as long as no real understanding exists of the causes of individual crimi-

nality (see, e.g., Earls, 1991). The context of crime remains a secondary concern, even as the assumptions that have most hampered its original acceptance in crime prevention research and policy have begun to be overturned.

Advantages of the Situational Approach

Although crime prevention continues to focus on criminals and not on the context of crime, both scholars and practitioners are increasingly aware of the significant barriers to developing effective offender-based crime prevention policies. In part this concern has been produced by the basic research agenda associated with understanding the causes and development of criminality. Researchers have found it difficult to identify who is likely to become a serious offender or to predict the timing and types of future offenses that repeat offenders are likely to commit (e.g., Albrecht and Moitra, 1988; Barnett and Lofaso, 1985; Blumstein and Cohen, 1979; Elliott et al., 1987; Estrict et al., 1983; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1992). This means that present knowledge does not offer a clear program for either selecting individuals who would be amenable to crime prevention interventions or developing effective crime prevention strategies that would alter the patterns of criminality among offenders (Earls, 1991; Earls and Carlson, 1995). Even where there is stronger evidence of prediction—for example, in the case of specialization for some types of adult offenders (e.g., Blumstein et al., 1988; Kempf, 1986)—legal and ethical dilemmas make it difficult to base criminal justice policies on models that still include a substantial degree of statistical error (Moore, 1986).

Given the difficulty of predicting criminality, it is perhaps not surprising that applied research in offender-centered crime prevention has more often than not illustrated the significant barriers that are faced in the development of successful interventions. Beginning with Robert Martinson's critique of rehabilitation programs in 1974 (see also Lipton et al., 1975), there have been a series of studies documenting the failures of traditional crime prevention initiatives (e.g., Sechrest et al., 1979; Whitehead and Lab, 1989). A number of scholars argue that many such failures are due to inadequacies in program development and research design in prior studies (e.g., Farrington et al., 1986; Goldstein, 1990). Moreover, some reviews have stressed that examples of successful offender-focused crime prevention efforts exist and

can provide guidance in developing more effective prevention policies (Farrington, 1983; Lipsey, 1992). Nonetheless, even those scholars who look to improve such policies have come to recognize the difficulties inherent in trying to do something about criminality (Visher and Weisburd, 1997). Summarizing the overall standing of what they define as traditional "offender centred" crime prevention, Patricia and Paul Brantingham write:

> If traditional approaches worked well, of course, there would be little pressure to find new forms of crime prevention. If traditional approaches worked well, few people would possess criminal motivation and fewer still would actually commit crimes. (1990:19)

Situational prevention advocates argue that the context of crime provides a promising alternative to traditional offender-based crime prevention policies. They assume for the most part that situations are a more stable and predictable focus for crime prevention efforts than are persons. In part this assumption develops from commonsense notions of the relationship between opportunities and crime. For example, shoplifting is by definition clustered in stores and not residences, and family disputes are unlikely to be a problem in industrial areas. High-crime places, in contrast to high-crime people, cannot flee to avoid criminal justice intervention. Crime that develops from the specific characteristics of certain marketplaces or organizations cannot be easily transferred to other organizational contexts (Goldstock, 1991).

Theoretical support for the predictability of crime in specific contexts is also strong. Following the insights of "routine activities theory" (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 1986, 1994), advocates of the situational approach to crime prevention argue that specific types of targets are found in specific situations, and the type of criminal activity that develops in such situations is linked strongly to both the nature and guardianship of those targets and the nature of the offenders that converge within them. When combining this approach with a "rational choice perspective" that emphasizes the rationality of offender decisions about criminality (Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cornish and Clarke, 1986), a significant degree of specialization of crime is expected. For example, robberies are seen as most likely to be found in places

where many pedestrians stroll (such as bus stops and business districts), where there are few police or informal guardians (e.g., doormen), and where a supply of motivated offenders can be found nearby or at least within easy public transportation access. Such places are not likely to be centers for prostitution, which would favor easy access of cars (and little interference by shopkeepers who are likely to object to the obvious nature of street solicitations), nor flashing, which is more likely to be found in the more anonymous environments of public parks (see Sherman, 1995).

Empirical support for these assumptions has been developed for a number of different types of crimes and crime situations (Clarke, 1992, 1995a). Recent studies, for example, point to a significant concentration of crime events at crime "hot spots," usually defined as a cluster of addresses or street segments (Pierce et al., 1986; Sherman et al., 1989; Weisburd et al., 1992; Weisburd and Green, 1994). Lawrence Sherman (1995) argues that such clustering of crime at places is even greater than the concentration of crime among individuals. Using data from Minneapolis, Minnesota, and comparing these to the concentration of offending in the Philadelphia Cohort Study (see Wolfgang et al., 1972), Sherman notes that future crime is "six times more predictable by the address of the occurrence than by the identity of the offender" (1995:36–37). He asks: "Why aren't we doing more about it? Why aren't we thinking more about whereduit, rather than whodunit?"

Specialization has been identified even within crime types that ordinarily go undifferentiated in crime prevention analyses and programs. For example, Eck (1995) and Weisburd and Green (1994) find a high degree of specialization in the context of street-level drug markets. Not only are specific drugs concentrated in specific drug markets, but a clear relationship exists between the physical and geographic characteristics of the markets and the drugs that predominate in them. Such relationships are explained by the nature of the use of the drugs involved and the types of individuals most likely to buy and sell them. Poyner and Webb (1991) also point to the importance of recognizing specialization within crime categories. They show that residential burglaries committed for cash and jewelry are carried out by opportunistic offenders who walk to their targets, while residential burglaries

committed for electronic goods demand more committed offenders who drive to their targets. The importance of easy access by cars on the one hand and the more spontaneous aspect of crime events on the other have important implications for understanding the types of burglaries that occur in different contexts.

Although these and other studies suggest that scholars may have more success in predicting crime in situations than crimes of persons, such assumptions should not be made too quickly. In the first case, much of this evidence is drawn from applied research studies that focus on assessments of crime prevention efforts. In turn, in a few studies that have subjected these assumptions to large-scale empirical analysis, results have been mixed. For example, Weisburd et al. (1992) do find a degree of specialization of crime types at crime hot spots but report that most places show a mix of related offenses (see also Sherman, 1995). After examining the criminal "careers" of public places in Boston over a 3-year period, Spelman suggests that a substantial reduction in crime can result by concentrating crime prevention efforts at the worst locations. Nonetheless, he concludes that "[m]uch of the concentration of crime among locations is due to random and temporary fluctuations that are beyond the power of the police and the public to control reliably" (1995:142).

Whatever the empirical support for the assumptions underlying situational approaches, an array of applied studies point to the success of situational measures in reducing crime and crime-related problems. These studies have been reviewed extensively elsewhere (see Clarke, 1992, 1995a; Poyner, 1993). Nonetheless, it is important to note that they span a broad group of crime contexts and involve numerous opportunity-reducing measures. Clarke (1995a) suggests that such programs can be divided into the following 12 categories:

- Target hardening (e.g., Webb and Laycock, 1992).
- Access control (e.g., Matthews, 1990).
- Offender deflection (e.g., through physical barriers; see Shearing and Stenning, 1984).
- Facilitator control (e.g., gun controls; see Earls, 1991).

- Entry/exit screening (e.g., Scherdin, 1986).
- Formal surveillance (e.g., security guards or electronic screening systems; see Scherdin, 1986).
- Employee surveillance (e.g., doormen; see Waller and Okihiro, 1978).
- Natural surveillance (e.g., street lighting; see Ramsay, 1991a).
- Target removal (e.g., Markus, 1984).
- Property identification (e.g., Clarke and Harris, 1992).
- Inducement removal (e.g., rapid repair; see Smith, 1995).
- Rule setting (e.g., Ramsay, 1991b).

Based on such successful case studies, there is growing interest among both scholars and practitioners in the situational approach (Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Tonry and Farrington, 1995). Nonetheless, in most of these studies, the methods of evaluation used meet only minimal technical standards, followup is often short, and reliable control groups are generally absent (Clarke, 1995a). It should be noted that crime prevention scholars and practitioners were in general agreement regarding the effectiveness of offender-based prevention programs before Robert Martinson (1974) reported the results of his systematic review of existing research. In good part he and his colleagues (Lipton et al., 1975) found that the weaker the research design employed, the more likely that success was to be reported. The evidence supporting situational prevention appears so broad as to make a similar conclusion unlikely. Moreover, a few recently completed experimental studies do show significant crime prevention effects (e.g., Sherman and Weisburd, 1995; Weisburd and Green, 1995a). Nonetheless, the enthusiasm surrounding situational prevention must be tempered by the weakness of the methods used in most existing evaluation studies.

Defining a Research Agenda for the Future

Although there is reason for optimism concerning the situational approach to crime prevention, substantial gaps still exist in the knowledge of how crime develops in specific contexts and in the assessment of the overall success of situational prevention initiatives. In part such gaps have developed from a lack of basic research examining the context of crime. Studies of situational crime prevention have most often been applied. This is the case, in part, because of a traditional lack of interest in situational prevention among funders of basic research issues. But it also results from the emphasis on practical crime prevention that is implied by the most common designation of this perspective as "situational crime prevention." The basic concern of situational crime prevention scholars has been with what works in crime prevention. They have been less concerned with basic research questions that underlie the situational perspective.

If the context of crime is to occupy a central place in understanding the crime problem, a basic research agenda must be developed. Such an agenda should focus on three main issues. First, researchers should gain a greater understanding of the factors that influence the development of crime in specific contexts. Such research is likely to take a direction similar to that of offender-based studies of criminal careers (Blumstein et al., 1986; for an application of this perspective to places, see Sherman, 1995). For example, researchers should consider why crime develops in a particular place, situation, or organizational context—what criminal career theorists define in terms of offenders as the problem of "onset." They also should develop knowledge on why some criminal contexts include a very high rate of criminal activity and others experience only a few incidents, or why some include more serious crimes. That is, they should understand the factors that influence the "frequency" or intensity of offending and its seriousness.

A major factor that has impeded offender-focused crime prevention is the lack of "specialization" in criminal careers. Research-

ers should define the extent to which there is specialization in the types of offending that occur in criminal contexts and develop a greater understanding of situations in which there is "transition" among offenses. Finally, they should define more carefully the factors that lead to a cessation of criminality in specific contexts. This is particularly important given the claims of success of situational prevention advocates. Both the natural and programmatic influences that lead to "desistance" of crime situations should be explored.

Although the basic themes of criminal career research can be applied easily to criminal contexts, scholars will face significant challenges in defining common units of analysis to carry out such studies. The boundaries of context are not as easily defined as those of persons. Complexity in criminal career research has increased as a result of the concept of co-offending (Reiss and Farrington, 1991), which suggests that there may be a diverse set of potential units for understanding the development of crime among persons—from the individual, to the family, to the friendship group, to larger units such as gangs. Nevertheless, the diversity of potential units of analysis is much greater in the study of the contexts of crime. Context may be defined in terms of physical places (e.g., Eck and Weisburd, 1995; Sherman et al., 1989) or organizational settings (e.g., Goldstock, 1991). Even within a common type of context, such as place, a variety of potential definitions can be applied to units for analysis. For example, study of crime hot spots has focused on addresses (e.g., Sherman et al., 1989; Spelman, 1995), block faces (e.g., Sherman and Weisburd, 1995), and large areas or neighborhoods (e.g., Cohen et al., 1993). Hot spot studies have also included units of various physical size, based on criteria of the clustering or consistency of crime events (e.g., Block, 1994; Weisburd and Green, 1994). The diversity of potential units for study may add to the sophistication of knowledge about the context of crime. Nonetheless, such ambiguity points to the importance of clearly defining what is meant by context in any particular study.

A basic research agenda is also needed to assess the related issues of displacement and diffusion. Evidence of these effects has been gained primarily as a byproduct of studies that examine the direct impacts of crime prevention programs (Weisburd and Green,

1995b). Accordingly, such studies are designed to examine the main effects of a program; only secondarily and often simply as a defense against potential criticism do they respond to concerns about displacement and diffusion. The weakness of this approach is twofold. First, there is often a tension between research design for measuring direct effects and displacement and diffusion effects (Weisburd and Green, 1995b). For example, given the choice of investing resources in measurement of direct or potentially diffuse displacement outcomes (see Barr and Pease, 1990), it is more practical for the evaluator to invest resources in the main effects of the study. But it is also the case that applied crime prevention studies are unlikely to allow a broad review of the nature of displacement and diffusion impacts. Such studies are generally designed to minimize displacement and maximize diffusion effects. They do not provide an optimal context in which to gain a reliable understanding of how displacement and diffusion operate in a diverse set of circumstances.

To better understand displacement and diffusion, studies should be initiated that are directed at these effects and not at the primary outcomes of crime prevention initiatives. Such studies would be concerned with main program impacts only in so far as they provide a setting for understanding displacement and diffusion. For example, they might use knowledge about successful crime prevention initiatives to manipulate the form and intensity of displacement and diffusion. They might also bring successful initiatives to bear in a variety of different situations and settings to assess how the context of crime influences potential displacement and diffusion impacts. Such studies would allow researchers to focus on methodological problems associated with measurement of displacement and diffusion, in particular those that relate to the potential for such effects to be dispersed across space, time, and offense type (see Barr and Pease, 1990).

A third area of basic research has less to do with the effectiveness of situational approaches than with their application in real human settings. It does not take a sustained research effort to recognize that cracking down on a place or situation and cracking down on an offender are likely to have different implications in terms of both legal norms and public perceptions. Situational approaches have in part been advocated on this basis, under the

assumption that situational approaches to crime prevention present fewer legal and ethical difficulties than do offender-based initiatives. Nonetheless, legal and moral questions may be raised about the potential intrusiveness of situational crime prevention measures in the everyday lives of ordinary people (see, e.g., Green, 1996). The legal and moral implications of situational prevention as well as its acceptability in the context of modern American life should be a focus of research. To date, there has been only limited discussion of the legal implications of situational prevention strategies and the long-term impacts that widespread adoption of situational measures might have on the quality of everyday life. Such discussion needs to be informed by concentrated legal scholarship and social research.

Basic research will not only help to develop a broader based understanding of the contexts of crime, it will also facilitate concrete policy decisionmaking. Present knowledge neither offers a solid basis on which to define a widespread societal approach to situational prevention nor permits confident assertion that the assumptions underlying situational crime prevention are more solid than those that underlie offender-based prevention programs. Basic research in these areas will fill important gaps in understanding and provide guidance and insight for public policy initiatives.

Although basic research is crucial to the development of effective situational crime prevention initiatives, a more methodologically sophisticated approach to applied studies in this area should also be encouraged. Summarizing the evaluation studies that provide the bulk of positive evidence about situational prevention, Ronald Clarke writes:

> [I]t has to be recognized that in most cases the individual evaluations were comparatively rudimentary. Followups were often short, so little is known about the durability of success. True experimental designs were almost completely absent from the studies (most of which consisted of simple time-series or quasi-experimental designs), with the result that in most cases it was impossible to be sure that the identified situational measures had produced the observed reduction in crime. (1995a:108)

In many areas of situational crime prevention practice, the rhetoric of success has clearly outstripped the empirical evidence available. Problem-oriented policing, for example, which uses an action research model similar to that suggested in situational prevention (see Goldstein, 1990), has exploded onto the American police scene. However, there is to date not a single controlled study that supports the success of problem-oriented policing and only a handful of solid nonexperimental evaluations (e.g., Eck and Spelman, 1987).

To avoid overstating the effectiveness of situational crime prevention—a common pitfall in crime prevention research generally—researchers should begin to develop more rigorous and controlled evaluations of situational prevention programs. Given the costs of such evaluations, they should focus on those public policy questions of greatest concern and on those programs that suggest the most likelihood of success. In this effort, researchers should draw on lessons learned from the failures of offender-based studies. Too often, scarce research resources have been spent on evaluations of programs that were poorly constructed and implemented and, in retrospect, had little possibility of success in the first place (Farrington et al., 1986; Weisburd, 1993). Funding agencies can help to avoid waste in the development of such research by defining a long-term agenda for applied studies and clearly identifying criteria for evaluation and areas of interest. Whatever that focus may take, it is time to subject situational crime prevention to the same level of scrutiny that has been applied to offender-based programs.

Conclusion

In deciding on crime control policies, policymakers are faced with a difficult dilemma. Societal resources to control crime are scarce and cannot be devoted to every potential crime prevention policy. Hard choices must be made. In this context the role of research and evaluation are particularly important. They can help in making informed decisions about what types of policies are likely to be most effective at the least social and economic cost. Present knowledge suggests that more should be invested in situational crime prevention policies. But the evidence to date should lead as well to caution in embarking on such policies. It is time to invest in basic research concerning the context of crime and in solid controlled evaluations of situational crime prevention programs.

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