

Situational Crime Prevention and Co-Offending*

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The crime prevention literature often contrasts “social prevention” and “situational prevention.” Social prevention focuses on reforming individuals through social policies. Situational prevention seeks instead to reduce crime by altering the settings or conditions in which we carry out daily routines, and avoids trying to change offender dispositions. Yet offender dispositions are not their only “social” feature. Much crime, especially at young ages, is “co-offending” carried out in small groups. In addition, offenders at diverse ages socialize in settings that lead to illegal acts in nearby times and places. Such settings are amenable to situational measures. Interestingly, situational crime prevention can alter the size, composition, timing, location, and informal supervision of small group activities and routines. This widens the range of crime reduction possibilities, while undermining the assertion that situational prevention is “non-social.”

INTRODUCTION

The crime prevention literature often contrasts “social prevention” and “situational prevention” (e.g., Rosenbaum, Lurigio and Davis 1998). In common parlance, social prevention focuses on reforming individuals through social policies, often including changes in education, rehabilitation, and youth activities designed to improve character. Situational crime prevention, however, takes individual dispositions towards crime as given. It seeks instead to change the everyday settings, products, and procedures that make crime rewarding and safe for the offender, and easy to carry out (Clarke 1997, 2005).

One could easily conclude that situational prevention is non-social, and some critics indeed dismiss it as “administrative criminology,” further conveying the notion that situational prevention is “non-social,” or even “anti-social” (see Clarke (2005) for a discussion of this and

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other criticisms of situational prevention). In reality, situational prevention and its kindred theories – including crime pattern theory, the routine activity approach, crime geography, and rational choice theory – display a keen awareness of human social characteristics, including human responsiveness to environmental cues (see Wortley and Mazzerole 2008).

A more interesting critique would apply simultaneously to situational prevention and its social prevention rivals. Both general approaches to crime prevention focus on individuals as the actor in the crime system. Social prevention seeks to reform individuals, thereby reducing their criminality. In contrast, situational prevention seeks to alter decisions made by individuals. Despite that contrast, one can criticize both social and situational approaches for not being social enough. This criticism is based on a single fact: that so much crime is carried out by small groups of offenders, not by individuals (see the next section). Thus, neither individual dispositions nor individual decisions tell us enough about crime. At adolescent ages, when crime participation ascends, co-offending is especially important. Co-offenses,¹ as defined by Reiss (1988), are committed with the simultaneous presence of at least two offenders. This contrasts with solo-offending, for which illicit cooperation is either absent or non-simultaneous. Consider a bank robber who plans the crime with someone else but acts alone in the robbery itself. The latter act is treated as a solo offense in Reiss's definition, even though it is part of a sequence with a social dimension and has an accomplice from a legal viewpoint. Thus, one should not assume that a "solo offense" is a "non-social offense."

Clear (1996) criticizes traditional crime theories as "atomistic," namely, focusing too much on individual action and individual reform. As it is commonly known, situational approaches to crime and crime prevention also tend to be atomistic. Yet situational prevention is flexible enough to take small group offending into greater account. This may be thought of as part of Wortley's (2008) situational precipitators concept: the presence of peers before the criminal event (through peer pressure and group dynamics) has a significant influence on the generation of crime and, consequently, its prevention. Sometimes peers before an event continue to work together in the criminal act itself, making it a co-offense.

CO-OFFENDING IS IMPORTANT FOR CRIME AND ITS PREVENTION

The literature shows that crime is substantially a matter of co-offending.² In adolescent ages, about half of crime incidents occur in groups, usually of two or three offenders. Allowing for multiple counting when multiple offenders are present,³ approximately two-thirds of youth crime participations are in groups (Andresen and Felson 2010; Felson 2003; Reiss 1988; Reiss and Farrington 1991). This number is subject to measurement discussion, but the point is that we cannot look at crime only as a feature of individuals. Moreover, many solo offenders are involved with others just before or after their offense (Tremblay 1993). This does not deny individual decision making or individual variations, but puts individuality into a larger context.

Co-offending poses a significant number of practical requirements. A group must assemble for such offenses to occur, and such assemblage is not automatic. Nor is an assembled

¹ These types of offences are also called accomplice crimes or group offenses. We avoid the word "accomplice" because, in legal terms, it might include non-simultaneous cooperation in crime.

² Some recent research lessens or even denies the importance of co-offending (Carrington 2002; Stolzenberg and D'Alessio 2008); but as shown below our data support the importance of co-offending.

³ Thus a single offense with two offenders counts as two participations, while an offense with three offenders counts as three participations.

group necessarily located in a convenient setting for carrying out crime. Indeed, co-offending cannot occur without situational features; thus, it depends on time and space, as well as circumstances and routines.

Co-offending helps us understand why routine activities, crime pattern theory, situational prevention, crime geography, and rational choice theory converse with one another. Everyday life brings offenders together with one another under particular criminogenic circumstances. For both individual actors and small groups of co-offenders, assemblage involves several processes, including (but not limited to) routines and convergences, proximity to crime opportunities, and foraging for crime targets. Most often, these assemblages are the temporary formation of a group for crime opportunities that dissolve upon completion of the criminal task (Brantingham and Brantingham 2008). Practical crime policy interferes with some of the above or any other processes, products, or procedures if such interference breaks up crime opportunities, however indirectly. Thus, situational interference with co-offending is part and parcel of situational prevention. Indeed, we can think of situational prevention as a set of methods for

- reducing crime opportunities,
- reducing offender convergences (possibly by disrupting networks of youth), and
- interfering with hangouts that set the stage for co-offending.

The size, composition, timing, and location of small group activities affect nearby crime, regardless of whether youths plan for the crime, and regardless of whether the crime is itself defined as co-offending or solo-offending. The process of co-offending is related to solo-offending as well because offenders often dispose of stolen goods or involve others before or after a solo crime (Tremblay 1993), most co-offenders also solo-offend (Reiss and Farrington 1991), and most solo-offenders also co-offend, sometimes in the same crime sequence.

From a situational viewpoint, consider that today's population is roughly the same at 1:30 pm and at 3:30 pm. But the group configurations at these two times can be entirely different. Youths who earlier were in class supervised by a teacher are later in small groups or alone on the way home from school. Thus, offenders and targets emerge as daily patterns quickly shift. These shifts in group patterns, sizes, and circumstances are central for understanding how crime occurs and how it can be thwarted.

RE-ENTER THE INDIVIDUAL

So far, we have emphasized situational aspects of co-offending. That is, we have discussed how the size, composition, timing, and location of small group activities affect nearby crime. We do not mean to imply, however, that co-offending situations obliterate individual actors and decision-makers in the crime process. First, individuals often choose to commit crimes with others for practical reasons – to better carry out the crime. For example, it might be easier or safer to rob somebody with a co-offender. Each offender has made choices. Second, group dynamics affect individuals in the crime-making process. The more youths present, the more crime ideas, the more targets to be considered, the more dares.

Admittedly, it is difficult for us to conceptualize a small group as an actor. Yet small group dynamics are a significant aspect of social psychological theory and research, and individuals often act differently together than they do separately. Indeed, considering group aspects does not constitute a denial of individuals as crime actors. Rather, it considers, or

recognizes, the interdependent nature of decision-making such as game-theoretic approaches to understanding the decision to co-offend (McCarthy et al. 1998). The central point is that co-offending processes, including assemblage processes and the decision-making process previously discussed, enrich our understanding of how crime occurs. This enriched understanding widens the situational prevention measures that could reduce crime to include consideration for co-offending processes.

YOUTH CONVERGENCE SETTINGS⁴

Youth convergence settings have been reviewed in Scott's (2001) pamphlet on disorderly youths. Scott did not emphasize crimes at nearby times and places, but rather crime and disorder in public youth hangouts. We adapt some of his situational questions to our current paper by asking three questions and filling in several sub-questions:

- *Where*, specifically, do the youth gather?
 - Near entrances to businesses or other buildings?
 - Near stairways, escalators or other high-traffic areas?
- *Why* do the youth gather where they do?
 - What accounts for the location's attractiveness?
 - Are there comfortable places to sit or lean?
- *How* can they evade supervision?
 - Can they conceal an illegal act?
 - Does the manager of the place tolerate disorderly behavior?
 - Is the manager involved in illicit conduct?

Scott (2001) relates that only limited success is gained by a pure coercive approach, viewing youth as offenders whose conduct must be controlled and prohibited. He recommends an accommodation approach, balancing the needs and preferences of youths and the complainants. He suggests creating legitimate places and activities for youths to minimize the trouble they may cause. In some cases, he suggests avoiding locating businesses that create youth hangouts, or modifying some public places to render them less comfortable, convenient, or attractive as youth hangouts. Scott (2001) also suggests modifying some settings to increase informal social controls and deny anonymity, as well as enforcing truancy and curfew laws.

Felson (2003) put forth the concept of offender convergence settings to understand how we may disrupt the process of finding suitable co-offenders. Invoking Barker's (1963) theory of behavior settings, Felson (2003) states that to find one another, likely co-offenders must be able to converge in time and space without outside interference, and have enough time to prepare for criminal cooperation. As people age through youth, they often shift their social life to more private and supervised convergence settings, such as the home and the workplace. This produces a natural depletion of potential co-offenders. As such, a crime partner regeneration process is

⁴ We must also consider the importance of "electronic convergences" with youth using telecommunications and computer technology. Though our focus is in regard to physical convergences in this research note, we provide a brief discussion of this issue below.

necessary for a suitable number of co-offenders to become available.⁵ To disrupt this crime-partner regeneration process, Felson (2003) suggests modifying or removing particular behavioral settings so those searching for co-offenders have trouble doing so or lack adequate time to coordinate subsequent criminal activity. Thus, fewer offender convergence settings will exist and criminal cooperation will decline. The task for scholars and practitioners is to identify offender convergence settings, along with any environmental or situational modifications to remove them or at least make them less criminogenic. In the spirit of situational prevention, appropriate crime reduction policies minimize the need for arrests while maximizing the impact of very low cost changes.

EMPIRICAL CONFIRMATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CO-OFFENDING

The essential point of this paper is to emphasize situational efforts to shrink offender convergence settings. That importance depends on confirming the magnitude of co-offending. This confirmation is particularly important because some recent but exceptional research finds that co-offending may not be as prevalent as previously thought (Carrington 2002; Stolzenberg and D'Alessio 2008). This section confirms, with Canadian data in British Columbia, the magnitude of co-offending, and hence justifies giving it policy attention.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Police Information Retrieval System (PIRS) data in British Columbia represents 174 of the 186 police jurisdictions in the province and 67 percent of the population. We extracted from this data system approximately 5 million negative police contact events from 01 August 2002 to 31 July 2006. This analysis considers four major offenses: aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, and theft. Considering the importance of age in the explanation of crime (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983), we focus on those between the ages of 12 and 29, the prime offending ages.

The PIRS database contains information for approximately 5 million negative contacts with the police involving approximately 9 million individuals (offenders, victims, complainants, and witnesses) over the four available years. These data have a number of advantages in assessing the nature of co-offending, some of which were also present for the two previous analyses of co-offending that used large-scale, incident-based data. Although we are not the first to use a large-scale data set to analyze co-offending, this is the largest data set yet applied to the problem. Connected to each of the 5 million incidents is a list of involved individuals, stating their age at the time of the incident and why they were included. The current analysis uses only a subset of 25,876 incidents yet a very large data file was necessary to produce that N, given the subsetting process. Our Base N's per offense range from 975 for robbery to 16,292 for theft.

Although these data represent 174 different police jurisdictions, they are tabulated from one police agency or reporting body. Unlike the NIBRS database that combines data from thousands of enforcement agencies, the RCMP data minimize inconsistencies in reporting of criminal incidents. Finally, we were able to calculate all statistics using averages across the years covered by the PIRS database, ironing out the unusual features of any given year.

From this database, co-offending is calculated by combining three categories – suspect, chargeable, and charged.⁶ Together, these categories approximate the arrest categories in NIBRS,

⁵ This is not to deny that some workplaces provide settings for offender convergences, or that some families are engaged jointly in crime. But these criminogenic potentials are weaker than in non-family and non-work settings.

⁶ A suspect is someone whom the RCMP believe committed the crime, but they do not (at the time of entry) have supporting evidence to pursue a charge; charged is for a person whom the RCMP believe committed the crime and

providing a basis for comparing U.S. and Canadian findings. With the addition of suspects, these data are more inclusive than Carrington (2002). As such, based on Carrington's (2002) other Canadian results, we should be biasing our results to decrease the impact of co-offending.

Table 1. Percent of participations that are co-offending, four major offenses, by single year of age, 12 through 29, British Columbia, Canada, August 1, 2002 through July 31, 2006

	Percent Co-offending	Base N
Robbery	54	975
Burglary	54	4513
Aggravated Assault	43	4096
Theft	37	16, 292

Source: The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Police Information Retrieval System, also known as RCMP-PIRS data. This table is based on approximately 5 million negative police contact events, 750 000 are index offenses. Such events include suspects, those charged, and those deemed chargeable the RCMP.

As shown in Table 1, co-offending is a significant portion in each of the four major offense categories. Moreover, for robbery and burglary, over half of crime participations involve co-offending. These co-offending percentages range from 37 to 54 per cent, with the percentages of co-offending for youth (12 – 29 years of age) being greater than 50 percent for robbery and burglary. Clearly, interfering with offender group processes deserves serious consideration as a set of crime reduction techniques. This can be accomplished through at least four mechanisms:

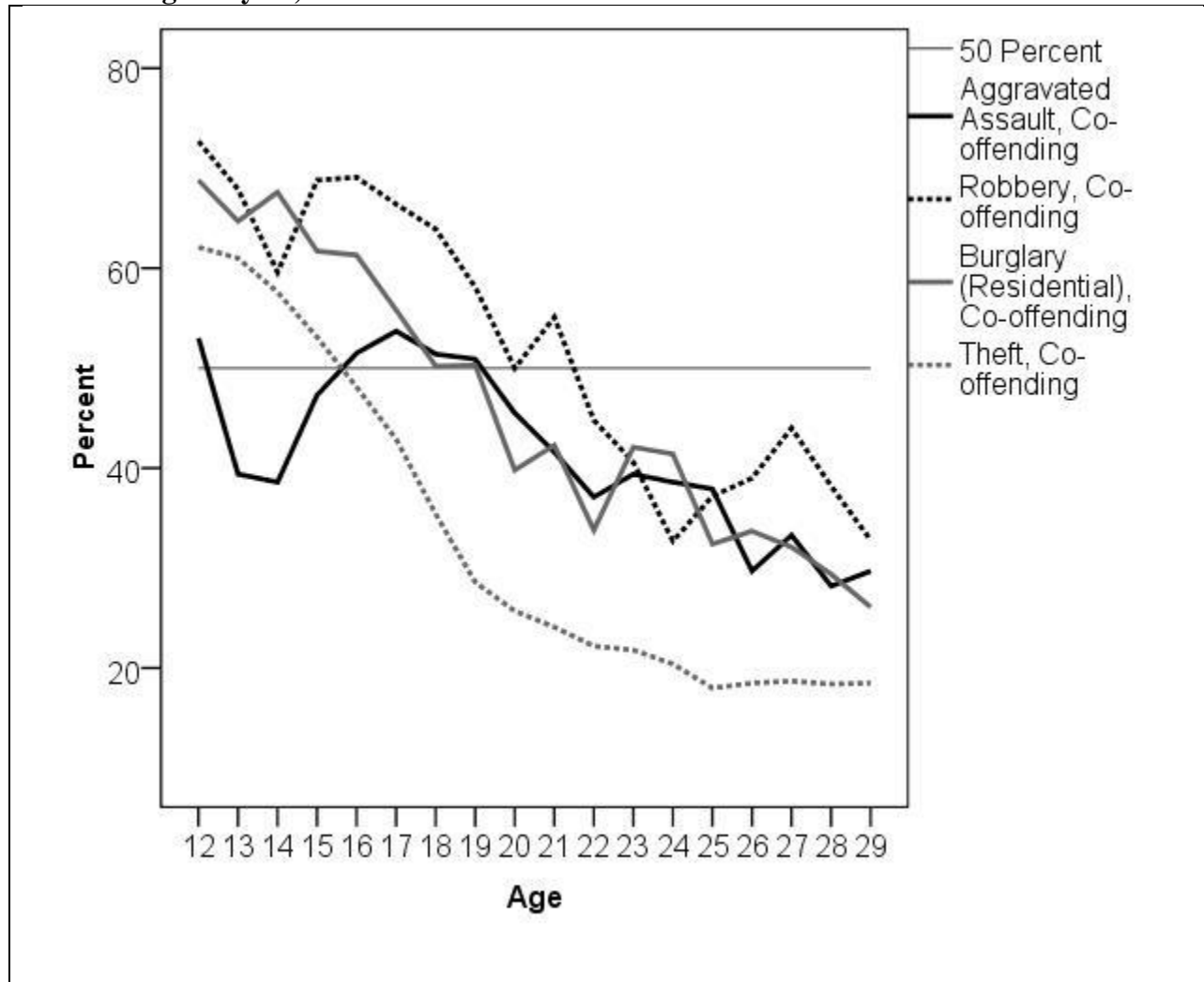
1. Reducing the number of offender convergence settings,
2. Making crime targets less accessible to these convergence settings,
3. Increasing supervision of these settings,
4. Reducing the presence or dominance of such settings during high risk times of day or days of week.

All of these techniques make it more difficult for co-offenders to converge, helping to reduce co-offending and perhaps solo-offending that occurs very soon after the group converges. Each of these four mechanisms are amenable to situational analysis and perhaps situational prevention at low cost, while avoiding high levels of arrest.

Figure 1 shows that disrupting convergence settings will have a differential impact on different crime categories. The magnitude of co-offending is particularly high for youth involved in robbery and residential burglary. Theft is predominantly a co-offense in the early teen years, but quite rapidly becomes a solo-offense in the later teen years. Finally, though of a lesser magnitude and most often below 50 percent, even aggravated assault has a significant portion of its participations being co-offenses. This implies that it is worthwhile to disrupt co-offending and any offender convergence settings that give rise to it. This leads us to note that the situational crime prevention perspective is relevant to co-offending analysis and counteraction.

for which there is supporting evidence; chargeable is for a person whom the RCMP believe committed the crime and for which there is supporting evidence, but who is not charged for a variety of reasons, such as being under the age of criminal responsibility.

Figure 1. Percent of participations that are co-offending (aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, theft), by single year of age, 12 through 29, British Columbia, Canada, August 1, 2002 through July 31, 2006



Source. RCMP Police Information Reporting System (PIRS).

RE-THINKING CERTAIN SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION MEASURES WITHIN A CO-OFFENDING FRAMEWORK

Certain crime prevention measures, commonly discussed in individual terms, might actually make more sense within a co-offending framework. A first example is truancy reduction – normally seen as a means to prevent individuals from falling prey to crime as offenders or as victims (See Garry (1996) for a review of truancy research). However, truancy also allows youths to meet away from adult supervision. Truants are likely to discover or create convergence settings from which illegal actions emerge at nearby times and places. Although it is possible for truant youths to commit crimes alone, it is more likely that their crimes will be carried out in small groups, and that their convergences will help that happen. Accordingly, truancy reduction might be most effective if it focuses upon controlling settings where truants converge prior to

carrying out their offenses. Focusing upon a small number of truant convergence settings could be more effective than arresting truants one by one.

A second police problem commonly thought of in individual terms is “social cruising.”⁷ We refer here to youths walking or driving around in public places to meet one another. The public often objects to cruising for its direct consequences, namely, that it generates immediate noise, traffic, and takeover of public space. Social cruising also has indirect consequences, by assembling youths who might then become involved in crime. More precisely, cruising can help youths find suitable co-offenders. Although the public might not be directly aware of these indirect consequences, they may have at least a sense this is happening, fueling their objections to groups of youths hanging out at night.

Local police agencies in Arlington, Texas, and Huntington, West Virginia, have sought to control social cruising by diverting youths towards less disruptive settings where they can meet without creating as many collateral problems (Glensor and Peak 2004). In Arlington, city officials reserved a large parking lot for teenagers to socialize in the evenings with gentle police presence (Bell 1989). This policy increased community security, not only directly but perhaps indirectly, by channeling and supervising youth convergences and thus diminishing their ability to stage co-offenses. Related work by Scott (2001) offers additional methods by which youth convergences can be managed to prevent crime. The general point is that situational measures to manage social convergences of youths can reduce crime.

A third example has to do with runaway youths. Although police and parents commonly view juvenile runaways as individual cases, in practical terms runaways often converge in settings where they commit crimes, both alone and together. Again, the situational control of the runaway problem offers a means to reduce co-offending in nearby times and places by impairing the discovery of suitable co-offenders (Dedel 2006).

Fourth, several projects to reclaim and manage urban parks in effect serve to prevent offenders from hanging out there. Hilborn (2009) documents several such efforts. His appendix B includes some 20 problem-oriented policing projects with that in mind.

A final example has to do with football violence. It is easy to view football hooligans as individual bad apples, but increasing evidence tells us hooliganism is a group phenomenon (Madensen and Eck 2008). A sports event not only converges legitimate fans, but it also draws together violent co-offenders, some of whom meet before the match to plan their activities.⁸ Many of the situational techniques to reduce football hooliganism do so by impairing this convergence process.

FUTURE QUESTIONS ABOUT ELECTRONIC IMPACTS ON CO-OFFENDING

Some people have suggested to us that modern technology has enhanced simultaneous electronic linkages among youths, altering their social processes and thus influencing co-offending. One no longer has to find a telephone to reach others, so social life can occur remotely at almost any time of day or night.

⁷ The word “cruising” is sometimes used with reference to men walking or driving around in search of prostitutes. We do not include that in the current analysis.

⁸ This paper neglects examples of how bars and taverns are managed and licensed to control dubious convergences and nearby crime. That topic is too rich for visiting within the confines of this paper.

A full discussion of this topic would require an entire book and quite a bit of additional research. However, this short section at least provides a basis for future discussion and inquiry. We might begin by dividing fixed time into four types of allocation:

- a. Time spent in face-to-face social interaction,
- b. Time spent in simultaneous electronic social interaction,
- c. Obligatory time (e.g., work and school), and
- d. Other time allocations.

The empirical question is how increases in simultaneous electronic interaction, category (b), influences the other categories. The question is complicated by the fact that electronic usage is often combined with time spent in other activities; thus, obligatory time includes side activities, such as students in class or employees at work who are also text messaging friends. More relevant for now is whether this additional social life is subtracted from category (a), producing less face-to-face time. If so, then offender convergence settings may become less relevant. In addition, co-offenders might set up their crimes via category (b) rather than (a).

On the other hand, it is possible that electronic contact serves primarily to set up social life rather than replace it. If that is the case, category (a) does not decline in size, but it may alter in location or group composition. If the basic social impulse remains fundamental to human life, and face-to-face social life is at the core of that impulse, then category (a) will not shrink and youth convergence settings will remain significant. Moreover, contacts among those who have not previously been introduced, or who do not know one another well enough for electronic intrusion, will continue to depend on physical convergences in suitable settings.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the RCMP-PIRS data in British Columbia for four major offenses we are able to confirm that co-offending is indeed important for crime. In fact, for these (and other) offense categories, co-offending is the dominant form of offending for prime offending ages. This raises the issue that benefits from altering offender convergence settings could be cost-effective, and that situational efforts to do so could become important. The prevalence of co-offending justifies further inquiry into offender convergence settings and what to do about them.

A long history of criticism of situational prevention is found in the literature. Critics have long claimed that situational crime prevention is too limited. Over time, situational prevention research and theory has, step by step, widened its application and undermined claims of its limited power. In linking situational prevention to co-offending, we have further demonstrated its potential. Situational measures to reduce or constrain offender convergence settings can undermine the formation of co-offending groups, or impair their access to crime targets.⁹ More generally, situational attention to offender convergence settings can impair efficient foraging for crime targets. As this happens, it will no longer make sense to dismiss situational prevention as nonsocial.

⁹ This paper neglects the discussion of civil liberties issues in situational prevention. Those issues are discussed specifically with regard to convergence settings in Felson (2003).

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