

Book Review

Pockets of Crime: Broken Windows, Collective Efficacy, and the Criminal Point of View

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*Pockets of Crime: Broken Windows,
Collective Efficacy, and the Criminal Point of View*

By Peter K. B. St. Jean

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Although not necessarily indicated by the title, the book *Pockets of Crime: Broken Windows, Collective Efficacy, and the Criminal Point of View* by Peter St. Jean should be of interest to environmental criminologists and those interested in crime prevention. St. Jean originally set out to apply ethnographic scrutiny to the claims and assumptions of broken windows (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) and collective efficacy (Sampson et al, 1997) theories. Learning from offenders themselves, he sought to understand how they interpret disorder and neighborhood collectivity (trust, solidarity, and willingness to intervene), thus adding to explanations as to why some city blocks experience considerably more crime than others. The ethnographic data provided little support for either theory, however; and more troubling to St. Jean, the quantitative data showed a weaker relationship existed between collective efficacy, disorder, and crime than expected. He concluded that something was mediating the effects of both collective efficacy and disorder, and that something is what he termed *ecological disadvantage*. St. Jean proposed that specific places within the urban environment provide high levels of criminal opportunity. Within the vernacular of environmental criminology, these places are referred to as crime generators and attractors (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1995).

The author based his thesis of ecological disadvantage on a study of 58 street blocks in a single, high crime, African-American neighborhood in Chicago. The low count of street blocks limited his statistical investigation but revealed that while low social disorder was primarily matched with low-crime street blocks, high social disorder was not necessarily matched with high crime blocks. Additionally, high collective efficacy blocks were predominantly matched with low crime, but low collective efficacy blocks were as likely to be either low or high crime blocks. It was primarily through information provided by an assortment of street-wise offenders, and supported by community members and systematic social observation, that St. Jean arrived at his conclusion of the decisive importance of opportunity.

Chapters, five, six, and seven are particularly enlightening because they detail how offenders utilize ecological (dis)advantage in three specific crimes: drug dealing, street robbery, and battery. Chapter five focuses on street-level drug dealing, where offenders reported that busy intersections located near neighborhood commercial businesses provide increased opportunity by offering easy access to customers, the anonymity needed to conduct an illegal business that

exists in high activity areas, and many ways to escape on foot if confronted by the police. Offenders reported that disorder levels (social and physical) at the selected corner were unimportant, as long as the overall surrounding area exhibits high enough levels to infer a high local demand for illicit drugs. Dealers reported they would remain and confront a neighborhood rallying against them, often through threats and intimidation, to keep the ecological advantage (and profits) a particularly opportune place provided.

Chapter six concentrates on street robbery. Here offender statements supported earlier ethnographic research (e.g., Wright & Decker, 1997) explaining how the presence of neighborhood markets, check-cashing centers, and bars bring together large numbers of distracted people with cash, thus making them suitable targets. Neither disorder levels nor neighborhood protective measures were of significant concern. Opportunity trumped all to these offenders.

Chapter seven focuses on battery crimes. The author theorized that concentrated disadvantage produced many individuals with poor social skills who used violence extensively; and, due to their economic condition, tended to reside together on certain street blocks with extremely low rent. These individuals were responsible for high levels of violence both on their streets and at nearby businesses where they either met inadvertently or sought out others who they had earlier unresolved conflicts. Neighborhood businesses thus generated violence because they served as meeting places of people in conflict, and those who provided alcohol made it that much more dangerous.

In the final chapter St. Jean summarized his findings and made recommendations concerning Broken Windows, collective efficacy, and ecological disadvantage. Considering the importance of opportunity to his thesis, it is surprising he says little about opportunity reduction, never mentioning for instance, CPTED, situational crime prevention, place management, problem-oriented policing, or other place-specific crime prevention tactics.

The book is suitable for graduate courses in both sociology and criminology as long as a supplemental book on environmental criminology is also required reading. Those seeking ethnographic evidence and a deeper understanding of why crime clusters around certain land uses will find it particularly rewarding. The book deserves a place next to the other ethnographies explaining how offenders utilize places and opportunity, including Rengert and Wasilchick's (2000) and Wright and Decker's (1994) studies of burglars, and Wright and Decker's (1997) study of street robbers.

References

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