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*“Tybalt, you rat catcher – will you walk”?*  
Romeo & Juliet

Most of us, whether consciously or not, adhere to routines and patterns. These habits can take the form of following the same route to and from work, stopping at the same Starbucks at the same time, patronizing a local dry cleaner with regularity, or filling up with gas at the same convenience store consistently. Preferring to stick to terrain we are familiar and comfortable with, we tend to frequent the same grocery store, fast food chain, and mall or retail outlet with clockwork predictability.

It certainly comes as no surprise then that opportunistic criminal predators also engage in routine and systematic activity patterns when selecting targets.

Travelling familiar corridors criminals look for targets that will afford ease of access, quick escape routes and offer little or minimal chances of resistance, detection, or apprehension. This “risk vs. reward” evaluation is sometimes referred to as the “rational choice” perspective. Certainly there is no suggestion that the decision to commit a crime is in any way “rational” by societal standards, but rather the process of selecting a target based on the perception that the target will offer quick, easy and low risk impediments to the perpetrator while affording a suitable “reward” is a key component in the commission of the criminal act whether it be shoplifting, the theft of an automobile, or the armed robbery of a convenience store.

It is here that the “comfort zone” plays a critical role in the criminal act.

Just as legitimate and law abiding citizens follow patterns, so too does the felon, preferring to frequent familiar environs. This process has been dubbed the “routine activity theory” by Marcus Felson and Lawrence Cohen and was first advanced in the late 1970’s.

Simply put, routine activity theory suggests that a criminal act is likely to occur when an opportunistic offender converges in space and time with a suitable target.

In 1989 Lawrence Sherman participated in a comprehensive study in Minneapolis that revealed just how concentrated and geographically or “place” specific crime can be when it was determined that a staggering 50% of street crimes in the city took place at just 3.5 % of addresses.

This finding was confirmed in a separate 14 year study of crime in Seattle published in 2004 which found that 50% of crime was found in just 4.5% of street segments.

Clearly, as environmental or place criminologists have suggested for some time, when it comes to crime, the old adage of “location, location, location” is apropos.

*“People who commit crimes have a normal spatio-temporal movement pattern like everyone else. The likely location for a crime is near this normal activity and awareness space. Criminals are likely to commit their initial crimes near these learned paths or activity nodes or near the paths and activity nodes of their friendship network. Crimes are likely to cluster near these activity spaces with a higher concentration near the activity nodes”<sup>1</sup>*

The opportunistic criminal offender can be territorial, largely confining themselves to familiar geographic terrain while seeking a target rich environment affording maximum reward with minimal risk.

Offender mobility patterns vary based on age, type of crime, and gender.

Victims are most likely to be impacted at or near one of their own routine activity modes.

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<sup>1</sup> Crime Pattern Theory Paul & Patricia Brantingham

Understanding then, that the criminal event is triggered by a confluence of often routine activities where the offender and victim converge in a specific setting at a particular time and place, and where there is an absence of “capable management” and other environmental factors present which would present unacceptable risks to the ordinary opportunistic perpetrator.

## When Worlds Collide

*“And like a rat without a tail I’ll do I’ll do and I’ll do”*

Macbeth

At 22 Jane D. was happy and excited to be starting college.

Having been born and raised in a predominately rural setting, her family had some trepidation about the large southern city where she would be living - a city that regularly placed among the top 10 for violent crime.

The campus was located several miles from the rather notorious downtown area, and Jane had found a brand new apartment building that catered to college students and was only a short two-block walk from the school.

The apartment complex featured gated entry to parking, was well lit, and possessed both CCTV cameras and a roving security presence. There had been no prior or previous crimes at the apartment building. Jane adapted well and developed a strong circle of friends including from the family style restaurant where she worked part time.

Jane stayed at school during the Christmas holiday break, picking up extra hours at the restaurant.

Three days after Christmas, Jane and a number of her friends from work rented a small bowling alley to throw a holiday party.

Consuming “more jello shots than anyone could remember” the party was extended until 2:00 am when Jane and her friends were told to leave by management that felt “things had gotten out of hand”.

Anxious to continue the party, it was agreed that the group would caravan in 3 cars back to the apartment building where Jane lived.

Jane drove with a male friend while the remainder of the group piled into two cars.

The group in the two cars arrived at the apartment complex about ten minutes after leaving the bowling alley and drove past the small open “public” parking area to the gate which required use of a tenant “clicker” to open.

They waited over fifteen minutes before scaling the gate and going up to Jane’s apartment (they had been provided with a spare key) after another fifteen minutes without a sign from Jane or her friend, they began to worry and started calling Jane’s cell phone.

Now almost 2:45 in the am it took them several tries to finally reach Jane and her friend who told them they had overshot the apartment and were lost miles from their destination.

“When they told us what part of town they were in we became very concerned- they had wandered into a very, very bad section of the city.” remembered one of the party goers.

Together with her companion and after switching drivers and getting directions at a gas station, Jane turned around and began to head back to her apartment to join her anxious friends.

It was a little after 3 o’clock in the morning and unbeknownst to the unsuspecting couple, a tragedy had already been set into motion that would soon reach a violent and inexorable conclusion.

Larry and Curly had been friends since they were small. They grew up in the same neighborhood, went to the same schools, and served time at the same Juvenile detention center.

Although only 21 & 22 respectively, they had amassed a lengthy number of arrests and run-ins with law enforcement.

Moe, at 28 the leader of the trio, had more arrests than both of them combined and had only been released from prison a few months previously having served 4 years on a 6 year sentence.

The three of them emerged from the late night club they frequented regularly – located in a blighted wasteland of derelict warehouses and shuttered and failed commercial buildings the spot was popular with many young and violent offenders, and would later be shut down by Federal authorities as the scene of a large scale narcotics distribution operation.

This was familiar territory for the three predators and just a few short miles from where two of them resided.

After a brief discussion, and having determined that they were short of the cash required to continue the evening, it was agreed that the trio would “do a lick” (street parlance for committing an armed robbery.) It was then that they spotted the car driven by Jane and her companion.

The two young well-dressed college kids driving a late model vehicle stood out in the area and at that time of the morning.

Following them, one of the assailants would later state “they was drunk. Weaving’ all over the road, they run up on the curb cupla times.”

The trio followed their prey for several miles until they saw them pull into the open area of the apartment parking lot (largely empty as most students had left for the Holiday).

Confronting the couple before they could exit their car, the 3 felons held them at gunpoint, and then proceeded to remove them in to an isolated location that was a grassy area off of a dead end street near the railroad tracks.

The location was about 6 miles from the apartment and only 3 miles from the central “comfort zone” frequented by the offenders- half way between where they had “partied” at the club (where they spotted their prey) and where they lived.

They robbed and beat the male, then sexually assaulted the woman and beat her as well.

The man was shot in the back before the trio fled the scene- all at or around 4 am.

Fortunately the male victim recovered from the gunshot wound after the two victims were discovered and taken to the hospital.

Arrests and convictions followed swiftly.

The tragic case of Jane D. serves to underscore the importance of understanding “territoriality” in criminal behavior and is a cautionary tale of overlapping lifestyles in time and space and as impacted by routine activity.

A classic and literal example of being at the wrong *place* at the wrong *time*.

Andy Blumwell, a crime analyst with the West Midlands Police department in the United Kingdom reviewed 250,000 crimes over a two-year period and where the perpetrator was identified. He determined that in over 50% of these events, the offender lived *within one mile* of the crime scene.

Allowing for the tighter restrictive geographic confines of the UK and Europe, crime analyst Susan Wernicke conducted a similar study in Overland Park, Kansas and determined that by age 17, the average “distance to crime” for perpetrators from home to crime was *2.7 miles*.

*“Crimes do not occur randomly or uniformly in time or space. Crimes are patterned; decisions to commit crimes are patterned; and the process of committing a crime is patterned.”<sup>2</sup>*

It becomes imperative then, in forming a better understanding of criminal activity and disproportionately vulnerable or likely targets for criminal behavior to better understand the relationship of “place” or environment and “routine activity” of the victim or target as well as the offender.

Thus, a systematic series of impediments by potential victims may subsequently “harden the target” and make the “risk/reward” ratio unacceptable.

Implementation of practical crime prevention measures by “at risk” facilities and by the citizens who frequent such locations can lead to systemic reduction in the likelihood of victimization.

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<sup>2</sup> Crime Pattern Theory Paul and Patricia Brantingham

A careful analysis of environment and locations that may afford disproportionate opportunity to potential predators and where a confluence of target/victims are likely to intersect as part of an ordinary and geographically bounded trafficked corridor that are part of ordinary routine activities is an essential component of basic crime prevention.

*“On a micro level, ordinary crime emerges when a likely offender converges with a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian”<sup>3</sup>*

### The Rat and The Broken Window

*“What if my house be troubled by a rat? And I be pleased to give 10,000 ducats to have it banned”?*  
The Merchant of Venice

In his work *Defensible Space*, architect Oscar Newman identified two virtually identical large apartment buildings. Both of the premises in question were located in a densely populated urban setting and both experienced high rates of crime.

Newman made subtle but profound changes to one facility, while it's “twin” remained unaltered. The test building enjoyed enhanced “natural surveillance” features (i.e.: increased ability to both see and be seen) through minor fenestration alterations and improved lighting.

A sense of “ownership” or territoriality was facilitated for the residents through clear boundary demarcations, landscaping and signage regarding regulations. Litter and graffiti were removed regularly and aggressively.

The results were remarkable.

Residents felt safe, secure, and proprietary about their building, becoming extended “eyes and ears” in reporting and discouraging unwanted behavior. Crime rates plunged precipitously.

By putting into practice many of the ideas and notions of crime and environment written about earlier by Jane Jacobs, Newman proved the viability of sending “cues” or signals that directly impacted on potential criminal behavior.

C.P.T.E.D. (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design) would soon follow with pioneers like Raymond Jeffries and Tim Crowe helping to shape a new way of thinking about crime and our surroundings.

Defined as “the proper design and effective use of the built environment in reducing crime and enhancing quality of life” CPTED continues to evolve and prove a vital, vibrant, and creative tool in effecting both positive and criminogenic conditions.

The Broken Windows Theory is nothing more than an evolutionary branch of the “order maintenance” aspect of CPTED.

Broken Windows re-enforces the notion that problems associated with blight and societal disorder and decay exacerbate the probability and likelihood of continuing, escalating and more serious crimes absent interdiction and intervention.

Routine activity that places potential victims and predators in the same place and at the same time can reduce and prevent potential crime by sending powerful signals that the requisite risk/reward ratio makes the locale unattractive to the “illegitimate” and safe for the “legitimate” user of the space in question. Criminologist Dr. John Eck added an important component to the crime prevention formula when he introduced the notion of “capable management in place”.

This doctrine emphasizes the critical role the owner/operator/manager of any potential target has in claiming “ownership” and subsequently good stewardship of their premises by evaluating risk at the

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<sup>3</sup> Routine Activity Approach Marcus Felson

property and implementing measures to exercise control at the perimeter, exterior, and interior that will reduce the likelihood of crime.

Risks are determined by the nature of the facility in question, the population it serves, and its immediate surrounding environs. Prior history of crime on the premises and condition of same may also be instructive.

*“After hearing hours of testimony and examining all available data on the subject of at-risk business and crime, this office has concluded that convenience stores often pose an unnecessarily unsafe condition, placing both employees and shoppers in needless jeopardy and exacting a largely immeasurable cost to our society.”<sup>4</sup>*

The implementation of Florida’s Convenience Business Security Act is a good example of shared responsibility in crime prevention.

The law recognizes the inherent danger convenience stores pose by nature of their operation, and the potential collision of offender and victim as part of routine activity theory and at a specific locale. Requirements under the statute mandate crime reduction measures like removing posters, advertisements and blockages from windows in order to permit maximum visibility, the deployment of high quality digital cameras, lighting that meets or exceeds recommended minimal guidelines, “drop safes” which limit cash on hand and access to same (with appropriate posted signage to that effect), training of store employees in robbery prevention and response, and adequate staffing during particular “at risk” hours. Initially opposed by the convenience store industry, the results are indisputable. Armed robberies of convenience stores were reduced by 30%.

The principle responsibility for the prevention of crime can not as a matter of practicality rest with law enforcement agencies.

Collective awareness by responsible business owners and the community they serve are the single most important element in recognizing and responding to the risks of crime.

Citizens’ would do well to learn to “read the street” by increasing awareness of their surroundings.

When conducting mundane and “routine” daily activity, exercise a new and heightened perspective about the environment.

Is the area clearly defined? Is the transition from “public” to private space well established? Are rules of behavior defined? (e.g.: posted signage re: speed limit/parking, hours of operation, etc.) Is the property clean and free of litter and graffiti? Is it well lit? Do you see people loitering? Are people practicing “avoidance behavior”? Avoidance behavior is an indication that people do not feel safe in a particular location- it is characterized by people taking short, rapid steps with their heads down and shoulders raised, avoiding all eye contact.

It is perhaps ironic that in conducting the most common of chores, whether it be at a grocery store, large discount mall, or other “routines” where we may be paying the least attention or have an overdeveloped sense of familiarity, we may in fact be inadvertently headed on a collision course with potential trouble. By enhancing our awareness of our own vulnerability to crime, we make not only ourselves, but our communities a better place to live.

*“How now, a RAT? Dead, for a ducat, dead”*  
Hamlet

J. R. Roberts of J. R. Roberts Security Strategies, LLC has over 37 years of experience in security and crime prevention. Mr. Roberts has served on multiple task forces for the cities of Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia, regularly lectures on a variety of topics for private security and law enforcement, and has been designated as an expert witness in over 400 legal cases in 31 states.

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<sup>4</sup> Office of the Attorney General, State of Florida 1991