

# Theoretical Perspectives on Tourist Criminal Victimization

## *Abstract*

*Crime on tourists is a topic that few tourism professionals like to discuss and even fewer would wish to endure. However, there are few tourist destinations in the world today that are immune to the problem. This paper attempted to place the location and incidence of crimes against tourists into two theoretical contexts. Hot Spot Theory and Routine Activity Theory provide a useful framework in which to explore how communities expose tourists to the risk of being criminally victimized and what feasibly can be done about it. Data from Florida on the frequency and location of crimes on tourists were used to illustrate these theoretical propositions. The intent of this paper was to provide insights to other communities as to how they can understand and manage their particular problems effectively.*

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Foreign embassies routinely issue safety advice or warnings for residents travelling abroad. Such lists change fairly often, but consistently countries such as Lebanon, Columbia and Afghanistan remain on the list (Lunberg & Lunberg, 1993). Third World nations have generally been considered more dangerous than developed nations as travel destinations. However, a recent trend has emerged where developed nations are listed among the places where travellers run a high risk of becoming criminally victimised.

Tourism is genuinely acknowledged as a peace industry. The need for safety is an innate trait of human nature (Maslow, 1954) and concern for safety has been shown to deter travel to specific destinations (Edgell, 1990). Egypt lost an estimated \$1 billion in 1992 due to the assaults of Muslim extremists on international tourists (Associated Press, 1993). In addition, the 1992 Los Angeles riots cost the city between \$1 billion and \$2 billion in lost travel revenue (Crystal, 1993; Jones, 1993). Highly publicised crimes against tourists have also been shown to cause shifts in travellers' destination choices. The Achille Lauro high-jacking caused a sharp drop in cruise travel to the Mediterranean but was attributed, to increased cruise bookings for the Caribbean and Alaska lines (Advertising Age, 1986).

A favourite complaint among destination marketers is that the media takes a relatively few incidences of crimes against tourists and blows it up out of all proportion (Crystal, 1993). For example, the tragic murder of a German tourist in Miami generated considerable national and international media attention suggesting that crime against Florida's tourists was rampant and on the increase. However, tourist crime statistics told another story. For the third consecutive year, the numbers of reported crimes on non residents had declined from a high in 1990 of 37,949 to 31,299 in 1993. Even these facts did

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not tell the whole story. Florida is perhaps unusual in the fact that many people work and/or maintain residences in the state on a part-time or seasonal basis. Therefore, the number of crimes perpetrated against non residents are often interpreted as a crimes against tourists. When part-time residents are removed from the analysis, the numbers of reported crimes against those whom we traditionally define as tourists was 23,901 in 1993. In a state where annual tourist volume generally exceeds 39 million visitors, the number of crimes per 100,000 visitors dropped to an all-time low of 61.28 (See Figure 1). Unfortunately, 'perception is reality' in the travel business and self-reported statistics of crimes against tourists are generally considered meaningless by news reporters without comparable data from other states or nations. Comparable statistics on crime on tourists - if produced - are closely guarded as evidenced by Ambinder (1992). To the author's knowledge, there have been only a few isolated attempts to report comparable crime statistics (Jones, 1993; Demos, 1992; Chesney-Lind & Lind, 1986; Schiebler, Crofts & Hollinger, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, we will report on the incidence and location of crimes on tourists in Florida as identified by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in 1993. Crimes against non residents who do not maintain part-time residences in Florida (e.g., second homes, condominiums, etc.) will be specifically addressed since they most closely operationalise a working definition of tourists. Second, we have attempted to place the location and incidence of crimes against tourists into two theoretical contexts. Though the available data was insufficient to test either theory in any substantive way, these theories provide a useful context in which to explore how communities

expose tourists to the risk of being criminally victimised and what can feasibly be done about it. Third, attempts were made to validate and/or modify the derived assumptions through feedback from a panel composed of senior crime prevention officers of the New Zealand (NZ) National Police. National Headquarters as well as public relations experts from the NZ Tourism Board, the Inbound Tour Operators Council, the NZ Motel Association and the Canterbury District Planning Council. These experts were identified as having considerable experience with dealing with criminal predatory activity and/or the media crises they produce and therefore could render a level of objectivity and realism to the study's key findings. Small expert panels of this nature have long been a valuable source of marketing insight for tourism managers (LaPage, 1994) and the technique applied to experienced law enforcement officers and tourism officials provided a unique dimension to this exploratory study.

The existence of crime on tourists is a topic that few tourism marketing professionals like to

discuss and even fewer would wish to endure. However, there are few major tourist destinations in the world today that are immune from the problem. This paper will hopefully provide insights for other communities as to how they can understand and manage their particular problems effectively. Remedies employed by communities have included efforts designed to educate the visitor to make them less of a suitable target while others have concentrated on increasing the presence of law enforcement officers in and around tourist zones. Still others have targeted the more systemic social problems that are known to foster criminal acts in society. It is hoped that through such a theoretically grounded treatment of crime on tourists, other destinations can draw from Florida's experiences in addressing their own related problems from an efficiency and efficacy standpoint.

### Human ecology and predatory activity: Theory and measurement

Hawley's (1950) ecological theory of human structures has provided the framework for researchers

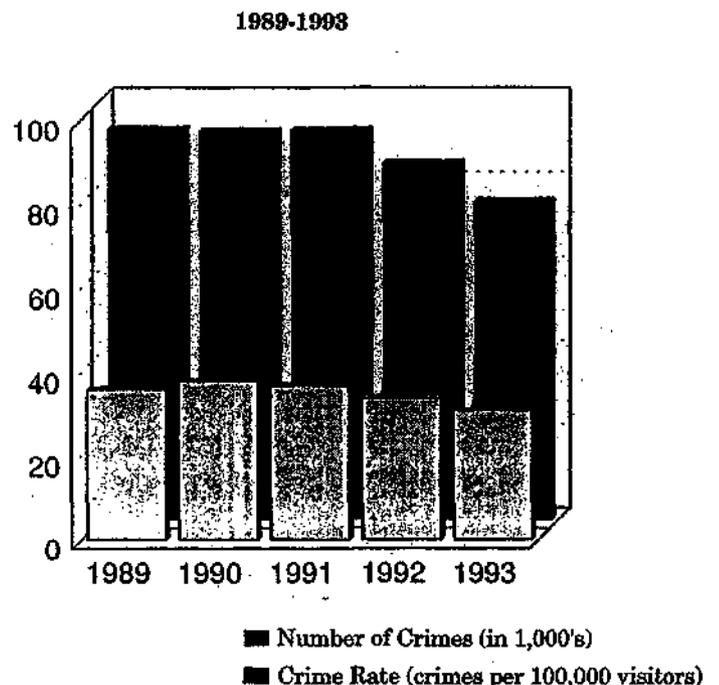


Figure 1: Crimes against Florida tourists

exploring why some communities generate more criminal acts than others. Hawley viewed a community as an organisation of niches and functional roles based upon the principles of commensalistic and symbiotic relationships. The principles of commensalism refers to the relationship among individuals based upon their functional similarities (Hawley, 1950). Felson and Cohen (1980) have noted similarities between commensalism and Durkheim's (1966) concept of mechanical solidarity in that in society groups evolve naturally from associations of functionally homogeneous individuals (e.g., neighbourhood, religion, professions, etc.). On the other hand, symbiosis connotes a mutual dependence among individuals characterised by their functional differences. Predatory crime, as a special case of symbiosis, involves an interdependent relationship between predator and victim in their efforts to adapt to and gain subsistence from the environment. Communities therefore provide the structure for the commensalistic and symbiotic relationships in which individuals seek subsistence and the satisfaction of needs. Hence ecological theory provides a useful framework understanding why community structures generate criminal propensities. Two of the most popular theories of criminology that are based upon the principles of human ecology are Hot Spot and Routine Activities Theories.

### Hot Spot Theory

Hot Spot Theory centres on the 'criminology of place' in that it can be expected that a relatively few places will be associated with a high percentage of crimes. These places, or hot spots, provide convergent opportunities in which predatory crimes can occur.

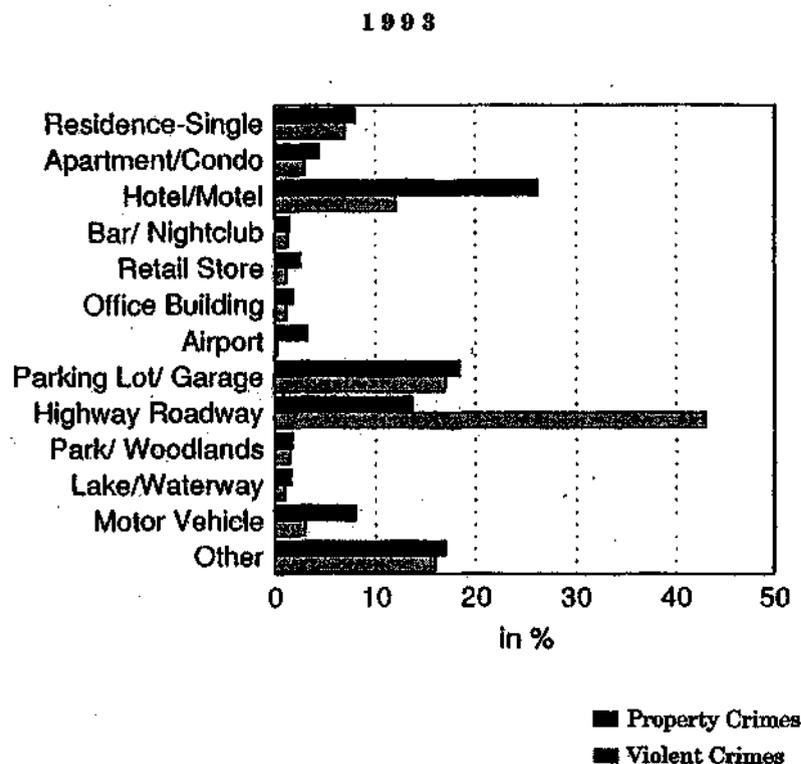
Several studies in the broader criminology literature support

the 'criminology of place' concept. For example, Sherman, Gartin and Buerger (1989) tracked calls summoning police for a one year period in Minneapolis and found that over one half of all police cars for predatory crimes were dispatched to 3.3 percent of all addresses. Furthermore, 90 percent of all robberies were located along seven main avenues. In a study of the clustering of crimes in Cleveland, Roncek and Maier (1991) found that city blocks with taverns and cocktail lounges had higher incidence of property and violent crimes as opposed to those city blocks with no such establishments. However, the city block with the highest crime rate was a large public housing complex.

In the U.S., both property and violent crimes committed against non residents (i.e., tourists) can be derived for each state's and community's Uniform Crime Report's (UCR) physical location categories. At the macro level, such data provides a potentially useful means to compare US

communities since crimes can be expected to cluster in some communities more so than others. For example, Dade County (Greater Miami) was the location of 29 percent of all reported property crimes and 37 percent of all reported violent crimes on Florida tourists during 1993. To put these incidences in perspective, Dade County is one of 67 Florida counties, represents three percent of the state's land mass, hosts 16 percent of the state's tourists and was the location of 30 percent of the total crimes committed against tourists. With a tourist victimisation rate of 150.35 per 100,000 visitors, Dade County was more than 3.5 times higher than Orange County (e.g., Orlando), the most popular tourist destination in the state. Such evidence demands further research explaining how one community exposes visitors to criminal victimisation more so than others.

At the more micro level, the UCR data for Florida revealed that more than seven (7) out of 10



*Figure 2: Top 12 locations of crimes against tourists in Florida*  
 Source: Uniform Crime Report

violent crimes committed against Florida tourists in 1993 occurred in three location types. Nearly 42 percent of these violent crimes were reported along highway roadways, followed by 18 percent in parking lots and garages, and 12 percent at hotels and motels. Statistically there were five (5) times more property crimes than violent crimes. Approximately six (6) out of 10 property crimes occurred in three types of locations: 26 percent at hotels and motels; 18 percent at parking lots and garages; and 14 percent along highways and roadways (See Figure 2).

Since hot spots can be shown to cluster in certain geographical areas, an appropriate reaction would be to discharge or upgrade security forces in the area. However, the panel experts from the police agreed that such a reaction may only derive short term benefits. There is evidence to suggest that it is not so much the physical place that produces criminal incidences but more so the type of place that presents and concentrates opportunities for predators (Sherman, Gartin, & Beurger, 1989). If crime was limited to a physical place, then criminal acts could be eliminated by enhancing security forces in the area or by physically excluding it from the tourism zone. In reality, however, such a response serves only to displace motivated offenders to other opportunistic locations with suitable targets and ineffective guardianship such as neighbourhoods, parks, bars, etc. Consequently, communities that solely adopt such a reactionary approach to criminal victimisation must contend with a the need to constantly refocus their sights on a continually shifting target.

### **Routine Activities Theory**

Another emerging theory known as Routine Activities Theory (Felson & Cohen, 1980) draws heavily from Hawley's human ecological theory as a theory of

criminal acts. Routine activities theory assumes that criminals are rational beings who are attempting to gain sustenance or satisfy needs by taking something of value from victims. In a sense, criminal acts can be construed as routine activities by some which feed upon the routine activities of others. For a criminal act to occur, three minimal elements must converge in both time and place. The minimal elements necessary for a direct-predatory crime to occur are:

1. a suitable target or victim;
2. a motivated offender, and
3. the absence of effective guardians capable of preventing the interaction between offender and victim.

The lack of any one of these

**Upgrading security forces for crime hot spots may displace motivated offenders . . . it may produce a continually shifting target.**

elements is sufficient to prevent the crime from occurring (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

Tourists inherently have at least four components that make them suitable targets, when the principles of human ecological significance are applied (Felson & Cohen, 1980). The value of tourists as targets affects their desirability among motivated offenders. Tourists by nature are perceived to possess items of wealth such as cameras, cash and credit cards (Ryan, 1993). Tourists are highly visible targets in that they are relatively easy to observe due to differences in dress and types of places they visit. Often tourist destinations provide environments easy for a motivated offender to access tourists, as well as the opportunity to escape once the crime has occurred. Parking lots and highways, as well as motel rooms that open to dimly lit

parking lots have been shown to be hot spots in the previous section of this paper. The inertia of a target includes those factors that may make a target difficult to subdue for the criminal act. Inertia may also relate the ability of the perpetrator to acquire and dispose of the item of value (e.g., camera, credit card, automobile).

The presence of capable guardians is another necessary element of the tourist-predator relationship. While the presence of police can be construed as a major component of capable guardians available to tourists, they are no means the only guardians capable of preventing a crime. Private security forces are commonly employed by hotels and resorts and therefore should be included in any measure of

**More guardians (police and private security forces) may not mean less crime.**

guardianship. Furthermore, there is evidence to support that the architectural and environmental design of a setting may increase the effectiveness of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Washnis, 1976). For example, the effectiveness of security officers in a controlled access theme park would likely be many times greater than the same number of officers operating in an unrestricted downtown shopping district or public park.

Lastly, an individual with both the criminal inclination and the ability to act on the propensity is implicit in the relationship between predator and victim. Criminal elements are known to exist in any industrial society. However, measuring the number of motivated offenders in a community is a daunting task and can generally only be approximated in a community's

overall crime rate. Often the macro conditions that are thought to create criminal inclinations have been used to gauge a community's overall criminal propensities. Such propensities have often been reduced to three measures:

1. socio-economic status;
2. crowding; and
3. ethnic or subculture segregation.

Overall crime rates in combination with societal strains known to influence criminal inclinations provide potentially useful proxy measures of motivated offenders.

To the author's knowledge, the only known operation of these macro-conditions on tourism victimisation rates was reported by Shielber, Crofts and Hollinger (1995). Consistent with years of criminological analysis (Kelly, 1993; Pizam, 1982), this study revealed that communities with the highest tourist victimisation rates were in more densely populated urban areas, with a high percentage of the people living in poverty - many of which were from non-white racial groups - and high overall crime rates. Both the number of capable guardians (i.e., police, private security officers) as well as the capable guardian rate were found to be highly inter-correlated with tourist crime rates, the nature of the relationships were not in the direction the theory would predict. Even though Routine Activities Theory predicts that increased capable guardianship will have a dampening effect on crime rates, often the results of research shows the opposite effect. This does not mean that increasing the number of police on the street increases the incidence and detection of crimes. Instead, it simply provides an indication that police and private security forces are discharged in more of a reactive than a proactive way. In other words, increased crime drives the need

for increased security presence, not *vice versa*. Though an apparent contradiction with Routine Activity Theory, it is a common finding in research of this nature.

Evidence of this nature would suggest responses from tourism managers targeted at the more systemic social problems that are known to foster criminal acts in society. However, these environmental issues that breed predatorial propensities are pervasive and seemingly too intractable for the tourism sector address alone. Well intentioned solutions such as the creation of all night supervised recreational centres can attempt to make environments more safe by getting potential youthful offenders off the streets and into

arenas as cornerstones for urban renewal in economically blighted areas since these sites place excess demands on limited law enforcement resources and expose visitors to unnecessary risks. Where such developments are to occur, facility planners would benefit future visitors by incorporating principles of "Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design" into the design of the area. Facilities where access is strictly controlled and monitored by design provide visitors a safer environment than their counterparts that do not. Well lighted parking areas with surveillance cameras and controlled access points could better secure these trying areas. In such environments, criminals will perceive their likelihood of detection is greater and the opportunities to escape once a crime is committed more limited.

**Urban renewal projects (e.g., convention centres) located in troubled areas may potentially place tourists at risk.**

Tourists also have a role in working with tourism managers and law enforcement agencies to ensure that they have an enjoyable and safe vacation. Examples abound among panel members where visitors from relatively high crime areas seemingly took a break from following common safety principles while on vacation. Visitors can increase their safety by:

more productive settings. Nevertheless, they are limited in scope since they do not address the ecological conditions that are conducive to high overall levels of criminality.

The creation of economic opportunities for urban poor will be of vital importance if we wish to create communities safe for tourists and residents alike. However, the means to satisfy such needs are not easily found and have albeitedly existed since time immortelle. In the short term, however, tourism managers particularly in high crime urban areas will likely have to contend with methods that can assist them in coexisting with depressed and predatorial ecological conditions.

The panel experts suggested that it is time for city planners to rethink their strategies of using convention centres and sports

1. using a map to plan their route before venturing out in a rental car;
2. paying attention when walking through parking lots;
3. travelling with, companions in the evening and avoiding suspicious characters in areas with no lights;
4. removing valuables from cars when leaving it;
5. locking windows and patio doors when leaving guest rooms; and
6. keeping hotel room key in a safe place while at a hotel pool, bar or health club.

Such precautions will not only improve the defensible space of these facilities, they will make visitors less of suitable targets.

## Conclusion

Hot Spot Theory in combination with Routine Activities Theory provides a useful means of understanding how and where communities expose visitors to the risk of criminal victimisation. For a predatory crime to occur, there must be a convergence in time and place of a suitable target, a motivated offender, and the absence of capable guardians. Tourist destinations by nature often provide the minimum elements necessary for crimes on tourists to occur (Roncek & Maier, 1991; Matthew, Stanford, & Long, 1987). Places where tourists are at greatest risk of becoming victimised have been shown to cluster in a few specific types of places. These places provide a suitable setting where the value, visibility and accessibility of the tourist target are high among motivated offenders and the opportunity to escape once the crime has occurred is feasible. This theoretical framework should be useful for both tourism managers attempting to understand and manage their problems effectively as well as researchers who are exploring why certain environments produce more criminal acts than others.

Though the data used to highlight the theoretical concepts was insufficient to be a true empirical test of either theory, it represents conceptually a good first step, one that puts forth several hypotheses that require future research. For example, what is the impact of specific architectural designs and security devices on criminal hot spots? How do tourist managers who successfully manage their problems renew and upgrade their security precautions over time (e.g., reactively, proactively)? What role does negligence on the part of the tourist play in the symbiotic

relationship between the criminal as predator and the tourist as victim?

No easy solutions are provided by this discussion for the tourism manager attempting to combat a "crimes against tourists" problem at the destination level. The location of criminal activity can be identified for increased law enforcement purposes, but these efforts can be construed as purely reactionary and only serve to relocate criminals temporarily to other less fortunate areas. An understanding of the conditions that are thought to create criminal propensities points to seemingly intractable problems that few communities can afford to address in any comprehensive way (i.e., poverty, economic disparity). Therefore, tourism managers particularly in urban settings with overall high crime rates must be forever vigilant in their attempts to protect visitors. This in part can be accomplished by creating a more secure environment (e.g., defensible space) through facility design and/or the presence of capable guardians: In addition, tourism managers should inform visitors of the role they should play in making themselves less of a suitable target reminding them of the behaviours that are not appropriate in the local urban environment.

In closing, crime has emerged as an important and pervasive issue for tourism managers in the developed world. In the past, the issue has been treated as a public relations problem for destinations and not as attack on the tourist product itself. Hopefully this discussion will initiate a dialogue as to how communities can win back their streets on behalf of residents and tourists alike. For those communities which put forth honest efforts, it is hoped that the media will realise the complexity of the problem and to check their natural tendencies to blow isolated incidences out of proportion when they occur. It is acknowledged that the public is well served when the media holds

tourist destinations accountable for their efforts to protect visitors. Nevertheless, allowances should be given to destinations whose efforts are genuine but are forced to react to new and shifting circumstances.

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