A Framework for the Analysis and Management of Library Security Issues Applied to Patron-property Theft

Heidi Simmons

McGill University Library, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper adapts three conceptual frameworks from Environmental Criminology – Routine Activity Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Situational Crime Prevention – to create a Crime Prevention Toolkit that helps librarians analyze and manage criminal activity in contemporary academic libraries. The toolkit is applied to a case study of patron-laptop theft at an urban academic library to demonstrate its use in analyzing criminal activity and creating a crime-problem intervention. The intervention was rapidly successful at eliminating patron-property theft. There were no patron-laptop thefts of any kind in the library after implementation of the intervention, in contrast to 12 recorded laptop thefts the previous academic year. This is the first time a research-based, conceptual framework of three theories from Environmental Criminology has been used to analyze and manage criminal activity in an academic library. It is also the first time a patron-property theft intervention in an academic library has been demonstrated effective in an empirical inquiry.

Introduction

In response to transformative technological advances brought on by the internet, academic libraries have undergone rapid changes in their mission, service, collections, and space usage (Holley, 2013; Kyrillidou & Shaneka, 2011). As academic libraries have discarded or stored their physical collections, additional physical space has become available for patron study or work (Holley, 2013; McCombs & Moran, 2016). Simultaneously, patron use of portable, high-value, electronic devices has increased. By 2015, 89% of university students regularly used a laptop, notebook, or Chromebook computer, and 86% regularly used a smartphone (Harris Poll/Pearson, 2015). While libraries have developed considerable expertise in protecting their own physical assets against theft (ACRL, 1988; ALA/LLAMA, 2010; Shuman, 1999; Witt, 1996), comparatively little research has focused on the protection of patron property. As libraries' physical resources decrease in number, and the number of patron-owned high-value electronic devices in libraries increase, *patron-property* theft is becoming a significant security concern in contemporary libraries.

With few exceptions, most recommendations and research in this area are not supported by either a conceptual framework or empirical research. While this was appropriate in the past when libraries were protecting physical assets, contemporary academic libraries now host larger numbers of student patrons who remain in the library for extended periods of time, even overnight. Patron safety and the protection of their personal property merits a more research-based approach,

supported by a conceptual framework that draws on the latest empirical research in the field of Criminology.

A Crime Prevention Toolkit of three complementary conceptual frameworks from Environmental Criminology – Routine Activity Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Situational Crime Prevention – is presented to help librarians effectively analyze and manage criminal activity. Supported by empirical research from Criminology, the toolkit provides additional strategies to complement current security management approaches. The toolkit is then applied to a case study of laptop theft at McGill University's Schulich Library of Physical Sciences, Life Sciences, and Engineering to demonstrate its use, from analysis through implementation, in creating a crime-problem intervention. The case study intervention was implemented and shown to be rapidly effective at reducing patron-property theft at an academic library.

Literature review

Two documents, sponsored by library associations, provide recommendations and guidance on academic library security. The American Library Association's Library Leadership and Management Association (ALA/LLAMA, 2010) provides suggestions to develop customized library security programs. It defines library responsibilities to protect staff, patrons, materials, and buildings. Patron-property protection is not specifically addressed. The Association of Research Libraries Office of Leadership and Management Services (Soete et al., 1999) reported a detailed survey of library security practices in 45

North American academic libraries, which included a compilation of documents, forms, training materials, emergency/disaster manuals, and security plan checklists from participating libraries. As it was created prior to 1999, it does not address the current security environment in academic libraries.

A variety of books, targeted mostly to public libraries, present a general overview of library security issues that are also relevant for academic librarians. Albrecht (2015) provides a comprehensive review of library security issues that includes patron management, security surveys, community partnerships, and staff training. Shuman (1999) focuses on criminal activity, patron behavior, electronic security challenges, emergency and disaster preparedness, and legal and ethical issues of security and technology. McNeil and Johnson (1996) look at the management of patron behavior in libraries and include sections on academic library crime, legal issues, sexual harassment, sexual behavior in libraries, and solutions to common patron behavior problems.

Library security research before and after the internet

Prior to the internet, library resource theft was the most common criminal activity in public libraries (Burns Security Institute, 1973; Lincoln & Lincoln, 1987). Most library security literature before the internet are comprised of 'best practice' proposals, focusing on the physical security of library buildings and their surroundings, interior space arrangements, library materials theft protection, staff training, emergency/disaster preparation, and effective use of security guards (Brand, 1980; Nicewarmer & Heaton, 1995). The literature looked at student security monitors (Nicewarmer & Heaton, 1995), book theft and mutilation (Brand, 1980; Currie, Raskin, Demas, Kreilick, & McNamara, 1986; Greenwood & McKean, 1985; Lincoln & Lincoln, 1987; Weis, 1981), and student theft profiles (Weis, 1981). Security checklists focused on physical and operational actions (Currie et al., 1986; Lincoln & Lincoln, 1987).

After the development of the internet, technological advances impacted libraries' missions, services, and collections, leading to new security challenges (Holley, 2013). While recent national crime statistics are not available for either academic or public libraries, small post-internet surveys of academic librarians show a greater concern for patron safety and property than for physical library assets (Sanders, 2012; Soete et al., 1999). By 2008, researchers had noted that security in libraries required a new way of thinking about patrons and facility security (Carey, 2008; Reed, 2008; Trapskin, 2008). Security recommendations included centralized library staff security responsibilities, discontinued student security monitors, greater university support of library security, greater staff security and soft skills training (Lowry & Goetsch, 2001; McGuin, 2010; Reed, 2008), more secure building design, improved interior natural surveillance (McGuin, 2010), technological improvements (McGuin, 2010; McMullen & Kane, 2008; Trapskin, 2008; Westenkirchner, 2008), and patron screening (Chadley, 1996; Forest, 2005; Lowry & Goetsch, 2001; Reed, 2008).

Patron property theft and conceptual frameworks

A few researchers have dealt specifically with patron property theft or used conceptual theories of Criminology to address criminal activity in a library setting. McKay (2008) reported using signs and personal communication to warn patrons of increased property theft risk at an academic library. Though signs may have been helpful, McKay believed that personal communication improved guardianship (i.e., protection or defense) by patrons of their personal property and reduced theft more effectively. McKay did not perform a study to test these beliefs, however. Drawing on Routine Activity Theory, a field experiment was performed to look at the effect of symbolic territoriality barriers in preventing the theft of unattended library printing cards. Two methods of establishing ownership and guardianship were compared. Both ownership and guardianship cues were shown to deter theft of printing

cards (Wortley & McFarlane, 2011). Henrich and Stoddart (2016) applied Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) to an assessment of the security and safety of an academic library building's design and spaces. Along with other suggested safety measures such as safety committees, training by safety experts, and information sharing about library security, the authors concluded that the CPTED checklist adapted by the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC, 2003) of Singapore, though not intended for library interiors, generated a thoughtful assessment that would promote security and safety in a library (Henrich & Stoddart, 2016). However, no empirical study was conducted to confirm that conclusion. Kitchener (2014) summarized an internal CPTED audit of the Kitchener Public Library performed in response to a spike in criminal activity. It describes their response plan and the observed and statistical improvements in security resulting from their security intervention (Kitchener, 2014). Cromwell, Alexander, and Dotson (2008) proposed managing book theft and patron behavior issues by incorporating a criminology theory, Situational Crime Prevention (SCP), into a library security plan and called for further study to demonstrate the approach's effectiveness.

Crime prevention toolkit

Environmental Criminology is an umbrella term used for a set of theoretical frameworks that focus on the role of opportunity in criminal events (Andresen, 2014; Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2014). Environmental Criminology seeks to prevent crime by understanding the environments that foster it and disrupting the *process* of criminal activity (Andresen, 2014).

Three complementary theories from the field of Environmental Criminology are presented for use by librarians in a Crime Prevention Toolkit. The toolkit helps librarians analyze criminal activity comprehensively, by considering the elements of crime and their relationships to controllers, the routine behaviors of both victims and offenders, the decision-making process of offenders, and suggested tips to systematically manipulate the crime environment to make criminal activities seem riskier and less attractive to potential offenders.

Routine activity theory

Routine Activity Theory contains two main concepts. First, it asserts that a crime must almost always require the convergence of three essential elements – a motivated offender, an attractive target, and the lack of a capable guardian. If any of these elements is absent, a crime is prevented (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cullen et al., 2014). Any individual can be an offender, while a target is any person or object that incites criminal behavior. Capable guardians against crime are usually the owner of the target and their mere presence can act as a deterrence to crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Eckert, 2016).

Second, Routine Activity Theory also asserts that illegal activities subsist on the legal activities of daily life. Patterns of everyday legal routine activities can influence the probability that the three essential elements will converge to produce a crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979). In their study, Cohen and Felson (1979) connected the movement of daily activities away from the home (as women went to work) and the increase in portable goods to the rise of the US crime rate after World War II. They found that the movement of women to activities outside the home raised the likelihood that suitable targets and motivated criminals would converge, absent a capable guardian, to result in crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cullen et al., 2014). Routine Activity Theory assumes that motivated offenders are usually present in any environment and that changes in the crime rate reflect fluctuations in opportunities. Thus, to regulate crime occurrence, Routine Activity Theory looks to disrupt the *opportunity* to commit a crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cullen et al., 2014).

Routine Activity Theory has been applied broadly and is supported by a large body of empirical research. Cohen and Felson (1979) showed