



## The influence of perceptions of social disorder and victimization on business owners' decisions to use guardianship strategies

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### ABSTRACT

Using social disorganization, broken windows, and routine activities theories as guides, this study considered how perceptions of crime in the neighborhood influenced business owners' decisions on the use of various crime prevention (guardianship) strategies. The analysis revealed that perceptions of a crime problem were influenced by the presence of disorder. Drug offenses and vandalism were particularly tied to disorder with drug offenses more often related to guardianship strategies than other offenses. In addition, several strategies were used as prevention measures counter-intuitively for crimes not affected by these strategies, suggesting the need for increased awareness and training for business owners on effective guardianship strategies.

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### Introduction

Although most community research concentrated on crimes affecting residential areas, millions of dollars are lost each year in the United States to community businesses being victims of crimes (Purpura, 2002). These losses can have significant negative effects on operational and financial decisions that ultimately affect the community as a whole (Payne, 2003). Businesses may have shorter operating hours or leave the area altogether. Businesses that do stay may increase costs, which are eventually passed on to the consumer, or reduce their staff in order to defray the costs associated with victimization. One study suggested that 30 percent of the businesses studied had considered relocating because of the effect of crime and 29 percent had considered going out of business (Hopkins, 2002).

Businesses will be affected by certain types of crimes more than others based on what type of business is conducted, the number of employees, the location of the business, the amount of suitable targets (both merchandise and people), and the amount of access to motivated offenders. Common offenses against businesses include vandalism, burglaries, robberies, shoplifting, and fraud (Coleman, 2002; Ferraro, 1995; Fisher, 1991; Manning, 1999; Payne & Gainey, 2004; Skogan, 1990). In addition, broken windows, broken fences, and general trash and litter not only provide visual cues of social disorganization and disorder (Felson, 2002), but also victimize the business sector through costs of repairs and clean-up.

While most agree that the costs of business crimes are significant, very little research has considered factors contributing to victimization or the ways businesses try to limit victimization. This study used

social disorganization theory, broken windows theory, and routine activities theory as a guide to consider whether the degree of perceived disorder and the extent of the crime problem influences the decision to alter the levels of guardianship.

### Literature review

Social disorganization theory has been around since 1942 with Shaw and McKay and the Chicago School. Like other behavioral theories of its time, social disorganization theory focused on group dynamics to predict behavior. The theory assumes that crime rates are tied to the degree to which communities remain in constant states of change. Transient communities will have weak ties to social norms and values due primarily to concentrated disadvantage and residential mobility (Warner, 2003). The transient nature of the communities allow for few social networks with businesses, churches, and neighbors to develop, producing a lack of cohesion between members of the community. The size of the community's network structure, therefore, determines the amount of informal social control the community has on behavior of its residents (Bellair, 1997). After waning interest for the last fifteen years, there has recently been somewhat of a revival of the group model, particularly with social disorganization (Bernard & Engel, 2001; Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003).

As is often the case with sociological and criminological theories, measuring attitudes and perceptions, particularly with regard to disorder and disorganization, is difficult. One consistent feature of most communities is the presence of businesses and community networks. These businesses act as a gathering place for the residents of the community and as a microcosm of crime and disorganization. As can be readily seen by merely driving through various neighborhoods,

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some establishments have gates, iron bars in the windows, graffiti on the walls, or unsupervised youth loitering in the parking lot, while others have manicured properties, bright lighting, and attentive uniformed employees or officials. These observations evoke an immediate perception of the amount of social disorganization in those particular communities.

Moving from a macro-theory such as social disorganization theory to a micro-theory like routine activities theory can help establish a theoretical framework to understand the ties between victimization and guardianship in disorganized communities. As noted by Cohen and Felson (1979):

Macrolevel analysis has provided some useful empirical generalizations and important insights into the incidence of crime; it is fair to say they have not articulated systematically the theoretical linkages between routine legal activities and illegal endeavors. (p. 593)

In addition, Cohen and Felson (1979) noted that studies using social disorganization theory did not explain how changes in social structure generate changes in opportunity for the criminal to commit crime. There is a need, therefore, to integrate social disorganization theory into an individual opportunity based theory such as routine activities theory. Integrating a macro-level theory (social disorganization theory) with a micro-level theory (routine activities) is difficult without bridging the two seemingly disparate theoretical perspectives together with a theoretical perspective that parallels both theories.

In this context, broken windows theory provides a bridge between routine activities theory and social disorganization theory. Broken windows theory is traced to an article Wilson and Kelling (1982) published in the *Atlantic Monthly* more than twenty-five years ago. The underlying premise of Wilson and Kelling's broken windows theory is that "disorder, left unchecked, leads to crime by driving residents indoors and sending a message to would be offenders that a neighborhood is out of control" (Thacher, 2004, p. 381). The phrase "broken window" is used because theoretically, "the broken window is the first step in a neighborhood's slow decline and deterioration...the broken window slowly turns into many broken windows" (Adams, 2006, p. 26). Eventually, the deterioration attracts criminal behavior.

Research has supported the notion that deterioration and disorder is related to crime (O'Shea, 2006). As a result, criminal justice agencies have developed measures to address disorder and some research has found that broken windows law enforcement reduces crime (Kelling & Coles, 1996; Worrall, 2002), though research is mixed in this regard (see Harcourt, 1998). Others note that disorder breeds fear (Xu, Fiedler, & Flaming, 2005). This fear is perhaps the source of many police departments' decisions to use broken windows-based law enforcement strategies. If public law enforcement agencies use specific strategies in response to perceptions of disorder, it is natural to ask whether private responses by individuals and businesses are influenced by perceptions of disorder. Research suggests that among community members and business owners/operators, fear of crime or the perception of fear will make people more likely to engage in self-protective behaviors (McGarrell, Giacomazzi, & Thurman, 1997). What needs to be addressed more specifically, though, is whether perceptions of disorder among business owners result in efforts to change their guardianship strategies, just as public police agencies have altered their guardianship strategies. It is through such a question that routine activities theory can be integrated with social disorganization and broken windows theories.

According to Cohen and Felson (1979), crime is a matter of situational opportunity that can be dictated by the presence of three necessary elements: (1) a suitable target, usually involving a person or wanted property, (2) a motivated offender (decisions are responses to societal controls, and (3) a lack of a capable guardian (Felson, 2002). From a routine activities perspective, one's risk of victimization "is a

function of lifestyle and/or patterns of routine activities" (Petersilia, 2001, p. 673). Routine activities theory has widespread appeal (Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996) and has been used to understand: (1) the commission of specific crimes, (2) why crimes occur in certain locations, (3) the victimization risks of specific groups, and (4) why crimes occur during certain time periods.

Routine activities theory has provided a foundation for understanding a wide variety of criminal activities, including vandalism (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2000), burglary (Cohn & Rotton, 2000; Robinson, 1999; Wittebrood & Nieuwbeerta, 2000), family violence (Kelly, 1993; Payne & Gainey, 2004), maritime piracy (Worrall, 2000), motor vehicle theft (Copes, 1999), arson (Stahura & Hollinger, 1988), larceny (Cohn & Rotton, 2000), and drinking behavior (Fox & Sobol, 2000). While some argue that the theory better explains property crimes than violent crimes (Bennett, 1991; Miethe, Stafford, & Long, 1987), others find routine activities theory particularly useful for explaining homicides (Caywood, 1998), stalking (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1999), child sexual abuse (Mannon, 1997), and assaults (Wittebrood & Nieuwbeerta, 2000).

Criminologists have also used routine activities theory to address crimes occurring in bars (Roncek & Maier, 1991), parking lots (Hollinger & Dabney, 1999), prison (Wooldredge, 1998), the streets (Robinson, 1999) and the work place (Lynch, 1997; Wooldredge, Cullen, & Latessa, 1992). Also attesting to the versatility of this approach, routine activities theory has also been used to examine the victimization risks of diverse groups including college students (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1999), college faculty (Wooldredge et al., 1992), and punk rockers (Kennedy & Baron, 1993).

Businesses are, by their very nature, suitable targets by providing both wanted merchandise and customers with money. Also, businesses are open to the public and are therefore attractive to motivated offenders, who would be otherwise suspicious in residential areas. The only element of the theory that can be readily controlled is, however, that of a capable guardian. LaGrange (1999) noted that even highly motivated offenders require certain conditions to complete their crimes. Businesses can employ crime prevention measures to reduce their rate of victimization and reduce customer fear. Not surprisingly, the presence of businesses has been found to increase the number of burglaries, but the relationship is at least partially influenced by physical disorder (Wilcox, Quisenberry, Cabrera, & Jones, 2004).

As vulnerable targets in socially disorganized communities, business owners may do things to increase their guardianship and ward off motivated offenders. The use of crime prevention measures may be the result of concerns about victimization in the business (e.g., internal fear factors) or concerns about victimization outside the business (e.g., external fear factors). In terms of external fear factors, one study noted a significant interaction effect between the social disorganization of the neighborhood and the use of security precautions (Smith, Glave-Frazee, & Davison, 2000). This means essentially that as a business owner's perception of disorder in the neighborhood increases, his or her use of preventative measures should also increase. Indeed, visual cues of physical and social disorganization, including litter, graffiti, and open prostitution and drug use likely have a significant impact on perceptions of safety (Fisher, 1991).

Other scholars, however, subscribe to the notion that fear derived from personal experiences has more of an impact on an individual than perceived disorganization. Gibson, Zhao, Lovrich, and Gaffney (2002) noted that it is the amount of personal integration into social networks that is most associated with perceptions of fear of crime. In fact, Crank, Giacomazzi, and Heck (2003) found no link between disorder and fear of crime. In addition, McGarrell et al. (1997) suggested that lifestyle characteristics and behaviors, and proximity and exposure to crime, are most robust in determining a person's perception of safety.

The current study considered the ties between perceptions of disorganization, perceptions of a crime problem, and prevention

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