

Spatial patterns of sex offenders: Theoretical, empirical, and practical issues

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Abstract

The aim of the current article is to review the theoretical, empirical, and practical issues related to the spatial behavior of sex offenders. After describing three theoretical models related to geographic profiling, empirical studies are presented that investigate the links between offender characteristics, modus operandi variables, and the distances traveled by sex offenders. Different spatial typologies of sex offenders and investigative strategies that take into account the spatial component of criminal behavior are discussed.

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Environmental criminology could be described as “the study of crime, criminality, and victimization as they relate, first, to particular places, and secondly, to the way that individuals and organizations shape their activities spatially, and in so doing are in turn influenced by place-based or spatial factors” (Bottoms & Wiles, 1997, p. 305). It may also be defined as the scientific study of “spatial patterns in crime, the perceptions and awareness spaces of potential criminals, criminal mobility patterns, and the process of target selection and decision to commit the crime” (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981, p.7). Environmental criminology’s primary concern is with the “where and when” of the criminal event, what Brantingham and Brantingham designated as the fourth dimension of crime. Three theoretical approaches of environmental criminology have been associated with geographic profiling because of their common concern for context: routine activity, rational choice and crime pattern theory.

1. Theoretical models

1.1. The routine activity approach

The central hypothesis of routine activity theory is that “the probability that a violation will occur at any specific time and place might be taken as a function of the convergence of likely offenders and suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians” (Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 590). All three elements are necessary for the crime to occur. The routine activity approach does not deny that offenders may vary in their inclination to commit crime, but takes such inclination as given (Felson, 1992). According to Felson (1998, 2002), there are four

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