

# CRIME PREVENTION THEORY AND PRACTICE

**Prof. Ljiljana Komlenović, PhD<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the importance and necessity of a comprehensive understanding and analysis of theoretical models for the development of effective preventive strategies aimed at preventing crime. The article seeks to demonstrate that theoretical models do not serve merely as academic frameworks, but also possess significant heuristic value. A critical examination of sociological, biological, psychological and environmental factors as criminogenic predispositions, formulated in the form of scientific theories, contributes to a better understanding of crime and to the shaping of crime-control policy. Such an approach is important for improving practice in the field of criminal justice and, particularly, for the prevention of criminal and related forms of behaviour.

**Keywords:** crime; scientific theory; research; crime-control policy; preventive strategies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We are witnesses to numerous material, health-related, social, security-related and other harmful consequences that crime, as a negative social phenomenon, produces for the community, as well as to society's inability to respond to it effectively. Official state authorities do not have an adequate approach to the problem of crime, nor do they possess successful strategies for countering it. For the most part, they deal with the consequences caused by criminal acts. Sanctions imposed on offenders do not succeed in reducing the number of perpetrators. An increase in crime also means more police, more professionals in the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Slobomir P University Banja Luka, kom.ljiljana@gmail.com*

prosecutorial and judicial system, and more prisons. The answer lies in the need to change something in the existing way of working.

According to some authors, the application of measures of criminal-law coercion is neither necessary nor socially justified. A large number of contemporary criminal legislations, in addition to punishments, also prescribe a whole range of forms of extra-penal response, such as security measures and educational measures, which have a preventive purpose. “Crime-control policy should be based exclusively on a rich and coherent system of measures of social prevention: general, special and specific, while some other, alternative solution should be sought for existing punishments – one that is free from deep interference with human freedoms and rights” (Milutinović, 1984: 306–320).

Although some authors consider such an approach to be a “luxury of wealthy societies,” in the contemporary world there are increasing examples of turning toward prevention as a higher and more advanced form of countering crime – that is, preventing crime before it occurs. A precondition for such an approach is knowledge of what crime is, and knowledge of how it can be prevented. Modern criminal policy has developed the concept of functionally linking its prevention programmes with the results of concrete etiological research. Some newer trends in the democratic world indicate an increased governmental interest in the development and advancement of knowledge in the field of criminology. The number of government-sponsored studies is growing, and their results are used as guidelines for policy and practice in the fight against crime (Tombs & Whyte, 2007: 125–147).<sup>2</sup>

Prevention, as some understand it, represents an improved and “higher” level in the fight against crime. It must be based on valid knowledge of the etiological, phenomenological and other characteristics of crime, as a product of science and scientific research, because its successful implementation depends on knowledge of the factors that cause crime. “The causes of crime are most often ignored and not researched, and without knowledge of the causes of crime, the problem is viewed in a lay manner; and only exceptionally can adequate social action arise from lay understandings. The performance of public and

---

<sup>2</sup> Tombs and Whyte recorded a 500 percent increase in research funding by the Home Office in the United Kingdom, a large part of which was intended for commissioning criminological research.

social functions requires their holders, before taking a position, to invest the necessary effort in understanding the problem they are resolving. In the field of combating crime, intuition and common sense are of less assistance than professional knowledge,” Tomislav Marković argued as early as 1973 (Marković, 1973: 11).

The initial step consists of becoming familiar with scientific theories that offer explanations of the causes of criminal behaviour. It is common for political decision-makers, guided by day-to-day political interests, to base their decisions on subjective opinions and methodologically unreliable research. It is evident that neither state authorities nor the broader social community have offered a systematic insight into the etiology and prevalence of crime. The contemporary political-science concept, when speaking of decision-making, is evidence-based policy rather than opinion-based policy. In modern society, decisions should be made by gaining insight into real-life circumstances on the basis of systematic, carefully designed and rigorously conducted scientific research, as well as on the basis of transparent results.

## **2. SCIENTIFIC THEORY AS A CONSTITUENT ELEMENT OF SCIENCE AND A CONDITION OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE – AN ACADEMIC APPROACH**

In order for a field of human knowledge to be accepted as a science, it must possess certain essential constituent elements. Some authors identify a greater number of such constituents, while others list fewer; however, all of them, alongside the subject matter of a science, the research method and language, also identify theory as a necessary constituent element of science (Milošević & Milojević, 2001: 4).

Sciences, therefore, deal with theories. But what exactly is a scientific theory? Regardless of the fact that the terms *theory* and *theoretical* have different meanings, not only in everyday speech and language but also within science itself, it is indisputable that defining theory is not a simple task. Although common-sense understanding interprets theory as “everything that is the opposite of practice,” changes in science often arise from scientific theories, and only rarely from empirical observation of reality alone. Scientific theory is, in this respect,

the starting and indispensable element, the foundation from which one proceeds. On the path toward achieving this goal, theory should serve as a reliable guide (Šušnjić, 1999: 92–104).

What may be accepted as a universal definition of scientific theory is contained in the very concept of theory itself: from the Greek *theos* — god — meaning a divine view of the world, a view from above, from a height, from where all phenomena are seen within the framework of a whole, rather than separately from one another as in ordinary experience. Scientific theories therefore differ from everyday theories primarily by their complexity. They represent “a series of empirical generalizations, that is, scientific laws, which are mutually connected into a logically non-contradictory system, at the top of which stands a unifying principle or assumption. Scientific theory is the basic unit of scientific knowledge and, similarly to a scientific law, represents a central concept of scientific cognition and the highest concept of scientific methodology” (Šešić, 1988: 291).

Finally, theory is not only a system of knowledge, but also a means of acquiring new knowledge and, on that basis, of developing successful practice. The basic goals of science are considered to include achieving acceptable explanations of the causes of how a phenomenon occurs in social life, understanding, prediction and the intentional transformation of phenomena studied by that science in accordance with human needs. This is also how different theories of crime emerged.

### **a. Theories of Crime**

Crime has a negative impact on various spheres of society. In order to be able to undertake anything meaningful against this negative and socially undesirable phenomenon, we must first possess correct knowledge about crime itself. In other words, we must describe and explain it. Theory helps us understand why crime occurs at all, and what its predominant causes are.

Crime is the subject matter of criminological science, although it was initially studied by experts from other sciences, but only partially and within the scope of their own fields of inquiry. Criminology, as a synthetic discipline, incorporates all valid knowledge from other sciences and expands upon it by encompassing all aspects of the criminal

phenomenon: etiological, phenomenological and victimological aspects, as well as the key instruments through which society counters crime.

The search for the causes of crime is a central question of criminology and has occupied criminologists since the very emergence of the discipline. The first theories of crime appeared in the eighteenth century and represent the precursors of contemporary approaches. They ask the following questions: why do some people become criminals while others do not? Why do we label certain people and their behaviour as criminal? Why are some areas more exposed to crime than others? In the search for answers to these questions, numerous theories of crime emerged. Many theories complement one another in this process. However, the history of criminology has also been marked by conflicting paradigms and views concerning the explanation of criminal behaviour, which is probably conditioned by the complex nature of crime as a phenomenon.

Within several criminological schools, three dominant classical theoretical concepts developed in the explanation of criminal behaviour: biological, psychological and sociological concepts, each with numerous theories and even more numerous representatives. However, it has become apparent that the traditional approach is slow, often does not function effectively and cannot keep pace with constantly increasing crime. For this reason, alternative methods are becoming increasingly prominent in the form of “situational crime prevention,” as one of the most popular contemporary approaches to responding to criminal behaviour. In this theory, the primary object of study is not the perpetrators of criminal offences and victims, nor their behaviour, but rather the analysis of situational factors that stimulate the occurrence of criminal behaviour (Muratbegović, 2004: 202).

In order to remain relevant and consistent with the time in which crime occurs, any explanation of crime should include both traditional and alternative theoretical models of so-called situational crime. No approach is inherently better than another and none should be considered superior. All of them have both advantages and shortcomings. Successful crime prevention will most likely include different aspects of all the approaches mentioned here. The concepts of classical theories may be long-term, since they deal with fundamental causes, while situational prevention is, to a greater extent, a necessary approach arising from the

characteristics of modern society and changed living conditions, and should not be recommended as a complete solution. It is important to understand the connection between these theoretical approaches and research, as well as their influence on practice.

### **b. Criminological Research**

Scientific theories of crime help us understand and explain the causes of crime. In this sense, they are the starting point and an indispensable element, the foundation from which society must proceed when it is determined to genuinely counter crime as a negative phenomenon which, as already stated, produces numerous harmful consequences for the community and citizens. This implies that theory must be examined through research and the application of scientific methodology. When crime is concerned, as a highly complex “bio-psycho-social phenomenon,” a multidisciplinary approach is clearly required. Scientific knowledge obtained through scientific research should assist the subjects of society and the state in planning, programming and resolving social problems.

Such an approach would overcome the existing situation in which our everyday knowledge of crime and criminals is, almost without exception, mistaken. The formation of an image of crime is predominantly “burdened,” on the one hand, by our subjective experiences and, on the other hand, as with any other social phenomenon of the modern age, by the influence of the media and various publications (Sutherland, 1973).

Thus, we have ever greater amounts of information and “knowledge” about crime. The paradox is that, despite such “vast knowledge,” crime continues to increase and assumes increasingly drastic and violent forms of manifestation, while most countries lack an adequate response to it.

Can we approach crime, as a complex social phenomenon, solely on the basis of common sense, without knowledge of its causes? The expected rational attitude of the community in which crime occurs toward this negative and undesirable phenomenon would imply that certain actors should overcome such approaches and find the best and most optimal methods for countering it. As the facts show, this cannot be imagined without scientific research. Therefore, the answer to the

explosion of information is scientific information. Only a scientific perspective on the study of crime, one that satisfies the principles of scientific observation, guarantees the accuracy and usefulness of the knowledge obtained.

Information on crime disseminated through the media has immediate importance and significance for ordinary media consumers. However, scientists and researchers recognize within such information a problem whose motives, causes and consequences need to be investigated. The reasons for this type of research may be political, academic or personal.<sup>3</sup> Science relies on a planned methodological procedure that should provide answers to questions in such a way that the results of such findings are subject to verification and assessment by others. New knowledge should lead to innovation, change or practical application in the fight against crime.

### **c. Practical Implications: Preventive Strategies, Programmes and Measures**

An essential feature of contemporary criminological research is not only the production of knowledge for its own sake, but also a shift in the focus of research from academic knowledge to applied knowledge, which is used in the practice of crime-control policy.

More specifically, the practical dimension of combating crime requires realistic, evidence-based strategies as products of relevant research. “Strategies and measures against crime that are based on speculation may be highly ineffective, which may result in an increase in crime, a poor public perception of the institutions responsible for suppressing it, and a general sense of insecurity among the public. For this reason, crime-control policies, as well as other matters of public policy, must be supported by sophisticated research mechanisms that produce knowledge for the institutions responsible for creating such policies and for those responsible for their implementation” (Karadinović, 2007–2008).

Recent literature and research indicate that criminological studies of this kind have proved invaluable in modern democracies. In the United

---

<sup>3</sup> More on this: Science, Society, and Criminological Research, [www.sagepub.com/upm-data/39936\\_1.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/39936_1.pdf)

States and Australia, for example, ministries of justice regularly fund longitudinal criminological research in order to identify the key factors influencing delinquent behaviour, with a view to developing potential preventive strategies and programmes. Numerous countries or regions have introduced awards to encourage good preventive practice in the field. Likewise, the European Union guidelines on crime prevention place strong emphasis on the importance of using appropriate knowledge and information concerning the current crime situation, the key causes of crime and potential preventive strategies (*Handbook on the Crime Prevention Guidelines: Making Them Work*, 2010: 47–55).

Preventive programmes evaluated by the international research network Campbell Collaboration, for example, include only those programmes that have met a number of scientific standards.<sup>4</sup>

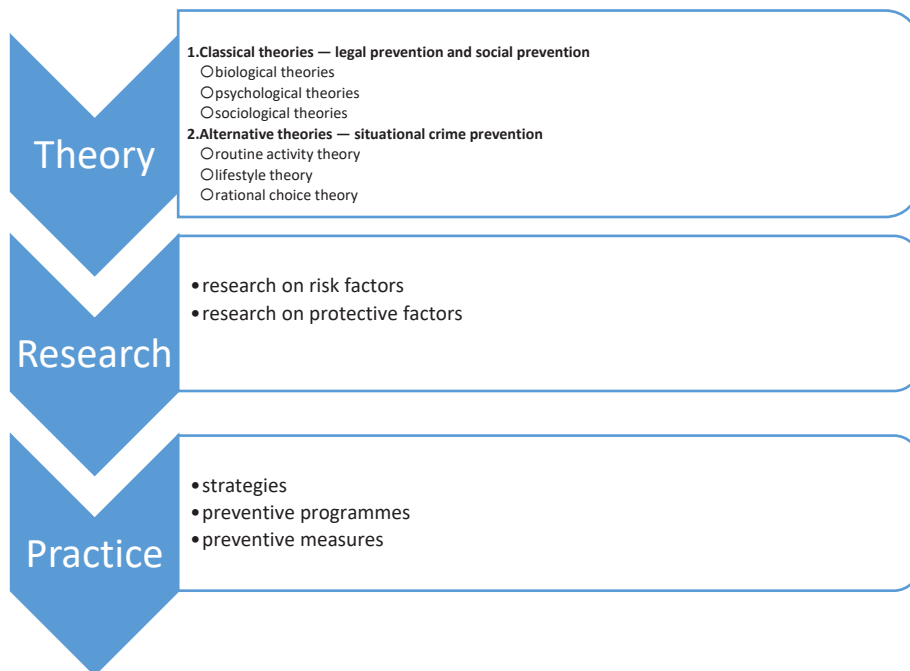
The identification of factors associated with different types of crime is a precondition for the development of a range of evidence-based strategies and programmes aimed at changing those factors and reducing the frequency of crime. These key or causal factors are often referred to as risk factors. The concept of risk emphasizes negative factors that may cause crime at the global level, such as politics and the economy; at the national level, such as culture, the media and the economy; at the local level, such as local factors, educational policy, availability of assistance and support services; and at the individual level, such as family values, rules and expectations (*Handbook on the Crime Prevention Guidelines: Making Them Work*, 2010: 17–20).

Knowledge of risk factors associated with different types of crime, and affecting populations, communities and individuals, is a precondition for the development of a range of strategies and programmes. At the national level, this helps governments determine priorities in relation to crime problems and direct programmes toward regions, cities or sectors that appear to be the most vulnerable. It has been shown that programmes and resources targeted in this manner at addressing the greatest needs represent an effective and economical way of reducing levels of crime and victimization. A well-planned prevention strategy will act upon individual, social and economic factors alike (*Handbook on the Crime Prevention Guidelines: Making Them Work*, 2010: 17–20).

---

<sup>4</sup> [www.campbellcollaboration.org](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org)

So-called protective factors, as a positive approach, help build or strengthen the resilience of communities and individuals to risks. They include, for example, effective and fair government, an efficient and transparent criminal justice system, adequate budgets for environmental and economic programmes with citizen participation, access to appropriate education and employment, strong ties and good relations within the community, including those connected with cultural and religious institutions. Other factors are also important, such as access to transport, recreational facilities, care for children and young people, positive role models, and adequate conditions for attending and remaining in school (*Handbook on the Crime Prevention Guidelines: Making Them Work*, 2010: 17–20). Thus, improving everything that can be encompassed by the concept of social capital may help protect the community and develop its resilience to crime and victimization.



**Figure 1. Overview of Crime Prevention – From Theory to Practice**

According to one study, four types of crime and corresponding forms of preventive action have been identified (Perigut, 1981: 13–17):

1. Criminal behaviours that arise as a consequence of unfavourable social conditions, such as overcrowding and similar circumstances. In such cases, various corrective measures of a social character are proposed in order to mitigate those conditions.
2. Acts that, by their nature, constitute violations of legal norms. In such cases, legal mechanisms for the protection of society operate in the form of prevention through repression, including the police, courts, prisons and similar institutions.
3. Forms of deviant behaviour that arise due to shortcomings and deficiencies in the physical and technical protection of space. Mechanical crime prevention, as part of situational prevention, focuses on reducing opportunities for crime by increasing the risk and effort for potential perpetrators. It includes physical barriers and technical means intended to make the commission of criminal offences more difficult, such as locks, bars, fences, safes, alarms and video surveillance.
4. Crime prevention through the design of the living environment is directed toward reducing the causes and opportunities for the commission of criminal offences, as well as reducing fear of crime through planning and environmental design — including buildings, landscapes and urban spaces — by limiting access and fostering territoriality, which ultimately reduces opportunities for crime.

The first two approaches fall within the domain of traditional criminology, which interprets the causes of criminal behaviour through personal and social factors that are, as such, known and already explained in numerous classical criminological theories. The third and fourth types of crime mentioned above, which relate to deficiencies in the physical and technical protection of space and the living environment, represent the so-called situational approach and rest on different premises in comparison with other types of crime and crime prevention that dominate the scientific literature. What distinguishes this concept from other types of prevention is its focus on the factors operating in the situation in which criminal behaviour manifests itself.

Each of the approaches mentioned above should potentially form part of a strategic and balanced plan, as well as policies, programmes and preventive activities based on empirical experience, theoretical knowledge and the results of scientific research. There is no single optimal approach; rather, it is necessary to consider the advantages and shortcomings of each approach in a given context. It is of crucial importance that a strategic plan for crime prevention correspond to the specific national and local context.

It is increasingly considered that concrete relations within a given place, namely the local community, are decisive for the emergence of crime. More than 70% of suspects became criminogenic in their place of residence, or at least in the district in which they live, which indicates the need for urgent action to address the causes of criminal behaviour conditioned by the specific characteristics of such a way of life (Singer, Kovčo & Cajner-Mraović, 2002).

Approaches to prevention range from addressing the social and economic roots of crime to strengthening the capacities of local communities to modify the environment in order to deter potential perpetrators and promote an increased sense of security.

### **3. THEORETICAL MODELS IN CRIME PREVENTION**

It is not possible to discuss crime prevention without considering it from a particular theoretical perspective. Theories of crime prevention seek to explain the causes, conditions, triggers and modalities of the emergence of crime as a negative social phenomenon, and on that basis to establish strategies for its prevention. The entire approach is based on identifying the risk factors that influence delinquent behaviour and then, on the basis of such knowledge, activating protective factors.

Since the issue of theories of crime prevention is closely conditioned by the underdevelopment of prevention science, these theories, by their origin, necessarily incline toward the sciences that had previously examined the problem of crime through their own theoretical reflections. By the logic of things, prevention science relies on the knowledge of criminology as a multidisciplinary field, within which numerous biological, psychological and sociological theories have emerged. By primarily studying the etiological and phenomenological aspects of

crime, criminology also gave rise to criminal prophylaxis as a special discipline which, in addition to repressive measures, studies the effectiveness of the application of preventive measures in suppressing and preventing crime.

In principle, prevention draws its foundation from criminological theories when it comes to explaining causes, while, in connection with contemporary approaches to crime prevention, special theories have also developed.

There are numerous disputes and different understandings concerning the relationship between theory and research when crime is concerned. The requirement to create a grand theory of crime that would be capable of explaining all forms of normative deviation, regardless of space and time, has not yet been fulfilled. Even *A General Theory of Crime* by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), which began with such a claim, ultimately could not fulfil that promise. Robert Merton overcame this difficulty by offering a compromise solution in the form of “middle-range theories,” to which most theories of crime belong and within which the theories mentioned above could also be classified. In doing so, he emphasized that such theories possess a degree of generality that transcends a particular historical epoch or culture and are crucial for practical applicability (Merton, 1979: 75). Merton criticized grand and abstract theories that cannot be operationalized and tested through research; therefore, middle-range theories currently appear to be an appropriate solution.

On the basis of the above, it follows that in the process of the emergence of different theories dealing with crime prevention, a process of “upgrading” took place. This means that each subsequent theory was synchronically connected to previous ones. For these reasons, it is often very difficult to draw a clear distinction between the point at which one theoretical approach ends and the point at which another begins. It therefore frequently happens that theories of prevention with entirely different theoretical starting points ultimately offer very similar strategies of preventive action (Krivokapić, 2008: 65). Such confusion regarding

identical or similar theoretical foundations creates problems in the classification of theories of crime prevention.<sup>5</sup>

### **a. Traditional Approach – Classical Theories of Crime and Crime Prevention**

Most of these theories emerged in the nineteenth century out of the need to understand and address crime as a visible and growing social problem. The main classical concepts – biological, psychological and sociological – through their numerous theories, provide answers to the question of the genesis and etiology of crime. They serve policymakers within the traditional criminal justice system in shaping criminal policy, determining punishments and developing programmes for the rehabilitation of offenders, and thereby also prevention.

In fact, these are classical criminological theories that help us understand and explain the causes of crime by explaining biological, psychological and social causes. They provide answers to the question of what drives people to commit crimes and seek to identify and describe the key causes that form the “sequence of steps” leading to delinquent behaviour.

Biological theories tend toward simple explanations of causes and toward offering simple solutions for eliminating crime. Biological theories of crime are focused on genetic, neurological and physiological factors that may predispose a person to criminal behaviour. These approaches assume that crime can be partly explained by innate characteristics such as impulsiveness, aggression or neurological developmental deficiencies. Some of the most prominent geneticists dealing with the problem of biogenic factors of violent behaviour claim that “genes are our destiny” (Jones, 1996).

Numerous theoretical teachings take personality, and certain psychological characteristics of personality, as determinants of crime as a whole. These theories emphasize the importance of individual psychological factors in shaping criminal behaviour. They most often focus on factors that include needs, intentions, reasons, motives and, in general, internal dispositions. The significance of psychological theories

---

<sup>5</sup> The division between the traditional and alternative approaches in this paper is highly simplified and represents the author’s choice as one possible classification criterion among many.

in explaining the causes, factors and manifestations of social deviance is unquestionable, since they demonstrate the indisputable connection between the psychological determinants of personality and behaviour, that is, the act itself.

Sociological theories encompass a range of theories that examine the influence of social structures on criminal behaviour. Many of them take into account the social context in which individuals live. They examine the influence of the community, social norms, social ties, social integration and social control on criminal behaviour. These theories identify numerous social macro- and micro-level factors that may increase a person's risk of criminal behaviour.

These teachings are quite similar and related, but their common characteristic is that each of them insists on one factor or mechanism when explaining the causes of criminal behaviour. This is entirely legitimate and accurate if we take into account only their particular angle of observation. However, such individual explanations are one-sided and insufficient to explain crime as a whole, as a multi-causal and multi-consequential phenomenon that arises as the result of several factors: social, psychological, biological, economic and environmental. It would therefore be overly simplistic and erroneous to explain this phenomenon by a single cause alone.

“Phenomena are not more accurately or more objectively described, explained or understood in one theory than in another: each of them explains or understands something that the others fail to explain, and therefore it makes no sense to say that any one of them is less or more scientific or true. More harm can be done to phenomena, that is, to facts, by one theory imposed upon them than by several theories covering their different aspects and relations” (Šušnjić, 1990: 92).

## **b. Alternative Theoretical Models – Situational Crime Prevention**

It has become apparent that the traditional approach is slow, that it often does not function effectively, and that it cannot keep pace with the constant growth of crime. For this reason, alternative methods are increasingly present in the form of “situational crime prevention.” The situational concept of crime prevention was originally developed by the criminologist Ronald Clarke in the 1980s.

Situational crime prevention is directed toward limiting the offender's opportunities to commit a crime, as well as toward other practical methods in which citizens themselves can participate. Its aim is to remove opportunity and to ensure that the costs of crime outweigh its benefits. This includes various forms of obstacles and protection, such as steering wheel locks, video surveillance of residential premises, passengers and luggage at airports, architectural solutions that allow better control of public space, citizen patrols and a range of other strategies that make it more difficult for offenders to commit crimes, including preventing offenders from gaining access to potential victims (Clarke & Felson, 1988).

Clarke and Cornish presented twenty-five techniques of situational crime prevention, organized into five key strategies that criminological practitioners should take into account when using the situational model: 1) increasing the effort required to commit a crime; 2) increasing the risks of committing a crime; 3) reducing the rewards of crime; 4) reducing the conditions that encourage crime; and 5) removing excuses for committing crime (Clarke & Cornish, 2003: 41–46).

Situational crime prevention places greater responsibility on the individual for his or her own security than the traditional approach does. However, in order to be successful, it requires cooperation among the police, public and private organizations, and members of the community.

One of the strongest criticisms of situational prevention and opportunity-reduction strategies is that they provide only cosmetic solutions. According to this criticism, crime includes economic and cultural aspects connected with capitalism and mass consumerism, while the underlying ideology is inherently biased in favour of the wealthy and against the poor (O'Malley, Shearing & Weir, 1997: 501–517).

Instead of situational prevention techniques, some criminologists advocate social prevention, based on the view that crime, as a social problem, is deeply rooted in the economic and cultural structures of society.

In theoretical terms, situational prevention is based on: 1) routine activity theory; 2) lifestyle theory; and 3) rational choice theory (Borovec, Balgač & Karlović, 2011). These are, therefore, the theories that support situational crime prevention.

### *i. Routine Activity Theory*

Routine activity theory was developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979, at a time when crime was rapidly increasing in American society despite the general progress that was occurring simultaneously. They described this as a kind of “sociological paradox,” and routine activity theory emerged as an attempt to explain these phenomena in a way that “sociological theories could not” (Andersen & Ha, 2017).

Routine activity theory starts from the assumption that everyday life is marked by a series of routine activities, such as going to work, school or other places at a particular time. These activities place individuals at risk of being perceived by potentially motivated offenders as suitable targets, and thus of becoming victims or perpetrators of various undesirable acts (Bossler & Holt, 2010: 227–326).

According to this theory, the occurrence of a criminal event is causally linked to three basic factors: a motivated offender, a suitable victim or target, and the absence of capable guardians. Cohen and Felson believed that the probability that a criminal offence will be committed arises when these three factors operate at a specific time and in a specific place. The occurrence of crime can therefore be explained by the convergence of these three elements in time and space, while the absence of any one of them reduces the risk (Felson & Cohen, 1979: 604).

Any disturbance of the “balance” among the three key elements of a criminal offence may influence changes in the crime rate. Consequently, this theory may play a significant role in predicting and preventing crime. Situational prevention has an effect on the latter two elements, and its theoretical foundation rests on that basis. According to this approach, control over these two factors represents the key moment determining the extent to which crime will be widespread in a social environment, since the number of motivated offenders within that environment is usually constant (Ignjatović, 2009: 397–401).

The absence of capable guardians, such as the police, security personnel, parents and friends, as well as the absence of other adequate security measures, such as technical means including locks, alarm systems and surveillance cameras, increases the risk of victimization.

This theoretical approach draws particular attention to the place of commission, that is, to geospace, and indicates that the place of commission, through its characteristics – for example, a location hidden from view, a location where a suitable victim can easily be found, and similar features – may influence whether, where, when and in what manner the offender will decide to undertake the act of commission.

Targets located in the geospace in which offenders' routine activities take place are characterized by a higher risk of victimization. Changes in people's routine activities were therefore used to explain changes in crime-rate trends.

The measures offered by routine activity theory in crime prevention can be reduced to the following: it is necessary to reduce the offender's motivation, eliminate the conditions that enable and facilitate the commission of a criminal offence, and increase the capabilities of guardians. All of this should contribute to deterring the offender from criminal action.

In brief, routine activity theory is a simple theory to understand, but it contains many complex ideas that are still being refined.

## ***ii. Lifestyle Theory***

Another theory that seeks to explain the emergence and scope of crime is lifestyle theory. This theory was introduced into criminological and victimological literature in the late 1970s by Michael Hindelang, Michael Gottfredson and James Garofalo. It was presented in their work *Victims of Personal Crime: An Empirical Foundation for a Theory of Personal Victimization*. The researchers sought to explain why certain groups experience higher rates of victimization than others. They defined lifestyles as “patterned, regular, recurrent, prevalent or routine activities.” In other words, lifestyles consist of activities in which people participate on a daily basis, including both obligatory and private activities. From this description, it is evident that the explanation of a person's lifestyle was primarily viewed through the prism of behavioural characteristics (Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo, 1978: 241).

According to lifestyle theory, exposure to victimization can be explained not only by the specific lifestyle of the individual, as routine activity theory suggests, but also by sociodemographic characteristics. Similar to routine activity theory, its findings showed that crime does not

occur randomly and that, among other things, lifestyle factors – such as social habits, work schedules and recreational activities – may play a significant role in determining who becomes a victim. Certain individuals who participate in activities that place them in high-risk situations, or who spend time in risky places or in the company of risky persons, have a greater possibility of becoming victims (Bossler & Holt, 2010: 227–236).

Although routine activity theory and lifestyle theory overlap to a considerable extent, the difference between them lies in the fact that routine activity theory is focused on the offender, while lifestyle theory is focused on the victim. This theory also identifies and explains certain personal demographic characteristics as potential victimogenic dispositions. Kennedy and Forde explain that the risk of exposure to a criminal offence also arises due to characteristics such as gender, age, marital status, occupation, and membership of an ethnic or social group, that is, characteristics that influence each individual's choice of activities both at work and during leisure time (Kennedy & Forde, 1990: 208–211).

Criminal activity may be viewed as “a characteristic of lifestyle or a form of routine activity that increases the risk of victimization due to the existence of motives, vulnerability or blameworthiness of the persons involved in it” (Jensen & Brownfield, 1986: 85–99).

Understanding lifestyle theory has important implications for crime prevention. By recognizing the role of lifestyle choices, exposure to high-risk environments and the absence of capable supervision, individuals and communities can take steps toward crime prevention through crime-prevention strategies, education, campaigns, counselling programmes and victim assistance, the development of community policing policies, the adoption of urban and spatial planning legislation, occupational safety regulations and similar measures.

### ***iii. Rational Choice Theory***

The rational choice theory of Ronald Clarke and Derek Cornish was presented in 1986 in the work *The Reasoning Criminal*. It proceeds from the assumption that every individual in society is a potential offender if given the opportunity. This model assumes that offenders are rational actors who conduct a “cost-benefit analysis” before committing a crime. It interprets criminal action as the result of a conscious choice, whereby the offender assesses that the benefit will exceed the potential punishment.

This theory represents a certain form of integration of psychological, sociological and situational approaches. Namely, if there is an “attractive opportunity,” then, after a certain cognitive processing of information, its realization follows. The criminal is thus viewed as a rational being who does not differ essentially from “ordinary” people, because a set of circumstances, or opportunities, turns that individual into a criminal.

However, the authors argue that this subjective opportunity represents a condition, but not a sufficient reason for criminal behaviour to manifest itself. The theory emphasizes that the decision to undertake a criminal act is based on a rational assessment, regardless of the personal mechanisms that caused that decision. In doing so, the authors claim that crime represents an “intentional, rather than accidental, form of behaviour,” and that these “costs” and “benefits” are not limited to monetary gains or losses, but also include social status, psychological satisfaction, and emotional rewards or deterrent factors. The satisfaction of such needs through a criminal act is connected with a “decision,” and that decision is a matter of “rational choice” (Cornish & Clarke, 2014: 1–13).

At its core, rational choice theory is an economic model of human action grounded in utilitarian philosophy. It claims that all human behaviour is goal-oriented, with actors seeking to maximize benefits while minimizing costs. Originally formulated in economics, Gary Becker famously applied this reasoning to crime in his landmark essay “Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach” (Becker, 1968: 169–217).

In terms of prevention, rational choice theory is directed toward increasing the effort required to commit a criminal act, reducing opportunities and increasing risks. The concept of opportunity includes both a subjective and an objective dimension. The subjective dimension refers to the personality, intelligence and motivation of the offender, while the objective dimension refers to the opportunity inherent in the situation itself, that is, the conditions created for the commission of a criminal offence.

In order for this mode of preventive action to be successful, it is necessary to intimidate and deter the offender by placing visible barriers. To that extent, this theory corresponds to situational crime prevention (Cornish & Clarke, 1986).

Despite certain criticisms of this theory – for example, that it cannot explain the problem of crime displacement and that there are difficulties in empirically proving the theory – its lasting contribution to crime prevention

lies in the fact that it drew attention to the rational nature of criminal behaviour.

Rational choice theory is closely connected with the routine activity approach, which argues that crime occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians. Together, these theories support much of situational crime prevention, which seeks to manipulate the environment in order to increase the perceived costs of criminal action.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Crime in the new age is of an increasingly complex nature, so the strategies known so far cannot be effective in deterring it. Successful crime-prevention strategies are hybrid in character. They must be adapted to the specific conditions of the twenty-first century and rely on the elimination of both general and specific causes as conditions of criminal phenomena.

Therefore, in addition to general social factors, which are already more or less known and explained in classical theories, situational theories give equal importance to the situational contexts that lead to crime, especially opportunities for crime, as well as to the criminal dispositions of the offender.

Crime prevention, as a new scientific discipline whose time is yet to come, faces numerous challenges, including those concerning its theoretical foundations. Theoretical models are not static entities; rather, they should develop in response to new insights, challenges and social changes. Such adaptability, as a response to newly emerging challenges, ensures the continued relevance and effectiveness of crime-prevention strategies in an ever-changing landscape.

#### LITERATURE

1. Andersen, M.A. & Ha, O.K. (2017) *Routine activity theory*, Simon Fraser University- Burnaby British Columbia, dostupno na [www.researchgate.net/publication/359264650\\_Routine\\_acitivity\\_theory](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/359264650_Routine_acitivity_theory)

2. Beker, G.S. (1968): „Zločin i kazna: ekonomski pristup“, *Žurnal za političku ekonomiju* 76, str 169-217
3. Bossler, A. M., & Holt, T. J. (2010). The Effect of self-control on victimization in the cyberworld. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38
4. Borovec, K., Balgač, I., Karlović, R. (2011). *Situacijski pristup prevenciji kriminaliteta- od teorije do prakse utemeljene na dokazima*. Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske, Zagreb
5. Clarke, R., Felson, M. (eds) (1993). *Routine Activity and Rational Choice*, *Advances in Criminological Theory*, Vol. 5, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ,
6. Clarke, R. (ed.) (1997). *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies*, Harrow and Heston, Albany, NY
7. Cornish, D., & Clarke, R. V. (1986). *The Reasoning Criminal: Rational Choice Perspectives on Offending*. Springer-Verlag, Berlin
8. Cornish, D. B., and Clarke R. V. (2003). “*Opportunities, Precipitators and Criminal Decisions: A Reply to Wortley's Critique of Situational Crime Prevention.*” *Crime prevention studies* 16: 41–96.
9. Felson & Cohen (1979). *Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach* Source: *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Aug., 1979), pp. 588-608 Published by: American Sociological Association [www.jstor.org/stable/2094589](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2094589)
10. Felson, M. and Eckert, M. (2016). *Crime and everyday life* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
11. Felson, M. and Clarke, R. V. (1998). *Opportunity makes the thief: Practical theory for crime prevention*. London, UK: Home Office, Policing and Reducing Crime Unit Research, Development and Statistics Directorate.
12. Gilling, D.: *Crime prevention – Theory, policy and politics*, London, 1977 Eisenberg, U.: *Kriminologie*, Köln, 1985.
13. Gottfredson, M. R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford University Press
14. Handbook on the crime prevention guidelines Making them work, Criminal Justice handbook series, United Nations Office on drugs and crime Vienna, United Nations New York, 2010

15. Hindelang, M.; Gottfredson, M.; Garofalo, J. (1978). Victims of personal crime: An empirical foundation for a theory of personal victimization, Ballinger, Cambridge, MA,
16. Cornish, Derek B. and Clarke, Ronald V (2014). editors With a new Introduction by Ronald V. Clarke *The Reasoning Criminal – Rational Choice Perspectives on Offending*, Routledge Taylor&Francis Group London and New York (1-13)
17. Ignjatović, Đ. (2009). *Teorije u kriminologiji*, Pravni fakultet, Beograd
18. Ilić, Z.(2002). *Plansko usmeravanje preventivnih aktivnosti*, Zbornik radova, Beograd
19. Jensen, G. F., & Brownfield, D. (1986). Gender, lifestyles, and victimization: Beyond routine activity. *Violence and Victims*, 1(2), 85–99. United National Library of Medicine, Gender, lifestyles, and victimization: beyond routine activity - PubMed
20. Karadinović, N.( 2007-2008). *Znanje o kriminalu je moć za borbu protiv kriminala*, program podrške istraživanjima u oblasti javnih politika, Fond otvoreno društvo BiH
21. Kennedy, L..W., Forde, D.R. (1990). *Risky lifestyles and dangerous results: Routine activities and expo sure to crime*, *Sociology and Social Research: An International Journal*, vol. 74, br. 4
22. Krivokapić, V.(2008). *Prevenција kriminaliteta- teorijsko-kriminalistički pristup*, Narodno delo, Beograd
23. Marković, T.(1973). *Maloljetnička delinkvencija*, Savezni sekretarijat za unutrašnje poslove, Beograd
24. Milutinović, M.(1984). *Kriminalna politika*, Savremena administracija, Beograd
25. Milošević, N., Milojević, S. (2001). *Osnovi metodologije bezbjednosnih nauka*, Policijska akademija Beograd
26. Merton, K. R. (1979). *O teorijskoj sociologiji*, Zagreb: Naklada odd-Centar društvenih djelatnosti- SSOH.
27. Muratbegović, E.(2004). *Prevenција kriminaliteta - od ideala ka stvarnosti*, *Kriminalističke teme*, Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Fakultet za kriminalistiku, kriminologiju i sigurnosne studije
28. Noaks, L. and Wincup, E.(2007). *Criminological Research. Understanding Qualitative Methods*. Sage Publications.

29. O'Malley, P., Shearing, C., Weir, L. (1997). Governmentality, Criticism, Politics, Economy and Society 26(4) 501-517  
[www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)>publication
30. Pease, K. (1994). *Crime Prevention* Oxford Handbook of Criminology, Oxford
31. Perigut, D., (1981). 'Crime Prevention for Australian Public Housing', ACPC Forum, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 13-7.
32. Popović Čitić, B. (2007). *Proces naučnog zasnivanja prevencije: od praktičnog modela do preventivne nauke*, Fakultet za specijalnu edukaciju i rehabilitaciju, Beograd.
33. Kuvačić, I. (1977). *Znanost i društvo*, Naprijed, Zagreb
34. Jones, S. (1996). *In the Blood: God, Genes and Destiny*, HarperCollins
35. Perigut, Donald (1981). „*Crime Prevention for Australian Public Housing*“, ACPC Forum, Vol.4, No.3,
36. Singer, M., Kovčo, V., Cajner-Mraović, I. (2002). *Kriminologija* 3. izmijenjeno i dopunjeno izdanje, Edukacijsko-rehabilitacijski fakultet, Nakladni zavod Globus, Zagreb
37. Sutherland, E. (1973). *On analyzing crime*, Chicago
38. Šešić, B. (1988). *Opšta metodologija*, Naučna knjiga, Beograd
39. Šušnjić, Đ. (1999). *Metodologija—kritika nauke*, Čigoja štampa, Beograd
40. Tombs, S., Whyte, D. (2007). *Researching Corporate and White-Collar Crime in an Era of Neo-Liberalism*, International Handbook of White-Collar and Corporate Crime, Springer, Boston, MA.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-34111-8\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-34111-8_6)
41. [www.campbellcollaboration.org](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org)
42. [www.sagepub.com/upm-data/39936\\_1.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/39936_1.pdf) *Science, Society, and Criminological Research*

Paper received: 14.10.2025.  
Paper approved: 01.03.2026.