

Exploring Juvenile Delinquency from the Perspective of Routine Activity Theory in Criminology

Danru Wang¹

¹ College of Public Administration, Shandong Agricultural University

Correspondence: Danru Wang, College of Public Administration, Shandong Agricultural University.

doi:10.56397/SLJ.2023.06.03

Abstract

Juvenile Delinquency has always been a significant proportion of criminal cases in China, and despite a series of policies aimed at curbing it, the effect has been minimal. The types of juvenile delinquency are mainly violent and predatory, and they involve certain contact or connection between the offender and the victim. This is in line with routine activity theory in criminology, which can be used to prevent victimization and reduce adolescent crime. However, before applying the theory, it is necessary to analyze the essential factors of adolescent crime from this perspective. This paper is based on this analysis.

Keywords: Routine Activity Theory, criminology, juvenile delinquency

1. A Brief Analysis of Routine Activity Theory

1.1 Concept and Development History of Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory is a criminological theory proposed by American criminologists Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson in the 1970s. The reason for the emergence of this theory lies in the social background of the time. After the end of World War II, many countries in the world had just experienced the invasion of war and were in a period of reconstruction and recovery. In such a special period, some Western countries experienced a sharp increase in crime rate, especially in violent and predatory crimes such as theft and robbery. Faced with this phenomenon, the Positive School of Criminology put forward their own views from the perspective of social environment. They

believed that this difficult-to-control crime situation was caused by social unrest and economic depression after the end of the war. When society recovered, the crime rate would significantly decrease. However, even after the social and economic stability was restored, the crime rate remained high. In view of the shortcomings of the Positive School of Criminology's policy to curb crime, the Classical School of Criminology's views reappeared in criminology. Based on the research on the crime control policy of the Positive School of Criminology, they believed that exploring countermeasures only from the perspective of social factors was insufficient. It was also necessary to influence the behavior choices of criminals to achieve the purpose of crime control, and thus Routine Activity Theory emerged. This theory holds that criminals usually commit

crimes based on the criminal opportunities provided by the victim. These criminal opportunities are related to the victim's daily activities and social environment, so changing the victim's daily behavior or social environment can influence the criminal's behavior choices and achieve the goal of reducing crime.

1.2 The Crime Analysis Model of Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory has received considerable attention since its inception. Despite some doubts about the theory, many criminologists have adopted its crime analysis model, and the methods of crime governance proposed based on this theory have been widely accepted and have achieved certain results.

According to Routine Activity Theory, the habitual behavior or lifestyle formed by potential victims in their daily activities will have a certain impact on the occurrence of crime. This lifestyle includes both occupational activities and leisure and entertainment activities. Generally, younger individuals, males, unmarried individuals, the poor, and blacks have a higher risk of victimization compared to older individuals, females, married individuals, the wealthy, and whites. This is because the former group is more likely to engage in activities outside the home, especially at night to participate in public activities, which increases the likelihood of contact with potential offenders who may engage in criminal activity. Therefore, these lifestyle habits increase their risk of becoming victims.¹ However, here the term "crime" only refers to crimes where there is some form of contact or connection between the offender and the victim, such as robbery, theft, and injury. Otherwise, the daily activities of potential victims will not affect the offender's choice of behavior. As a result, a prerequisite for using this theory is that the crime must be a specific type of crime, namely "predatory crime." In this specific type of crime, there are three elements necessary for its occurrence. If any of these elements are missing, the crime will not occur. First, there must be rational offenders with criminal motives; second, there must be suitable targets for the crime; and third, there must be a lack of defensive factors to deter the crime.

It is generally believed that changes in the number of rational offenders with criminal motives will affect the crime rate. However,

Routine Activity Theory believes that the increase in the number of offenders with criminal motives is caused by the increase in the number of vulnerable targets and the weakening of social defensive capabilities. As long as targets can be reduced and social defensive capabilities can be increased, the number of offenders can be reduced, thereby reducing the crime rate.²

In summary, Routine Activity Theory can be summarized as follows: people's daily activities have a certain predictability and repetitiveness. Individuals with habitual behavior are usually chosen as suitable targets by individuals with criminal motives. Once the environment at that time lacks protective factors strong enough to prevent the crime, the crime will occur. Therefore, if suitable targets for crime can be reduced or protective factors for crime targets can be increased, the occurrence of crime can be reduced.

2. The Elements of Juvenile Delinquency from the Perspective of Routine Activity Theory

Using the perspective of Routine Activity Theory, the causal relationship between the lack of defense in the daily activities of potential victims and the occurrence of specific juvenile delinquency can be understood. Based on this, if we analyze the occurrence of juvenile delinquency from the perspective of Routine Activity Theory in criminology, the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, every individual has their own thoughts, can understand and comprehend their own behavior, and choose to act according to their own will. Crime is also the product of this free choice in the human brain. When some potential victims' daily activities are predictable and repetitive, and lack necessary protection, rational offenders often weigh the costs and choose them as targets for their crimes. Therefore, one of the essential elements in the occurrence of juvenile delinquency is the existence of rational juvenile criminals. Secondly, Routine Activity Theory is only applicable to "predatory crimes" involving some contact or connection between the criminal and the victim. Therefore, "specific juvenile delinquency" is the second essential element in the occurrence of juvenile delinquency. Finally, according to the interpretation of Routine Activity Theory, crime occurs because there is an increase in potential victims who can be violated in society. The reason why they can be violated is due to their predictable daily activities and the

lack of necessary protection, hence “predictable daily activities and lack of necessary protection for potential victims” are the third essential elements in the occurrence of juvenile delinquency. Below, I will elaborate on these three essential elements in detail.

2.1 Rational Juvenile Offenders

When analyzing the emergence of crime using the Routine Activity Theory, the existence of “rational offenders” is essential. Therefore, one of the prerequisites for the occurrence of juvenile delinquency using the Routine Activity Theory is “rational juvenile offenders.” However, it is common sense that not all juvenile delinquents can be simply classified as “rational offenders.” Nonetheless, the goal of this article is to propose some measures to reduce juvenile delinquency from the perspective of criminology’s Routine Activity Theory, rather than presenting a universal formula for completely eliminating juvenile delinquency. As long as it can be proven that there is a portion of “rational offenders” among all juvenile delinquents, this theory has value.

So how can we determine which juvenile offenders are “rational offenders”? One method is to look at it from the perspective of criminal law. According to the Criminal Law of our country, the age at which one assumes full criminal responsibility is 16 years old. Minors who are over 12 years old but under 14 years old are only criminally responsible for intentional homicide and intentional injury under adverse circumstances, while those who are over 14 years old but under 16 years old are only criminally responsible for eight types of statutory crimes.³ In other words, according to China’s Criminal Law, only juveniles over 14 years old are “rational offenders,” but this does not deny the possibility that juveniles under 14 years old have the ability to discern and control and thus be responsible. In conclusion, it can be proven that there are indeed rational juvenile offenders with the ability to make rational choices in society.

2.2 Specific Juvenile Delinquency

Routine Activity Theory can only be applied to “predatory crimes” that involve some degree of contact or connection between the offender and the victim. Therefore, the second requirement for applying Routine Activity Theory to the analysis of juvenile delinquency is “specific juvenile delinquency.” According to Routine

Activity Theory, “specific” juvenile delinquency must meet the characteristics of “predatory crimes” on the one hand, and meet the requirements of “rational offenders” on the other. Although it is impossible to specifically determine which types of juvenile delinquency fall within the scope of “specific” juvenile delinquency, based on the above two requirements, some juvenile delinquency can be excluded from this category.

Based on existing research materials, the types of juvenile delinquency mainly include violent and property crimes. According to statistics from Chinese courts, robbery, theft, rape, and intentional injury account for almost 90% of juvenile delinquency, with robbery and theft being the majority.⁴ However, although these crimes all involve contact or connection between the offender and the victim, irrational crimes should be excluded from consideration, as Routine Activity Theory requires “rational offenders.” That is, if a crime is spontaneous, blind, or retaliatory, it should be excluded. This is because such crimes are not the result of a rational choice by the offender, but either have a chance or impulse nature, such as crimes of passion, or involve specific targets, such as crimes committed for revenge.

2.3 The Potential Victim with Predictable Daily Activities and Lacking Necessary Protection

According to Routine Activity Theory, rational offenders may take advantage of the predictable nature of a potential victim’s daily activities, as well as the lack of necessary protection, to commit crimes. Therefore, the third element of the occurrence requirements of juvenile delinquency analyzed using Routine Activity Theory is “the potential victim with predictable daily activities and lacking necessary protection.”

We can understand this occurrence requirement with an example of juvenile delinquency. In cases of burglary where teenagers easily enter an unoccupied house through an unlocked window, many homeowners on lower floors only close but do not lock their windows or leave a gap for ventilation before leaving. This habit of leaving windows unlocked is a predictable daily activity that juvenile offenders can take advantage of to enter the house and commit theft after the homeowner leaves. In addition, if the homeowner did not install burglar-proof windows or if there was

inadequate security in the area, it would lead to a lack of necessary protection, greatly increasing the probability of a successful theft. Therefore, the victim's daily activities are a crucial factor leading to victimization, and the lack of necessary protection makes it easy for offenders to see them as targets. Imagine if the homeowner did not have this predictable and repetitive daily habit of leaving the windows closed but unlocked, the potential offender would likely give up the idea of committing a crime. Alternatively, if there were security personnel patrolling the area, the potential offender might also leave in frustration.

3. Reducing Juvenile Delinquency from the Perspective of Routine Activity Theory

The reason why the previous text analyzed the occurrence of juvenile delinquency from the perspective of Routine Activity Theory in criminology is that when we aim to reduce certain types of crime, we should try our best to identify the reasons that contribute to their occurrence and then influence these factors to achieve our desired goals. For example, if we want to reduce predatory crime, according to Routine Activity Theory, the daily habits of potential victims and their lack of sufficient protection are important factors that influence the occurrence of such crimes. Therefore, to achieve our expected goal, we need to influence the daily activities and habits of potential victims or increase their protection. Specifically, when it comes to reducing juvenile delinquency, according to Routine Activity Theory, effective measures can be taken by changing the daily habits and behaviors of potential victims or increasing their protection.⁵ In the following text, we will discuss these two aspects in detail.

3.1 Changing the Daily Activities of Potential Victims

According to the Routine Activity Theory, the occurrence of juvenile delinquency is closely related to the daily activities of potential victims. When some repetitive and predictable daily activities of potential victims can be exploited by criminals, the potential victims are likely to become the targets of juvenile delinquents. Based on this, changing the daily activities of potential victims has become an effective measure to reduce juvenile delinquency. In specific cases, robbery cases account for a large proportion of juvenile delinquency cases, and the methods used are varied, including masked

robbery, violent robbery, armed robbery, and roadside robbery. There was a motorcycle robbery case that occurred at a barbecue stand late at night, where the criminals were a group of 13 to 14-year-old teenagers. They spent several days staking out the location and found that the motorcycle owner often parked a motorcycle near a barbecue stand at night, and went into the shop to buy skewers. Taking advantage of the darkness and the busy atmosphere at the barbecue stand, the teenagers forcibly drove away the motorcycle after the owner left it unattended. These young criminals used the repetitive and predictable daily activities of the owner to carry out the crime. If the owner could change this daily activity by not buying barbecue at a fixed time and place, the criminals would not have the opportunity to commit the crime.

3.2 Enhancing Protection for Potential Victims

Increasing protection for potential victims is an effective measure to prevent victimization. According to Routine Activity Theory, juvenile offenders often consider the strength of potential victims' current defensive measures when selecting targets for their crimes. For instance, in campus theft cases involving juveniles, valuable items such as mobile phones left in public places, computers left in dormitories, and bicycles or electric vehicles parked outside teaching buildings are often stolen. This is because the protective measures for these items are insufficient. Valuable items left in dormitories may be stolen when roommates briefly leave without locking the door, or when dormitory security is not sufficient to prevent unauthorized entry. Therefore, increasing protection for potential victims can be achieved by strengthening campus dormitory security management and cracking down on outsiders entering the campus, among other measures, to prevent victimization.

4. Conclusion

People are victimized by crimes every second in this world, and most crimes are not random or meticulously planned, but closely related to people's daily lives. By exploring the causes of crime, we can find measures to prevent crime, and according to the Routine Activity Theory of criminology, we can change people's daily activities to reduce the risk of victimization. From this perspective, as a global issue, the governance of juvenile delinquency can provide

measures to reduce it based on this theory, but these measures need further exploration in the future. We also hope that this theory can continue to be improved and developed by future generations to help find ways to curb more types of crime.

References

- Wang Mu. (1992). *Criminology*, Jilin University Press.
- Yao Yejun. (2019). The Causes of Juvenile Delinquency and Preventive Measures, *Journal of Changchun Education Institute*, (5).
- Zhang Xu. (2003). *Essentials of Criminology*, Law Publishing House.

¹ This conclusion was proposed by Hindelang and his colleagues through their research in 1978.

² Li Qitong. (2009). Causal Relationship of Juvenile Delinquency from the Perspective of Routine Activity Theory, *Contemporary Law Review*, (5).

³ The determination of the age of criminal responsibility is based on the provisions of the criminal law, and summarized and concluded accordingly.

⁴ Kang Shuhua. (2002). Criminal Origin—juvenile delinquency. *Journal of Guizhou Police Officer Vocational College*.

⁵ Li Qitong. (2009). Criminal Causality of Juvenile Delinquency from the Perspective of Routine Activity Theory, *Contemporary Law Review*, (5).