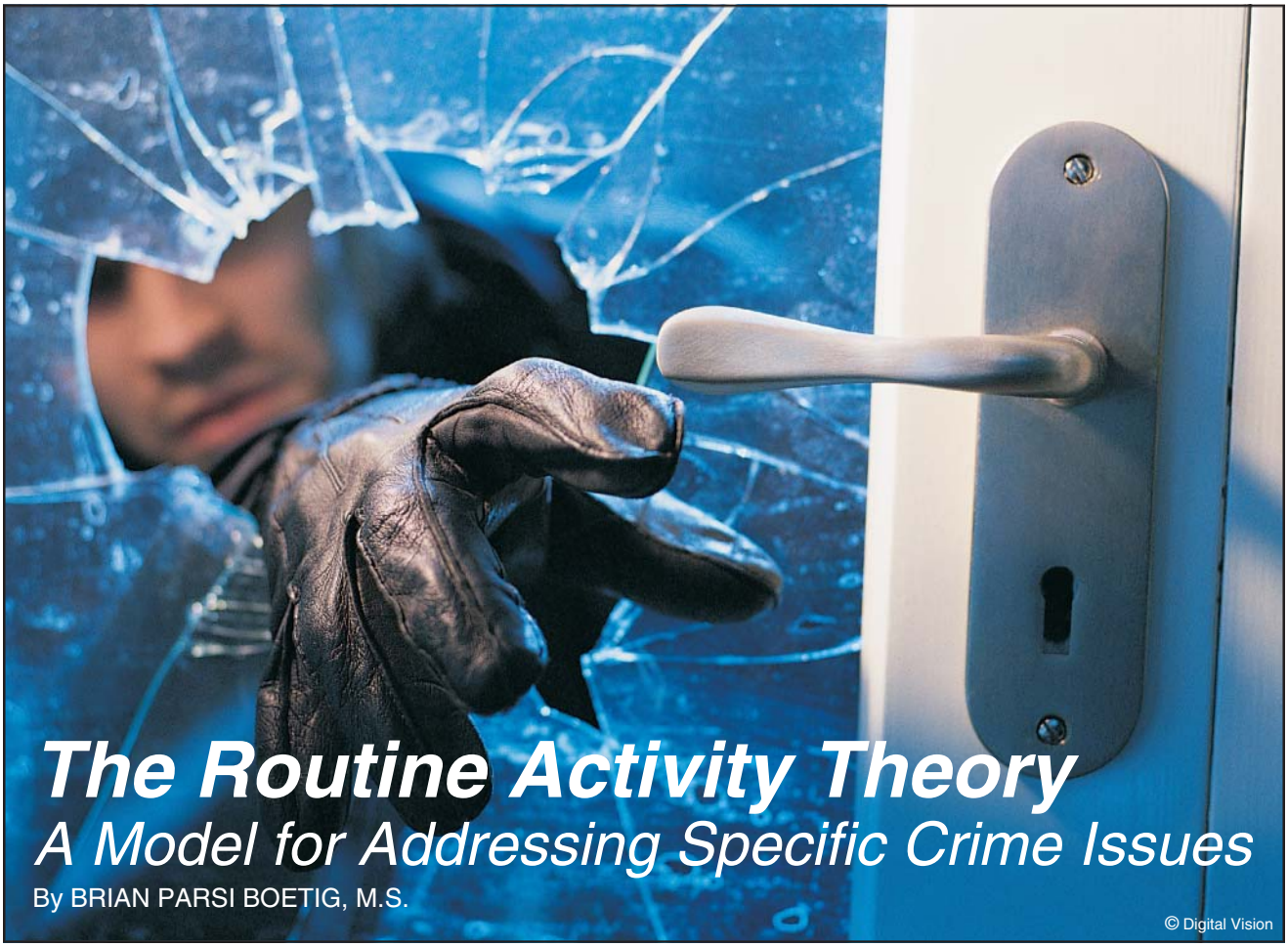

The Routine Activity Theory

A Model for Addressing Specific Crime Issues

By BRIAN PARSI BOETIG, M.S.

Developed over 50 years ago, the routine activity theory has remained at the forefront of crime analysis and prevention efforts. The model addressed crime analysis from a different perspective than most theories preceding it by exploring the convergence of the crucial components of crime at specific locations in space and time without regard to the motivation of the deviant act. Despite receiving criticism for the routine activity theory's simplistic approach,[1] many researchers applied it to various criminological studies from stalking to narcotics trafficking. Understanding the theory can assist law enforcement administrators in comprehending existing research and aid in developing crime control models to address specific crime issues.

Historical Framework

In 1979, Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson provided a new perspective on the criminological outlook on crime.[2] While most extant theories at that time focused primarily on criminals and their motivations and environment, the routine activity theory simplified concepts generally taken for granted by criminologists; it took the focus away from the criminal and redirected it toward the criminal act. Cohen and Felson readily admitted that although the routine activity theory was not a new idea, existing academic criminal research frequently overlooked it.[3]

During the decades preceding the routine activity theory, the pendulum of research began to focus on criminal acts, rather than broad social causes of

crime. A new breed of classical thinkers sought "workable solutions to the problem of crime" to replace the scientific and theoretical perspectives of offenses in the 1970s.[4] Studies published during those years explored residents' actions aimed at the reduction of access to offenders, distance of homes from the central city, and the presence of criminals who accounted for property layout and human activity around homes.

> ***"The routine activity theory explains how changes in daily patterns or activities of social interaction... affect differences in crime rates."***

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The routine activity theory sought to fulfill shortcomings in existing models that failed to adequately address crime rate trends since the end of World War II. The U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) reported on social and economic trends in metropolitan areas prior to and after the war. Criminologists focused on the same social and environmental issues measured by the Bureau and correlated them to crime rates. When criminological theories were applied to the Bureau's data in 1960, they would have indicated a reduction in crime as social and economic conditions improved, but the crime rate data actually showed increases in crime according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports. Without focusing on crimes, existing deterministic research, which took into account all social and economic factors, failed to explain this deviance between the criminological theory and the Bureau's data. Felson, along with other researchers at this time, addressed the issue through crime-specific analysis,[5] which encompassed the social disorganization occurring in metropolitan areas (e.g., the increase of married females in the workforce, unattended homes during workdays and vacations, and collegiate attendance among other new or changed social patterns). These social changes were examined and associated with crime rates, rather than the effects on criminals.

Components

The routine activity theory explains how changes in daily patterns or activities of social interaction, such as employment, recreation, educational endeavors, and leisure activities, affect differences in crime rates. It examines crimes as events, occurring at "specific locations in space and time, involving specific persons and/or objects."[6] Three crucial components necessary for predatory crimes are motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians.[7] The lack of any one of these would prevent a predatory crime. As communities evolve, routine activities of the citizens also change. These societal adjustments cause the convergence of the three primary components to either increase or decrease in certain spaces and at particular times; therefore, changes in the crime rates occur independent of societal or behavioral conditions that motivate offenders.[8]

The analysis identifies predatory crime (the focus of the routine activity theory) as an illegal act consisting of direct physical contact between an offender and a victim (e.g., rape, robbery, residential

burglary, and theft). It also classifies damaging or stealing an object also as predatory. The definition inherently excludes such nonpredatory crimes as possession of illegal contraband or public intoxication.

The motivated offender must have the willingness and ability to commit predatory crimes. Although previous criminological research heavily relied on motive, the routine activity theory only analyzes the presence and actions of an offender. While people conduct routine activities, motivated offenders select their targets based upon the perceived value, visibility, accessibility, and inertia of the objective. For example, expensive and moveable items, such as automobiles and portable laptop computers, have a higher risk of theft than washing machines and desktop computers because of the suitability of stealing them.

Offenders or victims can use technological and organizational advances of society to increase their abilities to carry out predatory crimes or defend against them. Offenders may use weapons in the commission of an offense, but victims also may use them as a deterrent. Automobiles, highways, and telephones also provide additional opportunities for offenders to thrive and victims to react. The ability of people to take evasive actions or possess protective tools, such as a weapon, also can reduce their potential for victimization.

When a motivated offender identifies a suitable target, the presence or absence of a capable guardian becomes a determining factor in the actual commission or deterrence of a criminal event. While law enforcement officers and security guards represent obvious protectors, research has neglected the notion of the unwitting citizen assuming an important role in guardianship with no bias toward the presence or absence of illegal acts. For example, a person at home during the workday may provide a form of guardianship over a neighbor's unoccupied house. A motivated offender may choose not to burglarize a home despite the presence of a suitable target (e.g., visible cash inside the house) because he fears the neighbor might cause his capture.[9] Further, capable guardians are not always people. Burglar alarms, video cameras, and other threats of exposure or capture can function as guardians, although their capabilities vary.

> ***"The model has steadily continued to attract attention and support in many criminological areas...."***

The theory also examines the extent of capable guardianship in groups of people and at certain locations as lone individuals usually are more likely to be victimized.[10] This additional guardianship occurs even if the group was assembled as a routine activity (e.g., a social function) with no intention of serving as a protective force, or guardian, for the group.

Modifications

A fourth component, the existence or absence of a handler, modified the routine activity theory.[11] This reworking attempted to build upon the earlier model where the presence of motivated offenders simply was assumed. The handler component involves a two-step process. First, social bonds are developed in society. Second, someone with a relationship to the potential offender exercises control over that person to adhere to the social bonds. The term *motivated offender* became *likely offender*.[12] This subtle change reflected the rational choice concept within the framework of the routine activity theory. Where the application fell short of an explanation on why

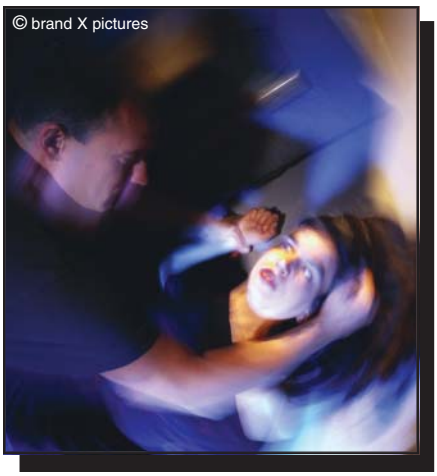
criminals become motivated, the rational choice concept filled this void.[13]

Contemporary Usage and Popularity

While some have criticized the routine activity theory,[14] others have relied upon it to address a multitude of crime-related topics. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners throughout the world use the theory as an approach to the study of crime and to provide foundations for crime prevention and forecasting. The model has steadily continued to attract attention and support in many criminological areas,[15] including predatory crimes as outlined in the original theory and others not included in the original model's design.

In a series of books geared toward criminal justice students and researchers, as well as loss prevention practitioners and other interested parties, Felson applied the routine activity theory to explain and prevent crime.[16] In addition to predatory offenses, he expanded the theory's usage to address fights, illegal markets, and white-collar crime and presented suggestions for a technique known as situational crime prevention, the analysis of unique characteristics associated with crime problems to arrive at prevention solutions.[17] Combining the routine activity theory with situational crime prevention was used later to explore crime within the business environment and in local communities.[18]

Within the study of victimology, the routine activity theory has been applied quite often. The example of a burglar entering an occupied home with the intent to steal but, instead, finds a woman to rape is a "malicious serendipity" of the routine activity theory.[19] Researchers used the theory to counter the "rape supportive culture" belief and show that not all women have the same risk of sexual assault based on their repetitious activities.



Victimization is characterized as less random and more spatial and temporal as outlined by the routine activity theory.[20] Researchers have used college campus safety as the setting for applying the routine activity theory, mainly for victimization studies. Applying the model to the rates of criminal victimization on campuses, they concluded that residents provide a continuous supply of suitable targets, especially with their abundance of portable goods.[21] College students generally lack suitable guardians and engage in risky lifestyles, such as partying and consuming alcohol and other drugs.[22] One study expanded the topical area of guardianship to explore those who make efforts to decrease their individual-level protective behaviors and why they do so.[23] The research sampled a college campus population and found that a general fear of crime was not a significant influencing factor, but, rather, specific, objective knowledge of both the potential exposure to likely offenders and the characteristics of the surrounding area caused changes in the routines of probable victims.[24] For example, a university police department should advise students of specific problem areas (In the past 3 months, two attempted sexual assaults have occurred at the parking deck near the library after dark.) instead of generalizing that threat across the entire campus (Two attempted sexual assaults have taken place on campus in the past 3 months.). Although the threat of sexual assault does exist across campus, the general fear is not as productive as specific

information in influencing students' behaviors.

Researchers also have applied the routine activity theory to stalking.[25] While the topical areas run concurrent with several others, such as college crime[26] and victimization,[27] studies have used the application to model stalking incidents, vulnerabilities, and its likelihood.[28] Similar to other types of victimization, the prevalence of stalking on college campuses often relates to the stable presence of suitable targets and the lack of capable guardians. Researchers applied the routine activity theory to determine that college women become suitable targets based on their routine and daily activities. The research sought to identify the lifestyle habits of stalking victims to give some predictive value to the likelihood of becoming a stalking victim.[29]

Researchers also applied the theory to the analysis of international drug control policy in the Netherlands, an application far from any use considered in the original theory development. They contended that in an attempt to develop drug control policies, the Dutch have become too far-reaching in their policy development and reviewing and reformulating policy based on the more simplistic routine activity theory could prove useful.[30] A similar argument also was presented several years after the research regarding the Netherlands applying the routine activity theory to explain the country's narcotic problem.[31]

An attempt to understand conflict that occurs in everyday life drew upon the fundamental elements of the routine activity theory. Researchers formed a parallel between conflict and routine activity and expressed the importance of the analysis, citing that the integration of the two elements can "interact in a criminal case."[32]

> ***"Researchers also have applied the routine activity theory to stalking."***

The routine activity theory was reformulated by marrying it with the theoretical concepts of several other criminological theories, including situational crime prevention, the control theory, self-control, and social disorganization. The reformulated theory was principally designed to describe the use of civil remedies to prevent crime,[33] and, though lacking empirical support, it proved useful for initially analyzing the effect of civil remedies.[34]

Practical Value for Crime Control

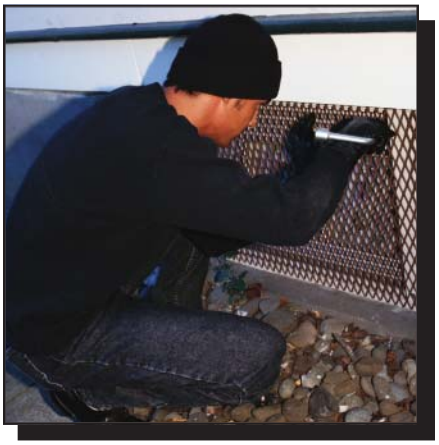
Law enforcement agencies can address specific crime issues within their respective jurisdictions by applying the routine activity theory as a framework for analyzing a problem and planning an intervention. Analyzing includes collecting and examining data about the problem, describing its history, evaluating potential causes, reviewing previous interventions, and identifying stakeholders and offenders.[35] The routine activity theory assists in all of these analytical processes. Once agencies analyze the problem and identify its causes, they efficiently and effectively can begin setting goals and objectives to achieve an outcome and design, implement, monitor, and evaluate programs or policies to address the problem, reducing the likelihood of the convergence of the three main components needed for a crime to occur.

Case Example

A city experienced an increase in daytime residential burglaries in a particular district. An analysis of the problem by the city's police department explored the three components of the burglaries that, according to the routine activity theory, must exist. The arrest reports in the few solved cases indicated that the motivated offenders

were primarily juveniles between the ages of 13 and 17. A review of the incident reports and follow-up interviews with the burglarized homeowners revealed that most burglaries happened on weekdays between noon and 5 p.m. During this time, all patrol units not responding to specific calls were required to be positioned in the city's school parking lots and at school crossings. No residences with alarm systems (or signs indicating the presence of one) were targeted. Often, several neighboring homes were burglarized on the same day. These crime characteristics represented the level of capable guardianship (or lack of it) during the criminal events. The suitable victims in this scenario were the actual items taken, not necessarily the owners of them (although most people generally think of owners as the victims). The items reported taken from the homes were normally small and easily transportable, including liquor, cash, CDs, and small electronic devices. Many of the homes' interiors often were needlessly vandalized as well.

After the department analyzed the routine activity theory's three components of the crime problem, it designed an intervention program. According to the model, the absence of any one of the components of a crime sufficed in preventing that crime. Therefore, assessing each component of the crime assisted in developing different action plans to use individually or together to develop preventive measures. The motivated offenders in the burglaries appeared to be juveniles, rather than professional burglars, based on the arrests made in the recent past, the less valuable nature of the victims (items stolen), and the senseless vandalism perpetrated at the scene.



Also, the burglaries appeared to occur in a period coinciding with lunch and after-school periods. To reduce the convergence of these motivated offenders with suitable targets (items in the residences), the department could initiate strict truancy enforcement programs, work with the schools to better track students leaving campus during the lunch period, and develop after-school programs. If the handler component of the theory is considered, law enforcement could work to implement programs to exercise influence over the juveniles to refrain from engaging in delinquent or illegal behavior, including initiatives to create mentorship or work programs for at-risk youths, parental notification of the burglary problem through community meetings, or even media releases.

In this example, the capable guardians included police officers, school officials, neighbors, and residential alarm systems, as well as residents simply being at home (which is not an option for many people who must leave their residences to go to work). Such efforts as creating a Neighborhood Watch with residents who remain home during the day, suggesting the installation of residential alarm systems, reminding residents to lock their doors, and increasing law enforcement patrols in the neighborhoods during peak burglary periods can increase the capable guardianship.

Reducing the suitability of the victims posed the most difficult task in this scenario because few citizens will purchase less valuable property just to decrease the likelihood of theft (many people do reduce the suitability of their cars being stolen by driving older, less attractive cars), and the government has little input in the legal

personal possessions of citizens. To reduce the suitability of the victims (items taken), police could provide information through pamphlets or community meetings to residents reminding them to secure valuables within their homes (not clearly visible from open windows) and not leave large sums of cash there. While ensuring that doors are locked acts as a capable guardian, it also hardens the target by making it more difficult to actually take.

While the scenario is simple and certainly not an exhaustive exploitation of each of the routine activity theory's components, it provides an example of how law enforcement can use the theory as a model for addressing specific crime issues. This scenario uses both the problem analysis and intervention program development stages.

Conclusion

Many researchers have used the routine activity theory to address crime problems, explain them, and develop preventive measures and solutions. In existence for over 50 years with only one minor alteration, the theory, with its unique applicability to a variety of criminological topics, is a resourceful model for crime-related studies.

Based on the popularity in current research, the routine activity theory will remain a tool for practitioners and a source of interest for researchers for several more decades. Law enforcement agencies can use it as a model to address a plethora of specific crime-related problems because of its simplicity and versatility.

> ***"An attempt to explain conflict that occurs in everyday life drew upon the fundamental elements of the routine activity theory."***

Contemporary uses highlight the seemingly illimitable potential of the theory in addressing particular crime concerns. Law enforcement managers can optimize the benefits of existing research and use them to address issues in their own jurisdictions to make their citizens and communities even safer. ✦

Endnotes

[1] C.R. Jeffery, "Obstacles to the Development of Research in Crime and Delinquency," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30 (1993): 491-497.

[2] See, L.E. Cohen and M. Felson, "Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach," *American Sociological Review* 44 (1979): 588-608.

[3] Ibid., 591.

[4] S. Pfohl, *Images of Deviance and Social Control* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 83.

[5] M. Felson, "The Routine Activity Approach and Situational Prevention," in *Contemporary Criminological Theory*, eds. L. Siegel and P. Cordella (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 20.

[6] Supra note 2, 589.

[7] Predatory does not imply person-on-person crime but, rather, preying on either a person or an item. Therefore, a burglary constitutes a predatory crime because the offender preys on the vulnerability of the item. Some items are more vulnerable than others. For example, it is easier to steal a piece of candy than a washing machine.

[8] Supra note 2, 604.

[9] For illustrative purposes and to maintain clarity, the author employs masculine pronouns for subjects in most instances.

[10] Further exploration in this area of a group of people as increasing capable guardianship is suggested to modify this concept from the perspective of terrorist acts where larger groups of people may actually increase the chances of victimization.

[11] M. Felson, "Linking Criminal Choices, Routine Activities, Informal Control, and Criminal Outcomes," in *The Reasoning Criminal: Rational Choice Perspectives on Offending*, eds. D.B. Cornish and R.V. Clarke (New York, NY: Springer-Verlag, 1986), 119-128.

[12] M. Felson, *Crime and Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1998), 53.

[13] J.R. Brunet, "Discouragement of Crime Through Civil Remedies: An Application of a Reformulated Routine Activities Theory," *Western Criminology Review* 4 (2002): 71.

[14] Criticisms regarding the routine activity theory's general lack of value have been lodged; see supra note 1; J.L.

Massey, M.D. Krohn, and L.M. Bonati, "Property Crime and the Routine Activities of Individuals," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 26 (1989): 378-400. More specific critiques of perceived research shortcomings and inadequate operationalizing of critical factors are found in T.D. Miethe, M.C. Stafford, and S.J. Long, "Social Differentiation in Criminal Victimization: A Test of Routine Activities/Lifestyles Theories," *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 184-194; and D.W. Osgood, J.K. Wilson, P.M. O'Malley, J.G. Bachman, and L.D. Johnston, "Routine Activities and Individual Deviant Behavior," *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996): 635-655.

[15] An Internet-based search of WebSPIRS (SilverPlatter Information: Florida State University (n.d.), retrieved March 10, 2004, from *http://80-www.lib.fsu.edu.proxy.lib.fsu.edu:9000/resources/criminology.html*) indicated that 33 criminal justice periodicals have published articles related to the routine activity theory since 1980, 26 of which have been in the last decade. A social science citation index through ISI Web of Knowledge (Thompson ISI. (n.d.). Social Science Citation Index, retrieved March 10, 2004, from *http://isi4.isiknowledge.com/portal.cgi/wos*) revealed 35 articles related to the routine activity theory and approach in their database since 1978.

[16] Supra note 12.

[17] Supra note 5, 20-25.

[18] M. Felson and R.V. Clarke, *Business and Crime Prevention* (Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press, 1997); and M. Felson and R.V. Clarke, *Opportunity Makes the Thief* (London: Police Research Group, 1998).

[19] Supra note 12.

[20] E.E. Mustaine and R. Tewksbury, "Sexual Assault of College Women: A Feminist Interpretation of a Routine Activities Analysis," *Criminal Justice Review* 27 (2002): 90.

[21] V.A. Henson and W.E. Stone, "Campus Crime: A Victimization Study," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 27 (1999): 295-307.

[22] B.S. Fisher, F.T. Cullen, and M.G. Turner, "Being Pursued: Stalking Victimization in a National Study of College Women," *Criminology and Public Policy* 1 (2002): 266.

[23] E.E. Mustaine and R. Tewksbury, "College Students' Lifestyles and Self-Protective Behaviors: Further Considerations of the Guardianship Concept in Routine Activity Theory," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 30 (2003): 309.

[24] Ibid., 321.

[25] Supra note 22; and E.E. Mustaine and R. Tewksbury, "A Routine Activity Theory Explanation for Women's Stalking Victimization," *Violence Against Women* 5 (1999): 43-62.

[26] Supra notes 22 and 23.

[27] Supra note 25.

[28] Supra note 22.

[29] Supra note 25 (Mustaine and Tewksbury).

[30] G. Farrell, "Routine Activities and Drug Trafficking: The Case of the Netherlands," unpublished manuscript, Rutgers State University of New Jersey, 1997; retrieved January 21, 2004, from *http://www.drugtext.org/library/articles/98911.htm*.

[31] T. VanderHeijden, "Routine Activities and Drug Trafficking via the Netherlands," paper presented at the meeting of the Institute for Human Rights and Criminal Justice Studies, Durban, South Africa, 2001.

[32] W.A. Pridemore, "Review of When Push Comes to Shove: A Routine Conflict Approach to Violence," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Behavior* 7 (2000): 125-128.

[33] Supra note 13, 73.

[34] Supra note 13, 76.

[35] W.N. Welsh and P.W. Harris, *Criminal Justice Policy and Planning* (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson, 1999).