

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Eck, John E.: Places and the Crime Triangle

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory
Chapter Title: "Eck, John E.: Places and the Crime Triangle"
Pub. Date: 2010
Access Date: September 16, 2014
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781412959186
Online ISBN: 9781412959193

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n77>

Print pages: 281-285

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n77>

The fact that crime tends to cluster in particular places is widely accepted and supported by a large body of research. French scholars André-Michel Guerry and Adolphe Quetelet were among the first to “map” crime and identify relationships between crime rates and community characteristics. Also, U.S. Chicago School researchers, including Robert Burgess and Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, examined crime patterns and discovered relationships between ecological characteristics and concentrations of criminal activity. However, these early studies ignored the heterogeneous collection of both high-crime and low-crime places that clustered together to form high-crime neighborhoods. Social scientists in the 1970s began to develop a collection of theories to explain this phenomenon. These theories form the basis of environmental criminology, often referred to as *crime science*. Crime science is not concerned with explaining an individual's propensity to commit crime. Instead, crime science research identifies environmental factors that create attractive crime opportunities and proposes interventions to reduce or eliminate these opportunities.

John E. Eck has advanced the crime science paradigm and its application through three significant contributions. First, he extended Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson's routine activity theory by calling attention to the importance of people who manage places. This extension led to the development of the crime triangle. Second, he has continued to investigate new analytical techniques and methods of problem conceptualization to improve research strategies and evaluations of crime reduction initiatives. For example, he has demonstrated the importance of using theory to guide interpretations of crime maps. More recently, he has explored the merits of crime pattern computer simulations for practice and theory. Third, he has helped reduce specific crime problems by producing manuals for police practitioners, crime analysts, and researchers that summarize the basic tenets of environmental criminology and recent evaluation findings. In addition to producing manuals to reduce harms associated with student party riots, pedestrian-vehicle accidents, and spectator violence in stadiums, he developed a crime analysis manual that has been translated into 16 different languages and is used throughout the world. Eck also developed the SARA (scanning, analysis, response, assessment) model, which helps police engage in problem-solving policing.

The primary focus of this essay is Eck's extension of routine activity theory and contribution to the development of the crime triangle. First, the origins of the place management addition to routine activity theory are briefly explored. Second, the various elements of the crime triangle are presented along with a discussion of how the triangle is used to address crime problems. Finally, a recently proposed definition of place management and the latest applications of this concept are presented.

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Place Management

Routine activity theory was published in 1979 by Cohen and Felson. These researchers proposed that crime is a function of people's routine activities. In the original version of this theory, Cohen and Felson argued that crimes occur when motivated offenders find suitable targets not protected by capable guardians. In an attempt to link the theory with Travis Hirschi's control theory, Felson later developed the idea of "handlers." Handlers are people who can influence offender behavior. These individuals can be parents, friends, spouses, teachers, or probation officers. While handlers are people who control potential offenders, guardians are tasked with protecting potential targets.

Eck further extended routine activity theory by proposing a third type of crime controller: the place manager. Managers are people who regulate specific places, such as landlords, bar bouncers, homeowners, and classroom teachers. In conducting research on drug markets during his tenure at the Police Executive Research Forum, Eck discovered that dealers operating open-air drug markets in San Diego, California, often selected places characterized by weak or absent management. A subsequent study published by Eck and Julie Wartell in 1998 found that efforts to improve the management of rental apartment housing increased evictions of drug offenders and decreased crime, providing more evidence to support the proposed association between management practices and crime at places.

The Crime Triangle

The current version of routine activity theory suggests that crime will occur when offenders and targets converge in places where all three controllers—guardians, handlers, and managers—are ineffective, absent, or negligent. The theory is often depicted as the crime triangle, also called the problem analysis triangle (see [Figure 1](#)). The first, inner layer of the triangle lists the three elements that must be present for a crime to occur, while the outer triangle represents the controllers that may intervene on behalf of each element to stop crime from occurring.

The crime triangle is used to guide investigations of crime problems and identify potential solutions. Analyses based on the crime triangle encourage researchers to examine the characteristics of the three elements and three controllers related to a specific crime problem. Interventions to reduce the crimes are then developed by considering whether one or more of the three elements can be altered or removed, and whether one or more of the associated controllers can be made more effective or put into place. The crime triangle is often used to guide the analysis stage of problem-oriented policing projects.

Figure 1 Crime Triangle



Source: Adapted from Cullen, F., Eck, J., & Lowenkamp, C. (2002). Environmental corrections: A new paradigm for effective supervision. *Federal Probation*, 66(2), 28–37.

Eck's contributions to routine activity theory and the problem analysis triangle have encouraged police to work with property and business owners to reduce community crime problems. Research suggests that significant reductions in crime can be achieved through partnerships with place managers. When managers refuse to address crime problems at their places, police have found success in bringing legal action against property owners who facilitate crime. Police efforts to compel place managers to reduce crime opportunities are often referred to as third-party policing.

Defining Place Management

Most recently, place management has been defined as “a set of four processes that owners, their employees, and others use to organize the physical and social environment of a location so that the [p. 283 ↓] functions of the place can be carried out” (Madensen, 2007, p. 19). These processes are (1) *organization of physical space*—the design of the physical space, including site selection, construction, repair, and upkeep; (2) *regulation of conduct*—the promotion of desirable and prohibition of undesirable activities, including but not limited to crime and disorder; (3) *control of access*—the inclusion and exclusion of people, including but not limited to potential offenders; and (4) *acquisition of resources*—the attainment of money and other resources that can be used for the first three processes, as well as any profit.

A recent study by Scott Hoke examined the effects of encouraging correctional officers to act as place managers. The officers were given control over the four place management processes in an attempt to reduce incidents of inmate misconduct. This increase in officer management activities reduced reports of inmate misconduct by more than 77 percent.

The impact of place management on crime helps to explain why two similar facilities in close proximity to each other can have very different crime levels. Bars that generate high numbers of calls for service are often located next to bars that require no police intervention. According to Tamara Madensen and Eck, this difference can

be attributed to the management practices of those who own and operate the specific establishments, rather than community-level influences.

Conclusion

Eck has made substantial contributions to the crime science paradigm through his place-based research. His examinations of crimes at places led to the recognition of place managers and their influence on criminal activity. Research of place management practices has extended our knowledge and understanding of effective crime strategies. Such studies have helped researchers identify the mechanisms through which crime is facilitated or suppressed. The crime triangle, which was derived from the place management extension of routine activity theory, is commonly used to investigate crime problems and develop interventions to reduce crime. As the popularity of the crime science perspective continues to grow, many more researchers and practitioners will likely agree with the assertion that “place should be a central component in crime theory and crime prevention” (Eck & Weisburd, 1995, p. 3). Consequently, place management research will continue to provide critical insight for both crime science theorists and practitioners.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n77>

See also

- [Brantingham, Patricia L., and Paul J. Brantingham: Environmental Criminology](#)
- [Clarke, Ronald V.: Situational Crime Prevention](#)
- [Cohen, Lawrence E., and Marcus K. Felson: Routine Activity Theory](#)
- [Jeffery, C. Ray: Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design](#)
- [Newman, Oscar: Defensible Space Theory](#)
- [Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D. McKay: Social Disorganization Theory](#)

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