**Original Article**

# Getting a handle on crime: A further extension of routine activities theory

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**Abstract** Routine activities theory has had considerable influence, stimulating subsequent theoretical development, generating an empirical literature on crime patterns and informing the design of prevention strategies. Despite these numerous applications of the theory to date, a promising vein for theoretical development, research and prevention remains untapped. The concept of *handlers*, or those who control potential offenders, has received relatively little attention since introduced by Felson (1986). This article examines the reasons for the lack of attention to handlers and extends routine activities theory by proposing a model of handler effectiveness that addresses these issues. In addition, the model explicitly links routine activities theory with two of its complements – the rational choice perspective and situational crime prevention – to articulate the mechanism by which handling prevents crime. We conclude by discussing the broad range of prevention possibilities offered by the model of handler effectiveness.
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## Introduction

Routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979) has had a considerable impact on the field of criminology and the prevention of crime. It compactly articulates the necessary elements that must converge for a crime to occur (Cohen and Felson, 1979), as well as those who have ability to prevent it (Eck, 2003). The theory has been widely applied, first to explain changes in crime trends over time (for example, Cohen and Felson, 1979), and then to explain differences in crime rates across cities (for example, Messner and Blau, 1987) and individual differences in victimization risk (for example, Cohen *et al*, 1981). Furthermore, routine activities theory has been used to explain a broad range of crime types, including violence (for example, Sampson, 1987; Kennedy and Forde, 1990; Fisher *et al*, 1998), property crimes (for example, Massey *et al*, 1989; Kennedy and Forde, 1990; Lynch and Cantor, 1992; Fisher *et al*, 1998; Mustaine and Tewksbury, 1998; Wilcox *et al*, 2007), sexual assault (for example, Schwartz and Pitts, 1995) and stalking (for example, Mustaine and Tewksbury, 1999; Fisher *et al*, 2002). More recently, those interested in crime

prevention have used routine activities theory as an organizing framework to conceptualize crime problems and develop prevention strategies (Felson and Clarke, 1998; Eck, 2003). Despite these numerous applications of the theory to date, a promising vein for theoretical development, research and prevention within routine activities theory remains untapped. Our aim is to extend routine activities theory in a way that contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the crime event, provides theory to develop research hypotheses and informs the development of prevention strategies.

The theory identifies six elements: targets/victims, guardians, places, managers, offenders and handlers. A great deal of attention has been paid to understanding what makes targets attractive and how guardians can protect targets and there is a growing body of research on what makes certain places suitable for crime and how managers can prevent crimes at places. There is less research on the handler–offender relationship and the effectiveness of such control in preventing crime. Examples of handling in the literature often describe pro-social adult handlers controlling the minor offenses of children and adolescents (for example, Felson, 1986). This raises questions as to whether potential handlers exist for other crimes and offenders, and if so, under what conditions handlers will be effective in preventing crime. We extend routine activities theory by proposing a model of handler effectiveness that addresses these issues. In addition, we articulate the mechanism by which handling prevents crime by explicitly linking routine activities theory with two of its complements: the rational choice perspective and situational crime prevention. Finally, we discuss the broad range of applications for prevention that the model of handler effectiveness offers.

## Routine Activities Theory

Cohen and Felson (1979) argued that the structure of routine activities influences criminal opportunity and therefore affects trends in direct-contact predatory violations. Drawing from human ecological theories, they suggested that structural changes in routine activity patterns can influence crime rates by affecting the convergence in time and space of three minimal elements: motivated offenders, suitable targets and the absence of capable guardians. The lack of any of these is sufficient to prevent crime. Routine activities theory has seen many significant developments that have extended its application beyond explaining changes in crime rates over time; further articulated the necessary elements for a criminal event and those with the potential to prevent it; and clarified how to conceptualize crime problems in terms of these necessary elements.

Routine activities theory has been used to explain a range of phenomena beyond crime rates over time, including distributions of crime across geographical units (for example, Messner and Blau, 1987) and individual differences in victimization (for example, Miethe *et al*, 1987; Sampson, 1987; Fisher *et al*, 1998; Mustaine and Tewksbury, 1998). The theory has proven useful across this broad range of applications, producing a sizable literature of empirical research.

In addition, *guardians*, or those who prevent crime, have been subdivided according to whom or what they are supervising – target, place or offender – and are now collectively referred to as *controllers*. Guardians protect targets from being victimized (Cohen and Felson, 1979), place managers supervise specific places (Eck, 1994) and handlers control potential

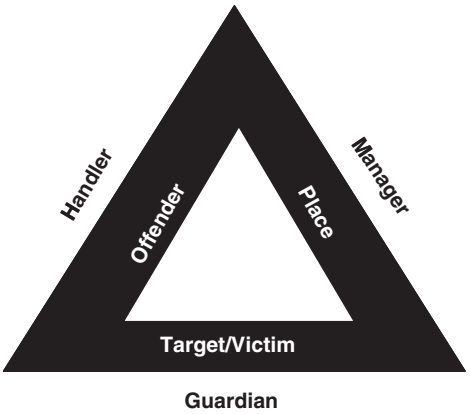


**Figure 1:** The crime triangle (Eck, 2003).

offenders (Felson, 1986). This more comprehensive version of routine activities theory has been depicted as a double triangle by Eck (2003) (Figure 1).

The inner triangle represents the necessary elements for a crime to occur: a motivated offender and suitable target must come together at an accessible place, while the outer triangle represents the potential controllers who must be absent or ineffective for a crime to occur.

Finally, Eck (2001) has suggested that routine activities theory describes not only the six elements of a crime event, but also that specific types of repeat crime and disorder problems can be understood in terms of these elements. That is, problems of repeat victimization, repeat places and repeat offending can be conceptualized as a function of the routine activities of potential offenders, victims and/or places, as well as the absence or ineffectiveness of potential handlers, guardians and/or managers (Eck, 2001). For example, a repeat victimization problem is one in which the same individual is repeatedly victimized; this repeat victimization can be attributed to both the victim's routine activities and characteristics as well as the routine absence of capable guardians.

The theory suggests that changes in crime patterns can be explained by changes in the supply of motivated offenders, attractive targets and places suitable for crime; the availability of effective handlers, guardians and place managers; and/or a shift in the routine activities of society which change the likelihood that the necessary elements of crime will converge in the absence of capable controllers. In terms of drawing prevention implications from theory, this suggests at least six potential points of intervention for any crime problem.

Yet, most theoretical and empirical research in this tradition has focused on understanding victims and guardianship (for example, Cohen *et al*, 1981; Messner and Blau, 1987; Miethe *et al*, 1987; Sampson, 1987; Kennedy and Forde, 1990; Fisher *et al*, 1998). More recently, the characteristics of places which facilitate crime and management practices that effectively reduce crime at places, have garnered more attention from criminologists (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1993, 1995; Eck, 1998; Mazerolle *et al*, 1998; Eck *et al*, 2007; Madensen, 2007).

However, since Felson (1986) first introduced the concept of handling, few have explored its possibilities in terms of understanding the crime event and developing crime prevention implications.

## The (brief) history of handlers

The concept of handling in routine activities has its theoretical roots in social bond theory (Hirschi, 1969). Social bond theory argues humans are self-seeking creatures and crime is gratifying; there is no need to explain the motivation for crime. Therefore, social bond theory seeks to explain the absence of crime. Hirschi (1969) suggested that a person is free to commit crime in the absence of social control and he located this control in the social bonds individuals have to other individuals and institutions.[1]

According to Hirschi (1986), control and choice theories (such as routine activities theory) share the assumption that humans are self-seeking beings. On the basis of this common starting point, Hirschi (1986) argued control and choice theories can be viewed as complementary, with control theories explaining criminality while choice theories explain crime. Felson (1986) built on this integration of control and choice theories by introducing the concept of handlers into routine activities theory. Felson sums up Hirschi's (1969) social bonds as *handles*, stating that 'a handle is a necessary condition for informal social control to occur' (1986, p. 121). In the absence of attachments to others, commitment to prosocial obligations, involvement in legitimate activities and beliefs in the rules of society, an individual is left with no handle to grasp and informal social control becomes impossible (Felson, 1986). Felson (1986), however, states that it is a 'special' case when an offender is actually unhandled, implying that most offenders have successfully avoided their handlers, rather than lack handles altogether.

Since introduced, handlers have received relatively little attention in the literature. The greatest attention has been from Felson (1995) himself, in a single piece that describes the discouragement of crime – guardianship, management and handling – as an ordinal variable that is directly related to the degree of responsibility the controller has to the target, place or potential offender. Those who own places or things or are personally related to people will be most likely to prevent crime, whereas strangers with no employment obligations to places, targets or potential offenders will be less likely to intervene. In this piece, Felson (1995) also describes control of potential offenders as a two-staged process: (1) attaching handles to youths, and (2) organizing community life so that the handles can be grasped.

Virtually all subsequent works that mention handlers merely summarize these two pieces by Felson (1986, 1995).[2] Therefore, these are the only available works with an illustration of the handler, the offender and the controlled behavior. Felson (1986, 1995), however, does not provide a detailed description of these three elements and we are left to review his examples to glean an understanding of the handler–offender relationship and the behavior it controls. In terms of the handler, the examples provided by Felson (1986, 1995) imply a prosocial adult. For example, he suggests that a parent, principal, school clerk and adult stranger at a mall are potential handlers with varying levels of responsibility (Felson, 1995). In terms of the potential offender, Felson (1986) repeatedly refers to 'youths', 'kids', 'children' and 'boys'. Finally, the controlled behavior that Felson (1986, 1995) describes

tends to be relatively minor, such as truancy, shoplifting, school yard fights and theft. We argue that the concept of handling actually has much greater potential than Felson's examples suggest.

## Why so little attention to handlers?

Given the sizable literature on victims and guardianship and the growing literature on places and management, the lack of attention to handling – both as a theoretical construct and as a source of crime prevention – warrants explanation. There are three general explanations for this. First, despite the fact that the theory clearly articulates motivated offenders as a theoretical construct (and thus variable), many have treated the motivated offender as a constant when using the theory to explain victimization. Although using the theory to understand patterns of victimization is a useful application, one must be careful not to allow these hypotheses derived from the theory to become reifications of the theory itself. That is, routine activities theory would suggest that, all else being equal, guardianship is inversely related to victimization risk. In many ways the absence of a discussion of offenders magnifies a division between traditional criminological theory which examines the sources of offender motivation, leaving opportunities for crime unexamined, and environmental criminology, which largely sets aside issues of offender motivation to explore the possibilities of opportunity in understanding patterns of crime as well as informing the prevention of crime (Clarke, 2004). Yet routine activities theory describes crime events resulting from the *interaction* of potential victims and offenders at places suitable for crime in the absence of effective controllers.

Second, routine activities theory has been used by those interested in crime prevention to help conceptualize crime problems and develop theoretically informed responses. Eck's (2003) crime triangle has been widely adopted by police as a conceptual tool for identifying the type of problem faced (that is, repeat victim, offender or place) and revealing the type of controller (that is, guardian, handler or manager) that should be engaged to prevent the problem. Perhaps handling has received such little attention because the idea of engaging handlers to prevent most crimes seems farfetched. Felson's (1986) examples of handling, which depict a prosocial adult controlling the relatively minor offenses of juveniles, may lead some to question whether the applicability of handlers goes beyond these types of actors and crimes. Although lack of handling might explain a serious repeat offender problem, on its face the idea of introducing handlers appears to be a naïve suggestion when dealing with offenses and offenders more serious than those described in Felson's (1986) examples.

Third, it remains unclear whether the concept of handling is substantively different from its theoretical predecessor from Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory. In other words, how, if at all, is handling theoretically distinct from social bonds? Handlers are typically referenced when routine activities theory is being reviewed, but there has been little theoretical or empirical attention paid to the construct. If the two concepts are assumed to be synonymous, there is little reason to expect that handling within routine activities theory would (or should) inspire a new body of research. In the next section, we address this and the above issues by proposing a model of handler effectiveness and articulating the mechanisms by which handlers prevent crime.

## Explicating Handler Effectiveness

Despite the little attention that handlers have received to date, we argue that exploring and extending the concept of handling is a worthwhile endeavor. First, doing so examines an untapped concept within a theory that has proven to be useful both in terms of understanding crime patterns, as well as informing prevention strategies. Second, as we will argue, introducing handlers to address more serious crime problems may not be as farfetched an idea as it first appears. Third, we explicate handling in a way that is substantively distinct from social bonds. Although our model does include a social element reminiscent of traditional control theories, it is more consistent with the opportunity perspective in which it is located.

In sum, we argue there is merit in exploring the explanatory as well as preventive possibilities of handling. To explicate this, we propose a model of handler effectiveness, defined as:

$$E = e^{b0} C^{b1} W^{b2} O^{b3} K^{b4},$$

where $E$ is the level of handler effectiveness; $C$ is the handler's level of social closeness to the potential offender; $W$ is the handler's level of willingness to intervene due to personal investment, either economic or emotional; $O$ is the handler's level of opportunity to intervene, either due to physical proximity or other forms of access to the offender; $K$ is the handler's level of knowledge about the situation and environment which allow and/or provoke the offense; $bi$ are weights; and $e$ is a random disturbance, indicating that there are many small independent causes of $E$ not captured in the preceding concepts.

These four characteristics ($C$, $W$, $O$, and $K$) – which individuals possess to varying degrees across different situations and potential offenders – interact to produce handler effectiveness. When any variable is equal to zero, the handler is ineffective in preventing crime.[3] There is no *a priori* reason to suspect that these four characteristics have equal influence across all combinations of handlers, offenders and situations; the relative importance of each variable likely varies across combinations as indicated by the weights. By using a multiplicative model with weights as exponents, this interaction can be modeled.

As previously noted, this model of handler effectiveness draws on the theoretical roots of the concept, but it is also consistent with elements of opportunity perspectives grounded in a rational choice model of decision making which will be discussed below. First, social *closeness* is similar to Hirschi's (1969) attachment; this variable captures the relationship between the handler and the potential offender. All else being equal, a strong relationship between the handler and the potential offender will increase the likelihood of handler effectiveness. This inclusion of social closeness captures Felson's (1995) assertion that those closest to a crime problem – whether guardian, manager or handler – will be the most effective in preventing subsequent crimes. As discussed in more detail below, social closeness is important for two reasons. Not only will a potential offender be more inclined to adhere to the handling of someone with whom they share a close relationship, but that relationship also allows the handler insight into what actions will be most effective in controlling this particular offender. Stranger handlers, however, do not necessarily have a value of zero on this variable (which would render handling ineffective). Potential offenders may heed the

warnings of strangers they have not met directly, but belong to an institution or social group with whom they feel socially close (that is, neighbors, teachers, colleagues and so on).

The handler's level of *willingness* to intervene to prevent the crime affects the likelihood of handler effectiveness. This model assumes that the handler, like the potential offender, is a (bounded) rational actor who seeks to minimize costs and pain and pursue benefits and pleasure. We take a broad approach with these concepts, arguing that the decision to intervene can be influenced by any personal investment, including emotional as well as economic costs and benefits. For example, the vested interest might be the adherence to prosocial values, such as parents who exert control over their children. Yet the motivation for exerting control need not be so reputable. Here, we draw from Eck's (1998) work with rental residential property managers. In San Diego, California, narcotics detectives met with owners/managers of residential rental properties and discussed how drug dealing could be controlled by these managers. In addition, these place managers received a letter from the police describing drug enforcement and the civil action authority of the city to close apartment buildings when management is non-compliant in taking action against drug dealing. These properties produced 60 per cent fewer reported crimes in the 6 months following the meetings (Eck, 1998). By leveraging the rationality of controllers (in this case place managers who did not want their apartments to be shut down by the city), crime was reduced without directly altering the motivations of the offenders. Like place managers, the willingness of handlers may be grounded in any number of personal investments. As was demonstrated by Eck (1998) with rental residential property place managers, controllers' rationality can be leveraged to get them to exert control over a problem to which they contribute through their complicity or apathy. For example, an employee may be willing to control the pilfering of office supplies by his co-workers when he realizes this behavior leads to lower bonuses for all employees.

The inclusion of *opportunity* in the model acknowledges the extensive theoretical and empirical literature that documents the temporal and spatial dimensions of criminal opportunity (for example, Sherman *et al*, 1989; Farrell *et al*, 2002; Bowers and Johnson, 2005; Eck *et al*, 2007). Just as the opportunity to commit crime is temporally and spatially patterned, so is the opportunity to prevent it. Even if a handler has a social relationship with the potential offender and is willing to intervene, he or she must have the opportunity to intervene. In some situations, this might mean the handler is in close physical proximity to the potential offender at a particular moment in time, as the handler may need to be physically present to effectively intervene during the commission of some crime types. In other cases, the opportunity to intervene may be other forms of access, as in the case of companies that monitor the computer activities of their employees. In short, the handler must be presented with or seek out the opportunity to intervene.

We argue that *knowledge* about the situation and environment that allow or provoke the offense also affects the likelihood of handler effectiveness. One basic tenet of environmental criminology is that criminal opportunities are highly specific (Felson and Clarke, 1998). In other words, a situation or environment may provide particularly attractive opportunities for crime. Furthermore, situations not only provide the opportunity for crime, but at times they may also provide the motivation, thus evoking criminal responses (see Wortley, 2001, and Cornish and Clarke, 2003). Handlers who are knowledgeable about the situations and environments that provide the potential offender with opportunities and/or motivations for offending will be more effective in taking action for prevention. Handlers can gain

knowledge about crimes, opportunities and motivations through various sources, such as social networks.

Routine activities theory and our extension that explicates the concept of handling essentially answer two questions, 'Who can prevent crime?' and 'Under what conditions will they be most effective?' Yet we have not explained the process by which handlers prevent crime. Here, we draw on two complements of routine activities theory – the rational choice perspective and the situational crime prevention framework – to answer this question.

## The rational choice perspective and situational crime prevention

While routine activities theory describes the necessary elements of a criminal event and the controllers who can disrupt that event, the rational choice perspective (Clarke and Cornish, 1985) suggests the processes by which offenders make decisions. According to this perspective, the decision to offend is a two-stage process. The 'involvement decision' is an individual's recognition of the 'readiness' to commit a crime (Clarke and Cornish, 1985). The offender has contemplated this form of crime and other potential options for meeting his or her needs and concluded that he would commit this type of crime under certain circumstances. The involvement decision process is influenced by prior learning and experiences of the individual (Clarke and Cornish, 1985). Conversely, the 'event decision' is highly influenced by situational factors. Situations, however, are not perceived the same by all; they are viewed through the lens of previous experience and assessed using the information processing abilities of the individual (Clarke and Cornish, 1985). This perspective acknowledges the 'bounded' or 'limited' nature of human rationality, as well as individual differences in decision-making capabilities. Furthermore, the information used to make decisions can be inaccurate, with judgment sometimes clouded by situational changes, drugs or alcohol. Over time, the involvement decision continues to be shaped by experience. Positive reinforcement from criminal events can lead to increased frequency of offending. The individual's personal circumstances might change to further reflect his or her readiness to commit crime. For example, Clarke and Cornish (1985) point to increased professionalism in offending, changes in lifestyle, and changes in network of peers and associates as personal conditions that change over time to solidify one's continual involvement decision. Conversely, an offender may choose to desist in response to re-evaluating alternatives to crime. This decision could be influenced by an aversive experience during a criminal event, a change to one's personal circumstances or changes in the larger opportunity context (Clarke and Cornish, 1985).

Situational crime prevention, which is grounded in this perspective, was designed to address highly specific forms of crime by systematically manipulating or managing the immediate environment with the purpose of reducing opportunities for crime as perceived by offenders (Clarke, 1983). In other words, situational crime prevention aims to change the offender's decision-making processes by altering the perceived costs and benefits of crime. As noted above, Wortley's (2001) work on situational precipitators has expanded the realm of situational crime prevention in a way that acknowledges that environments and situations not only create opportunities for crimes, but at times provide the motivation (see also Cornish and Clarke, 2003). Situational crime prevention techniques have focused on effectively altering opportunity structures and/or motivations of a particular crime by

(1) increasing the efforts, (2) increasing the risks, (3) reducing the rewards, (4) reducing provocations, and (5) removing excuses (Cornish and Clarke, 2003).

The rational choice perspective and the situational crime prevention framework can be used to explicate the process by which handlers prevent crime. We argue that situational crime prevention techniques are the mechanisms by which handlers can alter the involvement and/or event decisions of the potential offender by changing the motivation and/or opportunity for crime, as well as the way the potential offender perceives the environment and situations.[4] Although our model is primarily aimed at explaining variation in the event decision, it has implications for the involvement decision as well. Recall that the involvement decision is a rational one, as individuals weigh the costs and benefits of involvement in crime. The presence of a handler may serve as part of the cost–benefit analysis. The weight of handlers in the decision is tied to their social closeness, willingness to intervene, opportunity to intervene, and knowledge about the situation or environment that allows or provokes the offending. In addition, not all individuals will make the same decision based on a given set of circumstances; how the individual perceives his or her circumstances is highly dependent on prior learning, both experiential and vicarious. Not only can handlers influence the actual costs and benefits of being involved in crime, but they can also influence the way potential offenders perceive these costs and benefits via social learning processes. Individuals who anticipate handler interference may be discouraged from becoming involved in crime.

Once involved in crime, the decision to commit a particular crime – the event decision – is influenced by situational factors. These factors include the perceived risks, rewards, efforts, excuses and provocations for violence. A handler has the potential to influence these situational factors, thus controlling the potential offender. How the potential offender views these situational factors is also contingent on prior learning. If a potential offender has repeatedly received negative treatment from a handler when pursuing a particular type of criminal opportunity in the past, he or she may perceive similar opportunities in the future more negatively because of the prior experience. For example, an offender might recognize a particular situation as risky because of a previous intervention by the handler. Furthermore, these negative experiences may ultimately impact the decision to remain involved in crime, as some offenders may choose to desist if frustrated by their handler's repeated intervention.

## Discussion

We have argued that handlers have received relatively little attention within the routine activities tradition because the theory has been largely reified as a theory of victimization; it seemed to lack prevention implications for more serious forms of crime; and it was unclear whether the concept was theoretically distinct from its antecedent, the social bond. The proposed model of handler effectiveness, together with its links to a rational choice perspective of offender decision making and situational crime prevention, addresses each of these barriers. First, just as the recent developments in places and managers has done, our extension of the theory that explicates handler effectiveness re-establishes routine activities as a theory of crime events, rather than a theory of victimization. This theory is particularly useful in explaining a range of phenomena, in that it suggests hypotheses related to victimization, spatial and temporal distributions of crime, and offending patterns.

Second, the proposed model of handler effectiveness indicates that the prevention implications are actually much broader than they initially appear. Although Felson's (1986, 1995) examples describe prosocial adults controlling the minor offenses of children out of moral obligation, the concept is not nearly so limited. Rather, handlers need not be prosocial adults driven by their familial or occupational obligations. Rather, as our model suggests, they need only to (1) be socially *close* to the offender, (2) be *willing* to intervene, (3) have the *opportunity* to intervene before or during criminal events, and (4) have *knowledge* about the situations and opportunities which allow and/or provoke the offense. In terms of closeness, recall that Felson (1986) says it is a 'special' case when an offender lacks any handles; rather, the challenge lies in figuring out how others can grasp these handles to exert control. With few exceptions, most offenders have people with whom they are close. Our model does not require that they be close to prosocial individuals or institutions, only that social ties exist. This brings us to the issues of *opportunity* to intervene and *knowledge* about the factors which facilitate and even provoke the offense. Although not discounting the importance of guardians and place managers in preventing crime events, the handler's relationship to the offender provides access to understand why the offender commits crime, as well as what he or she perceives to be costs and benefits. This intimate relationship (that is, social closeness) uniquely positions the handler to choose selectively the techniques of situational crime prevention to control offending. Unlike place managers and guardians, who take preventive action to alter the decision making of unknown potential offenders, a handler presumably will be able to target specifically this particular offender's rational calculus based on his or her hopes, fears, likes, dislikes, preferences and discomforts. This might mean a girlfriend threatening to leave her boyfriend; a colleague revealing unethical behavior to an ethics board; a gang ostracizing a member for repeated violence; a sibling threatening to telephone a parole officer; a friend refusing to see an addict until they are in recovery; a grandmother cutting off financial support because of a gambling habit; or a strip club manager refusing to give shifts to dancers he suspects of prostitution. As humans, we vary in terms of what influences our behavior. Presumably, those *closest* to the offender, with the access to the offender that provides the *opportunity* to intervene, and the *knowledge* about the factors which put them at risk for offending will be the most successful at operationalizing the techniques of situational crime prevention. In some cases, co-offenders may actually be the most likely handlers, depending on the co-offender's ability to interpret situational risks.[5]

That being said, handlers must be *willing* to take control. The handler's motivation for taking control need not be completely voluntary, however. They may be encouraged, enticed, compelled and even threatened. The challenge here lies in finding ways to leverage the rationality of these potential handlers in a way that makes it in their best interest to take control. Examples include a friend who limits another's drinking to reduce the likelihood of subsequent aggressive behavior; gang members who discourage violence among their peers to minimize police attention to their drug dealing; and shift supervisors who are penalized for theft by employees under their supervision. In sum, the prevention possibilities appear to be fairly broad.

Finally, the proposed model of handler effectiveness is theoretically distinct from social bond theory and it is important to consider how to categorize the concept of handling within criminological theory. Although Felson (1986) derives the concept from control theories, handling is conceptually distinct from social bond theory. Felson's (1986) discussion of

handlers grasping 'handles' to prevent crime suggests a much more active prevention role compared to social bond theory, which seems to indicate that the existence of the relationship alone controls the behavior of a potential offender. Conversely, handling occurs not simply because a relationship exists, but because one party actively controls the behavior of another (as noted by our inclusion of *willingness* and *opportunity*, which suggest contemporaneous intervention). This is a more inclusive approach to control theory, which includes not just the indirect, passive relational control described by Hirschi (1969), but also direct control that has been discussed by other control theorists (for example, Nye, 1958).

Beyond social closeness, the inclusion of willingness, opportunity and knowledge in our model demonstrates that handling is much more than simply being bonded to prosocial individuals or institutions. Rather, we are describing a dynamic process in which an individual might be motivated to commit crime, yet chooses not to because of specific actions taken (or anticipated to be taken) by a specific handler in a specific situation. This reveals a major difference between the control theories and routine activities theory. Social bond theory explains between-individual variation in offending.[6] Routine activities theory as presented above with a model of handler effectiveness has the potential to explain between-individual variation in offending, as well as within-individual variation in offending across situations. According to the model, potential handlers possess social closeness, willingness, opportunity and knowledge to varying degrees across different situations and potential offenders, indicating that an individual may choose to commit a crime in one situation, but not in another (that is, the 'event decision' from the rational choice perspective), in part because of the differential influence of his or her handler(s).

Furthermore, just as a repeat victim problem can be seen as a function of target attractiveness coupled with weak or absent guardianship, so too can a repeat offender problem be seen as a function of offender motivation coupled with weak or absent handling. This highlights a fundamental distinction between the handlers from routine activities theory and traditional control theories. Unlike Hirschi (1969), routine activities theory does not suggest that motivation is ubiquitous; being a motivated or readied offender goes beyond a lack of handling. Just because a handler can prevent crime does not mean that lack of handling is a sufficient explanation for repeat offender problems. Rather, it is the interaction of weak or absent handling and a motivated offender with an opportunity favorable for crime that produces a crime event. Our aim has been to explicate the circumstances and the mechanisms by which handling of motivated offenders is possible.

When considering the substantial body of theory and research that has developed from the other elements of routine activities, exploring the possibilities of handlers is a worthwhile endeavor. If we think about how handlers can be conceptualized in concert with other perspectives and strategies, the implications for the proposed model appear to be broad. First, problem-oriented policing (Goldstein, 1979; Eck and Spelman, 1987; Eck, 2001) has had considerable impact on the field of policing, in that it has helped to identify the crime problem as the unit of work for the police. To date, police organizations have capitalized on problem-oriented policing by focusing on repeat place and repeat victimization problems; repeat offender problems have received less attention. Perhaps this is because introducing handlers seems like a naïve approach when considering more serious offenders. Although lacking strong bonds to prosocial individuals and institutions might explain offender motivation, creating such bonds seems like a tall task, particularly for the police. Yet the model of handler effectiveness presented above does not require that a handler be a prosocial adult

whose relationship to the offender alone will deter offending. Rather, it can be any individual who has a relationship with the offender, the willingness and opportunity to intervene, and the knowledge about the situation or environment which allows or provokes criminal behavior. Innovative police officers can find ways to leverage the rationality of potential handlers to get them to take control.

Second, the techniques of situational crime prevention have generally been operationalized to deter a broad range of unknown potential offenders. Yet handling can be a highly intimate act between two people who have an existing relationship. This capitalizes on an empirical reality frequently documented in criminology (and consistent with the rational choice perspective), but often ignored by opportunity theorists: individual differences. Our conceptualization of handling allows for, and even embraces, the idea that potential offenders vary in their perceptions of costs and benefits. For one offender, ostracism by his gang may be a cost greater than prison, whereas for another, eviction from a family member's home might be a point of leverage. We suggest that handlers may be uniquely positioned to operationalize the techniques of situational crime prevention in a way that is individualized to the offender, thus increasing the likelihood of effectiveness.

Third, the proposed model could also be used by private security as a template for systematically identifying positions and/or individuals who will be the most effective handlers. Once identified, their crime discouragement role can be formalized by notifying them of responsibilities and educating them about how to operationalize the techniques of situational crime prevention within specific settings. Consider two examples. First, employee theft is sometimes facilitated by workplace norms in which colleagues turn a blind eye to thefts by other employees. Exploiting the potential for employees to handle each other may reduce internal theft. Second, there is increasing attention to workplace bullying and other behaviors that negatively affect work environments. Here too employees can be enlisted as handlers to reduce bullying behavior.

Finally, our conceptualization of handlers also has implications for corrections. To date, the application of routine activities theory to the criminal justice system has been largely limited to policing. One exception is Cullen *et al* (2002), who considered how the concepts from routine activities theory could be applied in conjunction with the principles of effective intervention to improve community supervision of offenders on probation and parole. They argued that recidivism is the result of individuals who retain criminogenic propensity having access to opportunities for crime. Correctional practices, therefore, should aim to address both propensity as well as opportunities for crime. Cullen *et al* (2002) suggested that parole and probation officers could introduce opportunity reduction into community supervision by holding problem-solving meetings with potential handlers (that is, family and community members). Our model of handler effectiveness continues this discussion of how routine activities theory can be applied to improve correctional programs.

## Conclusion

In 1986, Felson recognized the theoretically distinct nature of handlers from guardians. In 1994, Eck contributed to the evolution of routine activities by noting that some individuals are specifically charged with preventing crime at places, rather than protecting specific targets or controlling potential offenders. Developments in theory and research within this

tradition have largely surrounded targets and their guardians and places and their managers. Felson's (1986) contribution of handlers, which we believe is substantial, has been largely untapped by both criminology and crime prevention. Given the extensive application of the theory thus far to each of these realms, handlers present an additional avenue for the theory, research and prevention of crime. As a first step in this process, we have proposed a model of handler effectiveness to guide the development of research hypotheses, as well as inform future prevention strategies aimed at reducing repeat offender problems. This conceptualization of handlers has promising implications for areas in which routine activities theory is commonly applied, such as problem-oriented policing, situational crime prevention and security, as well as areas that have not traditionally drawn from routine activities, such as community corrections.

## Notes

1 Hirschi (1969) identified four social bonds that, when absent or weak, leave the individual free to consider crime: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Attachment refers to emotional closeness to people. This is a form of indirect, relational control; the individual cares what the other thinks and is sensitive to his or her opinions. People avoid committing crimes because they do not want to disappoint those to whom they are attached. Commitment refers to the rational component of law abiding behavior. The more invested one is in conventional activities, the more they have to lose if they commit crime. Involvement represents the opportunity element of social bonds. Those who are deeply involved in conventional activities will have little time for offending, while those without ties to jobs, schools, prosocial friendships and so on are available for crime. Finally, belief describes an individual's bond to the conventional value system.

2 For exceptions, see Cullen *et al* (2002) for a discussion of parole and probation officers as handlers and Fisher *et al* (2002) for a brief discussion of potential handlers for stalkers.

3 Note that there are other controllers (that is, place managers and guardians) who may lack one or more of these characteristics, yet still effectively supervise places or protect targets. This model explains the effectiveness of handlers, whose relationship to the potential offender allows them to discourage specific crimes. Further, some individuals possess such small degrees of these characteristics that their ability to effectively handle a particular offender is compromised.

4 See Tillyer and Kennedy (2008) for examples of how controllers operationalize the techniques of situational crime prevention in focused deterrence violence reduction programs.

5 Felson's recent work on co-offending emphasizes the harm caused by co-offending and implications for prevention in light of the prevalence of co-offending (see Felson, 2003; Andresen and Felson, 2010). Specifically, he suggests disrupting offender convergence settings (that is, informal, stable settings in which offenders encounter suitable co-offenders) to impede the accomplice regeneration process. In other words, make it more difficult for offenders to find one another. Rather than focusing on disrupting the offender convergence process, our model of handler effectiveness aims to exploit the co-offender relationship once it has formed. If the rationality of one offender can be effectively leveraged to recognize real or perceived risks, he or she may become a handler for the co-offender(s).

6 Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-grade theory of informal social control does explain within-individual change in offending across the lifecourse. However, the within-individual variation we discuss does not necessarily include desistance, but rather the decision to offend in some situations and not others.

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