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Applying Situational Principles to Sexual Offenses against Children

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***Abstract:** Explanations of sexual offending against children have traditionally focused on the intrapsychic forces that are assumed to drive the offender's deviant behavior. The situational crime prevention perspective, on the other hand, examines the immediate behavioral setting to identify factors that encourage or permit sexual abuse. Empirical evidence increasingly indicates that sexual offences against children are significantly mediated by opportunities and other environmental conditions. It is argued in this chapter that the primary prevention of the sexual abuse of children may be effected by systematically identifying and altering these problematic environmental elements.*

This chapter outlines the case for applying a situational prevention model to sexual offenses against children. It examines evidence for the situational bases of these offenses, describes a situational typology of sexual offenders against children, outlines the settings in which their offending occurs, and proposes situational strategies for preventing these offenses. Regular readers of the *Crime Prevention Series* will be familiar with the principles of situational crime prevention. However, we are hoping that this volume

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will attract researchers and practitioners in the sexual offender treatment field who may not normally read articles on situational crime prevention. Therefore, we will begin by briefly reviewing the key elements of situational prevention.

SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION

Situational crime prevention is a relatively new applied criminological model that shifts the focus from supposed deficits of offenders to aspects of immediate environments that encourage or permit crime to occur. It is based on the premise that all behavior is the result of an interaction between the characteristics of the actor and the circumstances in which an act is performed. The immediate environment is more than a passive backdrop against which action is played out; it plays a fundamental role in initiating and shaping that action. Thus, the probability of crime varies according to both the criminal disposition of the individual and the crime-facilitating nature of the immediate setting. While most crime prevention efforts in the past have concentrated on the criminogenic risks and needs of the offender (e.g., through offender rehabilitation), crime can also be prevented by altering the criminogenic features of the potential crime scene. Situational crime prevention, then, is about creating safe environments rather than creating safe individuals.

Environmental perspectives such as situational crime prevention are classed as theories of crime rather than theories of criminality. This is a crucial distinction. Most criminological theories (and psychological theories that deal with crime) are theories of criminality. They seek to understand the societal, developmental and/or biological factors that have combined to create the criminal offender. In situational crime prevention, however, the criminal event rather than the offender becomes the unit of analysis. To implement situational principles, data are gathered to show where, when, why and how a particular crime occurs. The situational perspective recognizes and explores the fact that crime is not randomly distributed in time and space, but follows patterns. Burglaries, for example, are typically concentrated around “hot spots,” and these hot spots are the logical focus for prevention efforts. Situational prevention adopts a micro-level, problem-solving approach that targets specific forms of crime in specific contexts. The desired end-point of a situational analysis is an intervention that is tailor-made to meet the conditions of the particular problem under consideration.

The situational perspective has two distinct theoretical roots. One theoretical basis is the rational choice perspective, adapted from the expected utility model found in economics and in the psychological decision-making literature (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). Underpinning the rational choice perspective is the assumption that criminal conduct is purposive and that offenders commit crime in order to derive some benefit. Offenders are portrayed as active decision makers who undertake cost-benefit analyses of the crime opportunities with which they are presented, and who make choices about whether or not to engage in criminal acts. The immediate environment provides the potential offender with relevant information about the likely rewards and success associated with a contemplated crime. The attractions of criminal behavior include money, increased status, sexual gratification, excitement, and so on. Disincentives include the difficulty involved in carrying out the behavior, the likelihood of getting caught and the anticipated guilt associated with violating personal standards of behavior. Crime occurs when the perceived benefits of offending are judged to outweigh the perceived costs. The decision an offender makes to engage in crime may well be a poor one and ultimately prove to be self-defeating, but nevertheless it represents the most desirable option at that time as the offender saw it.

Situational prevention based on the rational choice perspective involves manipulating the immediate environments of crime in order to increase the cost-benefit ratio of offending as perceived by the potential offender. This approach to prevention is often referred to as opportunity reduction (Clarke, 1995). In first-generation theorizing on situational prevention (Clarke, 1992), opportunities were reduced by manipulating three environmental dimensions – making crime more risky, increasing the effort to commit crime, and reducing the rewards of crime. Later, an additional category was added – removing excuses – that targeted the neutralizations that many offenders utilize to allow themselves to circumvent moral constraints on behavior (Clarke, 1997; Clarke and Homel, 1997).

The other basis for situational approaches derives from research in behavioral, social and environmental psychology. According to this view, there is a subtle and intimate relationship between individuals and their immediate environments. Underpinning the logic of this approach is the principle of behavioral specificity, challenging the view of personality as a cross-situationally consistent predisposition (Mischel, 1968). In fact, it is argued, the behavior of an individual may be highly variable from one situation to the next. A person who may be described by others as aggressive

does not behave uniformly in an aggressive manner, but rather, aggression is displayed occasionally and only when certain “favorable” conditions are met. While people obviously differ in their propensity to commit crime, given the right circumstances most people are capable of criminal acts. Unlike the deliberative process described by rational choice theory, according to the behavioral specificity principle immediate environments may influence people at a sub-cognitive level in ways that they might not even be aware of to perform behaviors that they would not otherwise perform.

Whereas rational choice theory focuses on aspects of the environment that enable crime, this second group of theories tends to emphasize the instigating role of immediate environments. Summarizing research in this area, Wortley (2001, 1998, 1997) suggested four basic ways that environments may precipitate crime. Situations can present cues that prompt an individual to perform criminal behavior; they can exert social pressure on an individual to offend; they can weaken moral constraints and so permit potential offenders to commit illegal acts; and they can produce emotional arousal that provokes a criminal response. In addition to reducing opportunities for crime, prevention may require removal of these situational instigators. Recently, Cornish and Clarke (2003) have presented a revised model of situational prevention that incorporates some of these precipitating factors under the heading of reducing provocations.

EVIDENCE FOR THE SITUATIONAL BASES OF SEXUAL OFFENDERS AGAINST CHILDREN

The sexual offending literature has largely ignored the role of situational factors in the prevention of sexual offending against children. Sexual offenders, particularly those who have offended against children, are widely assumed to possess motivations that are pathological and long-standing and that separate them from non-sexual offenders. Their offending is largely portrayed as internally driven and, without individual-level intervention, likely to become chronic. Prevention is usually thought of in a tertiary sense, that is, in terms of treatment with known offenders. While it is true that the role of situational factors in the commission of sexual offenses has been recognized in a number of important conceptual models (Finkelhor, 1984; Marshall and Barbaree, 1990; Marshall et al., this volume; Pithers et al., 1983) in practice many researchers and clinicians working

in the sexual offending area have continued to focus attention on the personal, intrapsychic dimensions of the behavior and to overlook the contributions of immediate circumstances.

For their part, situational crime prevention writers have had very little to say about sexual offending. One suspects that there has been a tacit acceptance by many researchers of the pathology model of sexual offending and a belief that these offenses might fall outside the usual situational prevention rules. Indeed, one criticism often leveled at situational prevention is its disproportionate focus on property crime over interpersonal crime (Trasler, 1986). The thrust of this criticism is the assumption that as the offender's behavior becomes more "irrational," situational prevention has less to offer (Tunnell, 2002).

Recent research, however, has challenged the view that most sexual offenders are dedicated, serial offenders driven by irresistible sexual urges (Pritchard and Bagley, 2000; Simon, 2000, 1997; Smallbone and Wortley, 2004a, 2004b, 2001, 2000; Soothill et al., 2000; Weinrott and Saylor, 1991). For example, Smallbone and Wortley (2001, 2000) examined the official records of 323 convicted child-sex offenders, 169 of whom admitted their offences and agreed to provide detailed self-report data on their psychosocial/psychosexual histories and offending behaviors. While offenders were not asked directly about the role of situational influences on their offending behavior, a number of findings strongly suggest that immediate environmental factors were important in many cases. These findings include:

- *A late onset of the behavior* – The mean age of offenders at the time of their first sexual contact with a child was 32.4 years and the modal age bracket (accounting for 37% of the sample) was 31 to 40 years. That many offenders were able to resist sexually abusing children for so long suggests the absence of strong sexually deviant motivations. At the same time, the early thirties is an age when many men are assuming child-care and other supervisory roles with children and their opportunities to offend are significantly expanded (Hanson, 2002).
- *A low incidence of chronic sexual offending* – Less than a quarter of the sample had previous convictions for sexual offenses, and almost half reported having restricted their offending to one victim. These findings complement other research that shows the official sexual recidivism rates for sexual offenders are much lower than have been traditionally

assumed – around 13% after five years at risk (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998). Again these findings suggest the absence in many offenders of strong deviant motivations.

- *A high incidence of previous non-sexual offenses* – In contrast to the low incidence of previous sexual offending, around 60% of the sample had prior convictions for non-sexual offenses. Of those offenders with previous convictions, their first conviction was four times more likely to be non-sexual (82%) than sexual (18%). For many, sexual offending might be seen as part of a more general involvement in criminal activity (Simon, 2000, 1997). For these offenders, the problem seems to be less some special motivation to sexually abuse children than a more general problem involving the failure to inhibit urges and impulses, especially within the interpersonal domain. That is, many offenders in the sample may be better portrayed as “opportunity takers” than sexual deviants.
- *A low incidence of stranger abuse* – The vast majority of offenders (93.5%) abused their own child or a child that they already knew. Locating and grooming a previously unknown child for the purpose of sexual contact requires a high level of planning, commitment and effort. In contrast, most offenders had sexual contact with children with whom they had immediate or convenient access.
- *A low incidence of networking among offenders* – Around 8% of offenders said that they had talked to other offenders prior to their arrest, and 4% said that they were involved in an organized pedophile group. There was little evidence that offenders sought out a pedophile subculture.
- *A low incidence of child pornography use* – Around 10% admitted to using child pornography and 8% kept records of their sexual contacts with victims. Most offenders did not display the deep interest in paedophilia that one might expect from a dedicated offender.
- *A low incidence of paraphilic (sexually deviant) interests* – Apart from exhibitionism (5.4%), frotteurism (i.e., obtaining sexual gratification by rubbing up against another person, usually in public – 9.0%), and voyeurism (5.4%), fewer than 5% of offenders could have been diagnosed with a paraphilia other than pedophilia, including public masturbation (4.2%), fetishism (1.8%), sexual masochism (1.2%), transvestic fetishism (1.2%), making obscene telephone calls (1.2%), sexual sadism

(0.6%), bestiality (0.6%), and necrophilia (0%) (see also Smallbone and Wortley, 2004a).

Taken together these findings suggest that for many sexual offenders a control model might be more appropriate than a sexual deviance model. According to control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), the propensity to commit crime is widely distributed in the community, and the basic cause of criminal behavior is universal – an absence of restraint. Criminal behavior is intrinsically rewarding and requires no special motivation or pathology, while criminal acts themselves demand little in the way of specialized skills or experience. Offenders do not learn to commit crimes, but rather, they fail to learn not to commit them. Control theory asks you to imagine the extreme case of a child who has grown up without any restrictions being placed on his/her self-gratifying behavior. The outcome in such a scenario would be an individual who satisfies his/her urges indiscriminately. Absence of restraint can manifest in a wide range of behaviors. The offender who succumbs to the temptation to steal is also likely to exercise little restraint when presented with opportunities to rob, assault and so forth. Control theory, then, suggests that the causes of sexual offending against children may be the same as the causes of crime generally. The potential to view children as sexual objects may be more widespread than is usually assumed (e.g., see Barbaree and Marshall, 1989; Laws and Marshall, 1990; Malamuth, 1989; McConaghy, 1993; Smallbone, in press). Most of the time such urges are kept in check by a range of personal, social and physical constraints. However, opportunity structures and environmental cues may play an important role in weakening controls and facilitating offending behavior (Hirschi, 1988).

TYPES OF OFFENDERS

It should not be inferred from the previous section that the situational perspective necessarily assumes that crime is opportunistic in the sense of being a spur-of-the-moment reaction to a chance circumstance. In fact, rational choice theory was primarily formulated to explain premeditated crime. Crime opportunities may be simply taken as they fortuitously occur, but they may also be sought out or created by the offender. Even planned crimes by highly motivated offenders involve situational considerations. The professional burglar, for example, does not steal arbitrarily. Rather, he/

she carefully selects targets that experience has shown will deliver maximum pay-off and entail minimum risks.

Cornish and Clarke (2003) have sought to clarify the various ways that offenders respond to situations. They proposed three offender types based on the strength of the offender's criminal disposition and the role that situational factors play in his/her offending. The first type is the anti-social predator, which Cornish and Clarke argue is the "default" offender category. These offenders possess ingrained criminal dispositions, and their motivations for offending derive from the intrinsically rewarding nature of the crimes they commit. They utilize situational data to make rational choices about the relative costs and benefits of criminal involvement, and will operate on the environment to increase criminal opportunities. Predators may specialize in a particular type of crime or may be criminally versatile, but in any event all will have developed "knowledge, skills and experience enough to minimize risk and effort, and maximize payoffs" (p. 57).

Applied to sexual offending against children, the antisocial predator equates to the stereotypic predatory child molester. They are high-frequency, chronic offenders. In a further analysis of the Smallbone and Wortley (2000) data¹ (Wortley and Smallbone, under review), 23% of the sample were identified as persistent sexual offenders (they had previous sexual offence convictions). This comprised 5% who were specialists (they had previous convictions only for sexual offences) and 18% who were versatile (they had previous convictions for both sexual and non-sexual offenses). Compared to other (non-persistent) offenders, persistent offenders were more likely to have been sexually abused themselves as children, to have had their first sexual contact with a child at an earlier age, to abuse male victims, and to abuse extrafamilial victims. The specialist persistent offenders tended to have more frequent and extended sexual contact with their victims than did the versatile persistent offenders, suggesting that they are more interested in forming an emotional relationship with the child. The versatile offenders tended to have an earlier contact with the criminal justice system, reflecting their more general criminality. The persistence of these offenders demonstrates an unambiguous sexual attraction to children. They will take calculated steps to obtain victims and will have developed a repertoire of skills and techniques to allow them to carry out their task. They are likely to be adept at identifying vulnerable children who will present the fewest risks of apprehension.

Cornish and Clarke's second type is the mundane offender. These offenders are ambiguous in their criminal commitment and opportunistic in their offending. They engage in occasional, low-level criminality. Their motivations for offending are the same as for predatory offenders, but they have a greater stake in conformity and are therefore subject to stronger personal and social constraints on their behavior. These constraints, however, weaken from time to time. In particular, to facilitate their engagement in morally proscribed behavior, mundane offenders may invoke neutralizations for their crimes (Sykes and Matza, 1957), especially where situational factors serve to obscure personal responsibility (Wortley, 2001, 1996). Mundane offenders vary in their vulnerability to temptation, and hence in the extent of their criminal involvement, but, over all, both the seriousness and frequency of their offending are lower than among predatory offenders.

The term mundane is an unfortunate one to apply to sexual offenders against children, since it seems to trivialize the seriousness of their offending. An alternate label suggested by Cornish and Clarke to describe these offenders – “opportunists” – seems more appropriate in this context. Opportunist sexual offenders will typically be criminally versatile but relatively infrequent in their sexual offending. Wortley and Smallbone found that 41% of their child molester sample were serving their first sentence for a sexual offense, but had previous convictions for non-sexual offenses. Compared with the persistent offenders, these offenders were less likely to have been sexually abused as a child and were more likely to have had their first sexual contact with a child at a later age, to abuse female victims, and to abuse intrafamilial victims. Like versatile persistent offenders, they tended not to maintain extended relationships with their victims, underscoring the opportunistic nature of their offending. The criminal versatility of these offenders suggests a generalized failure to inhibit self-gratifying urges, while their relative lack of persistence in sexual offending itself suggests sexual ambivalence rather than ingrained sexual deviance. They offend because they can.

The third type in Cornish and Clarke's classification is the provoked offender. Provoked offenders are reacting to a particular set of environmental circumstances – situational frustrations, irritations, social pressures and the like – that induce them to commit crimes they would not have otherwise committed. Their crimes include “crimes of violence that erupt in the heat of the moment; or impulsive ones committed by offenders overcome by

temptation, or a temporary failure of self control” (Cornish and Clarke, 2003, p.70). The motivation for crime is supplied by the situation and the offence may represent an aberration in an otherwise law-abiding life.

Again the terminology employed by Cornish and Clarke is problematic when applied to sexual offenders, with “provoked” suggesting that the victim is responsible for initiating the behavior. Cornish and Clarke also describe these offenders as “situational,” a term that is better suited for this offence.² This label has already been applied in the sexual offending treatment literature (Gupta and Cox, 1988; Johnston et al., 1997; Lanyon, 1986), although it has tended to be used to describe transitory psychological states (e.g., anger) rather than specific environmental conditions. Situational offenders will generally have no other criminal involvement, and their sexual offending will be a relatively isolated event. Wortley and Smallbone found that for 36% of their sample their current conviction was their first for any offence. These offenders were relatively old at the time of their first sexual contact with a child, they usually selected female victims, they usually offended within the family, and, while most had just one victim, they tended to abuse that victim repeatedly over an extended period of time. The picture here is of a caregiver or other authority figure who has abused a position of trust and who has ongoing access to the victim. In other respects the offender may be largely unremarkable. One can imagine that in many cases there would have been surprise and even disbelief among those who knew the offender when the abuse came to light. They generally will not possess an entrenched sexual attraction to children, or, if they do, they have been successful in avoiding hands-on offending. Their offending may have begun after some triggering event – for example, a moment of intimacy with the child that proved stimulating. Where this first offence was experienced as rewarding, subsequent offending would be reinforced. Nevertheless, their offending is not inevitable, and had the facilitating circumstances not occurred they may not have taken this first step.

The behavioral responses to the interaction between offender type and situation are shown in Table 1. The table illustrates two points. First, the importance of situations does not decrease as the criminal disposition of the offender increases. Rather, the role of the situation changes, and hence, the nature of situational prevention must also change. The stronger the individual’s antisocial commitment, the more likely he/she is to be an active manipulator of – rather than a passive responder to – criminogenic situations. Accordingly, “harder” situational interventions are required as

Table 1: The Behavior of Offenders as a Function of an Interaction between the Disposition and Situation

	Offender		
Situation	Situational	Opportunistic	Predatory
Challenging			Manipulates
Tempting		Exploits	
Precipitating	Reacts to		

the offender’s criminal commitment increases. For predatory offenders, situational data primarily inform target selection. If necessary, they are prepared to expend considerable effort to achieve their goals, and obstacles to offending are challenges to be overcome. Predatory offenders will be the most difficult to deter, but the vulnerability of specific targets and the overall frequency of offending may be significantly reduced through situational prevention. For opportunistic offenders, situations offer temptations to be seized. Because of the moral ambivalence of the opportunistic offender, reducing temptations can be very effective in preventing abuse, with minimal danger of displacement to other targets. For the situational offender, opportunity reduction may not be necessary at all. Rather, relieving the precipitating conditions may be sufficient to remove the impetus to offend.

Second, offenders are not necessarily restricted to one type. There is a downward (but generally not upward) flow of offenders from higher to lower situational categories. For example, while predatory offenders are likely also to commit opportunistic and situational offenses, the reverse is generally not the case – opportunistic and situational offenders will not as a rule commit predatory crimes. In fact, predatory offenders may be more likely to commit opportunistic and situational offenses than opportunistic and situational offenders. This point was neatly demonstrated for general crime by Chenery et al. (1999). They found that 33% of vehicles parked in no-parking zones were owned by individuals with criminal records. That is, prolific offenders tend to offend across the situational

spectrum. An implication of this is that predatory offenders will not always require “hard” interventions.

The explicit identification of offender types is a new development in situational prevention. While the situational approach is conceptually underpinned by models of human action (such as rational choice), individual differences have generally played little role in the design of prevention strategies. The offender has been treated as a constant. Bringing characteristics of the offender into the equation more accurately reflects the view of behavior as an interaction between person and situation, and offers the potential for better targeted crime prevention strategies (see Marshall et al., this volume). At the same time, crime patterns remain the central concern of situational prevention. In order to alter criminogenic environments, crucially we need to know the circumstances in which the offense takes place.

SETTINGS FOR SEXUAL OFFENSES AGAINST CHILDREN

The locations of many types of offenses are fixed and self-evident. Thefts from pay phones, for example, always occur at pay phones (although we may want to know which particular phones are most vulnerable). Situational prevention of thefts from pay phones will generally involve altering the design of the phones or changing the environment in their immediate vicinity (e.g., improving surveillance). Situational prevention is more problematic with offenses that do not take place in any one designated location. In the case of sexual offenses against children, we need to consider a number of different settings in which offending may be most likely to occur.

Using a modified version of Kaufman’s Modus Operandi Questionnaire (Kaufman, 1989), Smallbone and Wortley (2000) asked their sample of convicted child molesters detailed questions about their pre-offense, offense, and post-offense behavior. Among these questions, offenders were asked where they found children for sexual contact (Table 2), strategies they employed to gain access to the children (Table 3), where the offending took place (Table 4), and strategies they used to be alone with the child (Table 5). Tables 2 and 3 exclude responses from intrafamilial offenders (n=79) since they will by definition find victims within the family home; Tables 4 and 5 include responses from all offenders (n=169). The tables indicate the percentage of offenders who nominated a particular response for at least one offense (an offender may offer multiple responses).

Table 2: Locations for Finding Children for Sexual Contact (extrafamilial only)

Location	%
At a friend's home	40.0
A close neighborhood	21.1
Baby-sitting	21.1
Through an organized activity	19.7
Offender's apartment building	17.3
Offender's place of employment	17.3
A distant neighborhood	15.8
A public toilet	13.2
Isolated or out of the way place (e.g., rivers, vacant lots)	11.8
A shopping mall	11.8
A park	10.5
A swimming pool	10.5
At church	10.5
Allowing the offender's own children to play with the child	10.5
A playground	5.3
Hitchhiking	5.3
The child babysat for other children at the offender's home	5.3
A video arcade	3.9
A movie theatre	2.6

Source: (Smallbone and Wortley, 2000).

The settings for offending nominated by offenders may be described under three general categories – domestic, institutional and public. Domestic settings may be the home of both the victim and the perpetrator (in the case of intrafamilial offending), the home of the victim to which the perpetrator has access, or the home of the perpetrator (or a friend) where the victim has been taken. As Tables 2 and 4 show, domestic settings are by far the most common location to both access victims and commit the offences, with 69% of all offenses occurring in the home of the perpetrator. Situational and opportunistic offenders may be particularly likely to offend

Table 3: Strategies for Getting Access to Children for Sexual Contact (extrafamilial only)

Strategy	%
Spent time with the child while parent/caretaker was present	46.2
Made friends with the parent/caretaker of child	44.9
Helped parent/caretaker around the house	35.9
Offered to baby-sit victim	23.1
Asked neighbors or friends of family to join in family activities	21.5
Offered to drive/walk victim to or from school	19.2
Volunteered for child or teen organization	8.0
Established romantic relationship with a single parent	7.0

Source: (Smallbone and Wortley, 2000).

Table 4: Locations for Taking Children for Sexual Contact

Location	%
Your own home	68.9
Going for a car ride	27.4
Isolated or out of the way places (e.g., vacant lot)	5.6
An out of the way place in the child's home	19.5
A friend or relative's home	17.1
The bush	15.5
A park	9.5
Public toilet	7.1
Swimming pool	5.4
Taking the child for walks	5.4
Playground	3.0
Movie theatre	2.4

Source: (Smallbone and Wortley, 2000).

Table 5: Strategies for Being Alone with the Child (Smallbone and Wortley, 2000)

Strategy	%
Being at home alone – it was OK with my wife/girlfriend	46.7
Watching TV with them	41.7
Letting them sleep in your bed	36.3
Sneaking into their room at night	34.5
Babysitting	31.7
Going for a car ride with them	31.5
Tucking them into bed	29.8
Taking them places during the day without one of their parents	25.6
Going swimming with them	24.4
Seeing child while parents were at work	24.1
Taking a bath/shower with them	22.6
Going to isolated or out of the way places (e.g., vacant lots)	21.4
Taking them on overnight trips without one of their parents	20.8
Giving them a bath	17.9
Being together for a holiday	17.9
Letting the child stay up after the parent had gone to bed	17.3
Taking them camping	15.5
Being at a house of a friend/relative who said it was OK to be alone there	14.9
Going to a shopping mall	10.1
Seeing them on weekends (if divorced or separated)	8.9
Having sole custody	8.3
Taking them to school	7.7
Taking them to the video arcade	7.1
Taking them to a park	7.1
Taking them to the movies	6.5
Taking them out of school	6.0
Having the child baby-sit for your children	4.2
Going to a playground	3.6

in domestic settings, but predatory offenders are also active here. For example, 45% of extrafamilial offenders established friendships with the parents of a child and 7% established a romantic relationship with a single mother in order to gain access to a victim, both strategies that indicate long-term planning (Table 3). As Table 5 shows, the offenses themselves often occur during normal day-to-day interaction between caregivers and children – watching television with children, bathing them, tucking them into bed and so forth. Undoubtedly, many of these situations will be deliberately engineered by the offender, but in the cases of situational and opportunistic offenders the offense may initially have occurred in response to being presented with these opportunities.

Institutional settings are places where groups of children congregate outside of the home for some formal purpose. They include day-care centers, schools, churches, youth groups, orphanages and so forth. In these settings the perpetrator will usually be an employee or volunteer who has some official role and who has authority over the children. Institutional settings accounted for a small but nevertheless significant number of offenses. For example, 20% of extrafamilial offenders said that they accessed children via an organized activity (Table 2). Note, however, that only 8% of extrafamilial offenders said that they joined a child or youth organization for the purpose of accessing children for sexual abuse (Table 3). In other words, these data suggest that in many cases the abuse occurred in response to opportunities that were made available to the offender.

Public settings are parks, public toilets, shopping malls, swimming pools and so forth. These locations are typically associated with predatory offenders. They are the locations that many parents will regard as most dangerous and are the traditional focus of “stranger danger” public education campaigns. In comparison to other locations, however, they are relatively infrequent places for locating children for sexual abuse (Table 2). They are somewhat more common as the location for abuse (Table 4), indicating that some offenders who already know their victims will take them to out-of-the-way places to carry out the offense.

Each of these settings presents challenges for situational prevention. Domestic settings will often be the locations for offenders with the least entrenched pedophilic interests, but they are also the most difficult locations to access for prevention. The person who ought to be a capable guardian of the child, and to whom one would look to put in place protective strategies, is often the abuser. Institutional settings, on the other hand,

permit a good deal of control over the activities of employees and volunteers. However, the history of many organizations is that they are more concerned about protecting their reputation than they are in instituting prevention policies, and abuse in these settings can go undetected for many years. Public settings often offer the greatest potential for control over the environment. For example, authorities can design and operate public toilets in whatever manner they see fit. However, public locations where abuse may occur are almost limitless, and the base rates for offending in any one location are very low. In practice, it will be necessary to concentrate on the main public “hot spots” for abuse to apply prevention efforts. How situational prevention might be operationalized in each of these three settings, and for different types of offenders, is considered in the following section.

SITUATIONAL PREVENTION OF SEX OFFENSES AGAINST CHILDREN: SOME PROPOSALS

There are, as far as we are aware, no studies that have tested situational interventions with sexual offenders on a pre-test/post-test basis. This section therefore contains suggestions for situational interventions that are necessarily speculative. We draw on the general situational crime prevention strategies described by Cornish and Clarke (2003) and Wortley (2001). There is some overlap between these two models, and some strategies do not seem particularly applicable to sexual offending against children. Accordingly, we will concentrate on four strategies – increasing effort, increasing risk, controlling prompts and reducing permissibility.

Increasing Effort

All other things being equal, offenders will select targets that require the least effort and involve minimal deviation from their routine activities (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Increasing effort involves making the offending behavior more difficult or inconvenient to carry out. For sexual offending against children, this principally means making it harder for potential offenders to obtain children to abuse. While predators may at best be slowed down by this strategy, situational and opportunistic offenders may be fully deterred. Specific tactics for increasing effort include controlling

access to facilities, target hardening and controlling tools (Cornish and Clarke, 2003).

Increasing effort may be achieved through excluding potential offenders from places where children are located. Policies instituted by most schools and day-care facilities that regulate casual access to the grounds by visitors (e.g., rules that all visitors must report to the office) are a way to implement this strategy. Increasingly, organizations that deal with children are also screening employees and volunteers to prevent people with previous convictions for sexual offenses from working with children. This strategy is useful for identifying the most obvious predators. However, given that Smallbone and Wortley (2000) found that three-quarters of their sample did not have previous sexual offense convictions, screening alone will not guarantee that these environments are safe. Smallbone and Wortley further found that sexual offenders were three times more likely to have previous convictions for non-sexual offences than for sexual offences, and on this basis it is tempting to suggest that institutions should also screen for general criminality. However, the vast majority of individuals who commit non-sexual offenses do not go on to commit sexual offenses (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998), so such a policy would produce an enormous number of false positives.

Target hardening involves obstructing offenders in their illegal pursuits. Usually this entails employing physical barriers, locks or screens to protect the intended object of their crimes. In the case of the sexual abuse of children, this strategy may be operationalized by the teaching of so-called protective strategies to children (Wyles, 1988). Grooming victims for abuse requires varying degrees of effort for predatory offenders, and in the selection of their victims, they are likely to target vulnerable children who present an easy mark and offer the least resistance. While some commentators have argued that child-focused prevention programs unfairly shift the burden of prevention onto children (Kaufman and Zigler, 1992; Melton, 1992), children's reactions to potential perpetrators can nevertheless have a significant effect on the perpetrator's subsequent behavior. Smallbone and Wortley (2001, 2000) found that the most successful tactic for potential victims when approached by a perpetrator was being assertive and saying "no." Also relatively successful was showing distress, which seems to jog the conscience of the offender. In contrast, struggling and calling for help were not particularly effective. Even well-designed child-focused prevention programs are not, however, without their own risks (Smallbone et al., in preparation). To avoid unintended negative

effects for children (e.g., their premature introduction to adult concepts about sexuality; increasing fears about and reducing trust in adults), child-focused prevention programs should arguably concentrate more on general confidence and assertiveness than on specific details about sexual abuse. Since both the risks and consequences of sexual abuse are known to be reduced in secure, protective families (Conte et al., 1989; Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993), perhaps the most effective child-focused approach would be to maximize protection within families.

The facilitators of offending also may be targeted in prevention efforts (i.e., “controlling tools”). The behavioral effects of pornography are controversial, but research suggests it plays a significant role in some sexual offenses. Marshall (1988) found that up to one-third of child molesters said that they viewed pornography immediately prior to offending.⁴ Smallbone and Wortley (2000) also found that 19% of offenders said that they showed their victim pornography to incite their curiosity and to help prime them for sexual contact. Such research helps justify censorship laws and law enforcement efforts to restrict the availability of child pornography. Increasingly, pornography, as well as opportunities for networking with other offenders and accessing children for abuse, are provided via the Internet⁵ (Tremblay, this volume). Many workplaces have explicit rules prohibiting staff from visiting pornography sites on work computers, a policy which may be backed up by regular audits of Internet use. As Taylor and Quayle (this volume) outline, it is also possible to exercise some control over the operation and content of these sites, for example, by making server managers legally responsible for pornographic sites that they store.

Increasing Risk

The risk of detection is perhaps the most salient variable in the potential offender’s decision making. Increasing risks involves making it more likely that the offender’s behavior will be observed or detected. Arguably, predatory offenders are most sensitive to risk factors, but they will also have developed the most sophisticated strategies to minimize the dangers of detection. Increasing risk includes extending guardianship, strengthening formal surveillance, increasing natural surveillance, and utilizing place managers (Cornish and Clarke, 2003).

In routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979), absence of a capable guardian is one of the three preconditions for crime (along with a suitable target and a motivated offender). Extending guardianship seeks

to encourage individuals to watch out for crimes that occur within their informal spheres of influence. In the case of sexual abuse of children, the parent/caregiver plays a primary role in safeguarding the child. As Simon and Zgoba (this volume) point out, while most sexual offences against children occur within the home, parents are perpetrators in just 15% of cases. That is, parents may potentially play a preventive role in up to 85% of child sexual abuse cases. Public education programs can be employed to alert parents/caregivers to the need for effective supervision and protection of children in their care (Wyles, 1988). These campaigns need to extend the usual focus on “stranger danger” to include discussion of the risks for children from relatives, neighbors and friends in domestic settings. We are, of course, aware of the inherent social dangers of such campaigns in creating unnecessary suspicion and fuelling a moral panic. Nevertheless, acting with care, perhaps parents/caregivers can be better educated to recognize danger signals such as an offender’s repeated or seemingly over enthusiastic attempts to seek opportunities to be alone with a child.

Where there is official guardianship, strategies can be developed to increase the levels of formal surveillance. In institutional settings, those in authority need to take responsibility for supervising the behavior of employees and volunteers. Sensible protocols governing the interaction with children need to be considered. For example, it may be appropriate to have procedures that forbid an employee/volunteer to be alone with a child. Physical modifications to the environment – for example, interviewing rooms with glass panels in the doors – can help increase natural surveillance. Once again, however, there is a clear need to balance the potential benefits of preventive interventions against the potential risks of increasing unwarranted suspicions about physical and emotional contact between adults and children.

Formal surveillance may include tracking the offender’s movements via Internet use, credit card transactions and passport control. Awareness of this surveillance may serve as a deterrent, while the records themselves may be used in criminal investigations and prosecutions. Recently in Australia, there were mass arrests of offenders who downloaded child pornography from the Internet and used credit cards to pay for the downloads (Taylor and Quayle, this volume). Similarly, 24 countries currently have legislation that makes it possible to prosecute their citizens who travel overseas to access children on sex-tourism excursions (David, 2000).

In public settings, increasing risk may require greater surveillance of offending hot spots by utilizing place managers. For example, as Table 2

indicates, 12% of extrafamilial offenders said they located children in shopping malls. Those in charge of security at these locations need to be aware of sexual offenders' modus operandi and be on the look out for suspicious behavior. Again, the physical design of facilities may be an issue. For example, 13% of extrafamilial offenders said they had located children at public toilets. The placement and orientation of public toilets need to take maximum advantage of natural surveillance: e.g., they need to be well lit, located in busy locations, and have no concealed entrances (Cockfield and Moss, 2002).

Controlling Prompts

Learning theories emphasize the role of immediate environments in cueing behavior. Situations, then, may contain within them the impetus to offend. Sexual offenses against children may be stimulated by the observation of children in "provocative" (from the perspective of the offender) or vulnerable situations. Controlling prompts involves identifying and removing such situational triggers (Wortley, 2001). This strategy may be particularly important in the offending of situational and opportunistic offenders, but even the behavior of predatory offenders will be mediated by environmental cues.

As shown in Table 5, sexual offending often occurs while the offender is engaged in some intimate activity with the child, such as giving the child a bath. Controlling triggers of this sort is of course very difficult. Where the guardian is not the perpetrator, he needs to exercise judgment when delegating these intimate tasks to others. Where the offender is already in therapy, avoiding such high-risk situations will be likely to form part of a relapse prevention program. For other offenders, we may need to rely on them to instigate their own situational prevention strategies. This is perhaps not as unlikely as it may sound. In an early report on Vermont's *Stop It Now!* program, almost one-quarter of all calls to a sexual abuse prevention hotline were from otherwise undetected offenders (Chasan-Taylor and Tabachnick, 1999). Similarly, almost 30% of callers to the *Stop It Now! UK and Ireland* helpline during 2003 were from people expressing concern about their own behavior (Stop It Now! UK and Ireland, 2005). It may be possible to use such opportunities to educate men to recognize and manage situations that they might personally find tempting. If, as we have argued, the potential to be sexually aroused by children is more common than is usually acknowledged, then the current media focus

demonizing sexual offenders may be counterproductive because it leaves many men who are struggling with temptations confused about their urges and without guidance.

In some cases, accommodation pressures can create the temptations and opportunities to offend. Sexual offending by adolescents often involves incest among siblings, which may be more common when siblings share beds or bedrooms (Finkelhor, 1984). Similarly, a high prevalence of child sexual abuse has been reported in some semi-remote Australian Aboriginal communities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Task Force on Violence, 1999), and this may be partly facilitated by cramped, open-plan housing where families are forced to share sleeping quarters (Smallbone et al., 1999).

Reducing Permissibility

Offenders may minimize the criminality of their behavior by invoking various excuses to free themselves from the inhibitory effects of self-blame (Sykes and Matza, 1957). Situations can assist in this process by obscuring the offender's contribution to the harm-doing. Sexual offenders are noted for their tendency to justify their behavior with cognitive distortions such as "I was educating the child," "the child enjoyed the relationship," "I could not help myself," and so on. Reducing permissibility involves strategies that help clarify the offender's role in his behavior. This strategy is likely to be most effective with situational and opportunistic offenders who retain an underlying belief that sexual offending against children is morally wrong. Specific techniques include clarifying responsibility, personalizing victims, rule setting and clarifying consequences (Wortley, 2001).

Citing loss of control through alcohol is perhaps the most obvious way that offenders may seek to deny personal responsibility for their offences. Irrespective of debates about whether the effects of alcohol are the result of physiological disinhibition or cognitive expectancies (Marlett et al., 1973), the fact remains that up to two-thirds of sexual offenders against children have serious problems with alcohol (Looman et al., 2004). Excessive alcohol consumption is, of course, a major general public health issue with much broader implications than its contribution to the sexual abuse of children. Nevertheless, the link between alcohol and sexual offending may be particularly strong in some specific settings that are also amenable to situational intervention. We noted earlier the high incidence of child sexual abuse in some Australian Aboriginal communities. The task

force investigating this problem identified widespread and chronic alcohol abuse as the single biggest causal factor⁶ (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Task Force on Violence, 1999). Recently, many of these communities have developed alcohol management plans that involve severe restrictions on the sale of alcohol, and in some case they have established “dry” communities. However, there has at this stage been no formal evaluation of the impact of these measures on sexual offending.

Environmental conditions can also blur for the offender the link between their behavior and the harm done. The tendency for perpetrators to excuse their behavior may be particularly prevalent in residential institutions for children such as orphanages, homes for the intellectually disabled and juvenile correctional facilities. The capacity of “total institutions” to engender abuses of power by staff has been well documented (Goffman, 1959; Haney et al., 1973). Institutional regimes divest residents of human qualities and individuality, facilitating neutralizations by staff that justify abuse (“they’re all the same,” “they’re just a number,” etc.). In addition, staff are afforded a degree of anonymity and a cloak of collective responsibility that minimize their sense of personal accountability for their actions (“everyone is doing it,” “I am just doing my job”). Abuse may be reduced by empowering and humanizing residents (personalizing victims) and curbing the sense of license that staff may have to act as they please (rule setting, clarifying responsibility). Strategies include: ensuring that residents receive adequate levels of physical care that affords them human dignity; minimizing institutional features of the environment and unnecessary regimentation; introducing explicit codes of conduct and induction procedures for staff that clearly spell out acceptable and unacceptable behavior and leave no room for the exploitation of ambiguity; providing formal opportunities for residents to make complaints if abuse occurs; and opening the institution to outside scrutiny, including instituting a process of regular independent inspections and reviews.

Finally, self-exonerating cognitions may be directly challenged. Again, accessing potential offenders is problematic, and public education campaigns would seem to provide the best forum for getting these messages across. Interestingly, as shown in Table 5, Smallbone and Wortley (2000) found that a common tactic of offenders was to spend time watching TV with their victim prior to the abuse. This would seem to provide an ideal opportunity to reach potential offenders at the very time that offending was being contemplated. These messages might particularly challenge the

comforting neutralizations that the offender is performing a service for the child (clarifying consequences) by setting out the harm suffered by children through abuse.

CONCLUSIONS

The application of situational prevention to sexual offenses against children involves two separate questions – is it theoretically plausible, and is there practical utility in doing it? In response to the first question, we argue that situational factors are a crucial and theoretically neglected element of these offenses. Situations are an unavoidable component of all behavior. It is perhaps trite, but nevertheless true, that no behavior can occur without opportunity – an experienced and determined pedophile confined to a deserted island (or prison) will not commit pedophilic acts. But the role of situations is more subtle than this. As research increasingly emphasizes the lack of specialized pedophilic commitment of many sexual offenders, then greater attention needs to be paid to the role that conducive environmental conditions play in facilitating the behavior.

As to the applied implications of a situational perspective, we acknowledge that devising practical interventions for sexual offending is not without its problems. The majority of offenses occur within the home and may be carried out by the very person who is responsible for protecting the child. It is not only difficult to reach such offenders through situational means, but to emphasize the commonplace nature of much sexual abuse runs the risk of encouraging a siege mentality. Care needs to be taken to ensure that sensible protective behaviors do not turn to paranoia. It would be a pity – and ultimately counterproductive from the perspective of encouraging healthy adult-child relationships – if fathers felt they were unable to show affection to their children, if people were reluctant to baby-sit their friends' children, or if teachers felt that they could not comfort a distressed pupil for fear of raising suspicions that they were involved in sexually abusive behaviors.

But equally, the current tendency to demonize sexual offenders and to assume that they form a clearly identifiable group in the community is problematic. As our data show (Smallbone and Wortley, 2000), screening for previous sexual offences will fail to identify most offenders. Moreover, while the focus remains on “stranger danger” people are likely to be less aware of the dangers that exist for their children close to home. The alternative message to stranger danger – that many men experience, if

infrequently and fleetingly, a sexual response to a child – is a challenging one. Nevertheless, frank acknowledgement of this may help men deal with these feelings and better prepare parents/caregivers to protect the children under their care.

We have provided some modest suggestions for situational prevention of sexual offenses against children. We do not do not think that our proposals are by any means the last word on the matter. Indeed, we hope that we have stimulated debate and further research on the topic.



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NOTES

- ¹These analyses also involved additional cases. The final sample comprised the official records of 362 prisoners and self-report data from 213 prisoners.
- ²However, a problem with this term is that it implies the other forms or offending are not situational. As we argue, all crime has a situational element.
- ³Smallbone and Wortley (2000) also found that many offenders were seeking an emotional relationship with their victims. Confident and assertive children are less likely to form dependency relationships with offenders and thus will not provide the emotional response many offenders seek. This might also be considered an example of Cornish and Clarke's (2003) reducing rewards.
- ⁴Pornography use may also be conceptualised as a situational prompt. It might also be noted that images of children do not need to be pornographic for them to be stimulating. As Tremblay (this volume) reports, the television program *Malcolm in the Middle* was very popular among the pedophiles in his sample.
- ⁵Arguably there is a case for a fourth setting for offending – a virtual setting.

⁶The task force also cited the ready availability of pornography in these communities as a contributing factor to the high levels of sexual abuse.

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