EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROUTINE ACTIVITIES THEORY AND SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION: AN ANALYSIS OF PROPERTY CRIME VICTIMIZATION

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ABSTRACT: A property crime victimization survey was conducted of households in both high and low crime neighborhoods in one southern city. A response rate of 68.5% was obtained. The study tested the premises of both the routine activities and social disorganization theories as they contribute to the likelihood of property crime victimization at the individual level. It was found that routine activities theory explained 28% of the property crime variance in the socially disorganized area (high crime) while only explaining 11% of the same variance in the low crime area. Separate measurements were used to establish the level of social disorganization in the two geographical areas. The beta coefficients reveal that in the high crime area, those most likely to be property crime victims are white, single homeowners who are not at home from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., who have relatives living in their neighborhoods, and who interact with their neighbors. These findings lend marginal support to the routine activities model.

INTRODUCTION

A number of different theories have been developed that attempt to explain the increased level of crime in society. Two of these theoretical perspectives — routine activities and social disorganization — tend to overlap and complement one another in their explanation of crime.

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causation. The present study tests some of the basic premises of these two theories.

We examine property crime in a small city in the western part of Virginia. Property crime is the focus of this research because of the increased concern voiced by the residents of this city regarding such crime. As a whole, the citizens are less concerned with violent crime (a relatively rare occurrence) and are more vocal regarding property crime demanding crime prevention strategies be implemented to reduce such crime. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt at explaining property crime victimization in a small city that uses both theories.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Routine activities theory maintains that crime is distributed non-randomly in time and space. The likelihood of crime occurring is enhanced when motivated offenders, suitable victims, and an absence of capable guardians all meet (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Social disorganization theory maintains that crime will increase when the social controls or social cohesion of a community is weakened (Shaw & McKay, 1942; 1969).

Routine Activities Theory

Routine activities theory postulates that crime can be explained by focusing on three categories of variables — motivated offenders, suitable targets, and capable guardians. Crime victimization is increased when there are “one or more persons present who are motivated to commit a crime, a suitable target or potential victim is available, and there is an absence of formal or informal guardians who could deter the potential offender” (Akers, 1994; p. 61). Cohen and his colleagues maintain that individuals have regular patterns of behavior that increase their chances of being victimized (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cohen, Felson, & Land, 1985).

Routine activities theory has been tested by many researchers to explain, for example, urban homicide patterns (Messner & Tardiff, 1985; 1986), crime rates (Maxfield, 1987), workplace victimization (Lynch, 1987; Wooldredge, Cullen, & Latessa, 1992); violent street crime (Kennedy & Baron, 1993), predatory crime (Lasley, 1989), and personal and property crime (Miethe, Stafford, & Sloane, 1990). Other researchers have focused on the theory explaining crime in certain places as opposed to individual victimization. Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger (1989) used routine activities theory to explain “hot spots” of predatory crime in Minneapolis. Roncek and Maier (1991) examined