Introduction to
the Study of Crime

Crime has been a major social problem in the United States for decades, but an understanding of the conditions that cause or prevent it has seemingly not increased over the years. In criminology a strong historical tradition has focused on criminals and their motivation for crime, and a newer line of inquiry on victims and the conditions that expose them to risk of crime. It is now time to recognize the ways in which these perspectives enhance each other in explaining criminality. Tentative work has been done in this area with the recent concern over theoretical integration (e.g., Messner, Krohn, and Liska 1989), but that work has been limited to explorations of integration among theories of criminality, rather than integration of the larger offender and victim traditions. It is this latter topic that is the subject of this book. We attempt to explore the feasibility of integrating models of crime that involve both offender and victim variables. It is a simple approach, but sometimes the simpler ideas are the better ones. At least, that is what we argue here.

WHAT IS TO BE INTEGRATED?

This book is about crime, but to get there we need to talk about criminals, victims, and the situations that bring them together. Criminologists have studied each of these dimensions of crime, but not within an integrated framework. Theories exist for each dimension, but there is no literature that brings them all together. This is understandable, since it is unrealistic to expect a single theory to encompass all of this complexity.

The Criminal Motivation Tradition

Criminologists in the 1940s understood crime only as the activity of crim-
inals. In order to understand crime, one had to study criminals and the
social context in which they acted. Simple enough. But in the 1960s some
criminologists began to understand that victims and their social context
were also important. The earlier, traditional viewpoints treated the moti-
vation of the offender as the linchpin to understanding why some persons,
but not others, committed crimes. This is a line of scientific inquiry that
still occupies much time and energy in contemporary criminology.

Numerous theories have been developed to account for criminal
motivation and the distribution of crime. Individual-level theories empha-
size how the biological composition and psychological attributes of some
individuals increase their criminal propensities (see Wilson and Herrnstein
1986). Rational-choice and learning theories stress how the subjective
utilities (i.e., expected rewards minus expected costs) of alternative
actions determine the choice of criminal or conventional solutions to the
problems of everyday life (see Cornish and Clarke 1986; Akers 1987).
Social bond theory (Hirschi 1969) locates the cause of crime in the weak-
ening of bonds to conventional institutions, and cultural deviance theo-
ries (e.g., Sutherland 1947) claim that crime is an expression of cultural
conflict, normative dissension, and peer associations. Macro-structural
theories of crime emphasize how high crime rates are a consequence of
economic inequality, unemployment, anomie, population mobility, het-
erogeneity, and weak institutional control (see Merton 1938; Shaw and
McKay 1942; Blau and Blau 1982). Empirical support can be found for
each of these apparent sources of criminal motivation.

The Opportunity or Victimization Tradition

Regardless of what is known or speculated about crime, there is one cen-
tral fact: risks of victimization are not randomly distributed across social
groups. Based on data from the U.S. National Crime Survey (NCS), vic-
timization rates for violent predatory crime (e.g., robbery, assault) are
higher among persons who are male, younger (16–24 years old), black,
never married or divorced, unemployed, poor, and live in central cities.
For property offenses (e.g., burglary, auto theft), demographic differ-
ences in victimization risks are generally similar to those for violent crime.
Various explanations for these differential risks of victimization have been
proposed.

Criminologists have long been interested in the role of the victim as
a contributory agent in the genesis of crime. However, it has been only in

the last two decades that systematic theories of victimization have been developed. Although alternatively called a "routine activity," "lifestyle," or, more generally, "criminal opportunity" approach, each of these recent theories highlights the symbiotic relationship between conventional and criminal activities. From this perspective, routine activities of law-abiding citizens that increase their exposure to risky and dangerous situations, decrease the level of self-protection or guardianship, and enhance their perceived value or attractiveness as crime targets provide physical opportunities for criminal acts and increase individuals' risks of victimization.

A fundamental assumption underlying current victimization theories is that offenders exercise a degree of rationality when selecting crime targets. Although this "reasoning criminal" (Cornish and Clarke 1986) is constrained by the limits of time, ability, and the availability of relevant information, offenders are assumed to select particular targets that have high subjective value and low expected costs. Once offenders decide to engage in crime, a wide array of victim characteristics and situational factors are presumed to influence the process of target-selection (see, for review, Cornish and Clarke 1986). To understand the social and spatial distribution of crime, current theories of victimization place primary importance on the role of routine activities and lifestyles of potential victims in creating the physical opportunities for offenders to express their criminal intentions.

The Social Context

It is a truism that crime requires both offenders and victims (or targets) and situations or social contexts that unite them. Crime rates and individuals' risks of victimization vary widely by social context. This social context is a micro-environment that has physical and social dimensions. The importance of the social context is immediately recognized by the fact that crime is simply more common in some environments than others. Geographical areas (i.e., standard metropolitan statistical areas [SMSAs], cities, census tracts, neighborhoods, city blocks) with greater population mobility and heterogeneity and lower economic opportunities are generally associated with higher rates of criminal victimization. Within each of these aggregate units, individuals' risks of victimization may vary according to their routine activities and lifestyles, their proximity to "hot spots" for crime (see Sherman, Gartin, and Buerger 1989), and the crime-control activities of the residents and their immediate neighbors. On the other hand, several authors (e.g., Lynch 1987; Miethe, Stafford, and Long 1987; Sampson and Wooldredge 1987) suggest that the impact of various crime-enhancing factors may be dependent on the particular

social context. High rates of nonhousehold activity or low levels of safety precautions, for example, may be detrimental to individuals' risks of victimization only in areas with high proximity to motivated offenders and a rich criminal opportunity structure. Alternatively, the oppressiveness of many geographical areas is so pervasive that all residents, regardless of their personal lifestyles and routine activities, may be equally vulnerable to victimization. As these examples illustrate, the social context is important for a full understanding of crime because crime does not occur in a vacuum, and this micro-environment may determine how other factors influence individuals' risks of victimization. A major purpose of the current study is to examine this basic relationship between crime and its social context.

The Union of Offender, Victim, and Context

There are several necessary conditions for the occurrence of predatory crimes (i.e., crimes that involve direct contact between a victim and offender). Lofland (1969) recognized that these criminal acts and other forms of deviance require at a minimum facilitating "places," "hardware," and "others." From this perspective, a murder is impossible without (1) the union of an offender and the crime target in time and space (place); (2) a physical weapon or other instrument of death (hardware); and (3) a victim, especially one lacking protection from bystanders who may thwart the attack (others). In contrast, the basic premise underlying a routine activity approach to victimization (Cohen and Felson 1979) is that structural changes in activity patterns influence crime rates by affecting the convergence in time and space of three elements necessary for predatory crime: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and absence of capable guardians. Although other authors may not explicitly mention these conditions, all previous studies share the basic assumption that predatory crime is impossible without an offender, a victim, and a facilitating environment.

The fact that predatory crime requires, at a minimum, the convergence of potential victims and offenders in a social context is true by definition. However, what is less obvious is that most previous research has ignored at least one of these necessary conditions. Specifically, traditional theories of criminality (e.g., strain, social bond, differential association) emphasize the sources and causes of criminal motivation, but are silent as to how the actions and characteristics of potential victims may impede or enhance the opportunity for criminal activity. On the other hand, theories of victimization (e.g., routine activity and lifestyle approaches) identify those factors that determine the selection of particular crime targets and

enhance individuals' exposure to risky and vulnerable situations but pay little attention to the social forces that foster and promote criminal motivations.[1] Few studies have attempted to integrate these theories in the same model.

An integration of theories of criminality and theories of victimization is desirable for a number of reasons. First, predatory crime may be a minimal occurrence if social forces are present that decrease either criminal motivation or the availability of attractive targets. In other words, high levels of criminal motivation and an attractive opportunity structure for victimization may both be required for the maximum occurrence of crime. Second, target-selection factors and exposure to risky and vulnerable situations may explain only the differential risks of victimization for residents of geographical areas where socio-economic conditions are conducive to crime. However, the only way to evaluate such hypotheses is to include both measures of offender motivation and target-selection factors in the same empirical study. Third, as a form of model misspecification, failure to consider aspects of both criminality and target selection may dramatically alter substantive conclusions about the predictive power of each type of theory.

LINKING THEORY AND DATA

Theories of crime and victimization are usually far less precise than their counterparts in other social science disciplines (e.g., economics, psychology, geography). This lack of theoretical precision can be seen in several ways. First, even when stated as propositional inventories, criminological theories are rarely detailed enough to include the proper functional relationship among concepts or specify the relative importance of each component. According to differential association theory (Sutherland 1947), for example, are pro-crime definitions that are of longer duration more important than definitions that are more frequent or of higher intensity? Is commitment more important under social bond theory than involvement, attachment, and belief (Hirschi 1969)? Do these social bonds have linear or nonlinear effects on the likelihood of crime commission? According to current theories of victimization, are exposure and proximity to motivated offenders more influential than target attractiveness and guardianship in the selection of crime victims, and are the effects of these variables additive or multiplicative? Second, criminological theories usually do not explicitly specify their level of generality and the proper unit of analysis. For example, criminal opportunity theories of victimization do not specify whether they should equally apply to all types of predatory

crime (even those involving intimates), explain both aggregate rates and individuals' risks, and account for both cross-sectional and longitudinal trends. When theories lack such fundamental details, they are basically unfalsifiable because any empirical observation can easily be construed as consistent with at least one component of the theory (see also, Garofalo 1987; Miethe, Stafford, and Long 1987).

Previous research on victimization and, to a lesser extent, criminality has been primarily descriptive rather than predictive. Much of the early American criminological research emphasized the physical mapping of crime trends across geographical units, and this tradition continues today. Over the last two decades, yearly estimates from the NCS data have been used to develop an alternative barometer of the extent and severity of the crime problem. As a result of these efforts, we are well informed about the relative risks of victimization for various social groups. The fact that persons who are young, male, nonwhite, and poor have greater vulnerability to violent crime than their counterparts is an empirical observation that is the basis for much theoretical inquiry. Unfortunately, most descriptive studies lack the strong theoretical grounding that enables the researcher to both make informed causal inferences and control for other variables that may mediate the observed relationships.

Even if theories of criminality and victimization were well specified, the limitations of available data create an enormous gap between theoretical concepts and their empirical indicators. The NCS projects, the major source of national data on victimization risks, are primarily designed to yield estimates of the prevalence of crime rather than to test criminological theories. Unfortunately, this emphasis is the fundamental reason why few measures of routine activities and lifestyles are included in the ongoing NCS series. Under such conditions, operationalization will be only marginally successful in developing indicators of each theoretical component, and demographic variables will have to be used as proxy measures for many of them.

Several major problems of inference occur when there are limited measures of theoretical concepts. First, models are misspecified by excluding relevant variables, resulting in potentially biased estimates of the net impact of the included variables. Second, the use of proxy variables in many cases leads to inconclusive findings. For example, a positive association between family income and victimization risks may represent the adverse impact of target attractiveness or greater exposure to risky environments outside the home, whereas an inverse relationship may be attributed to higher safety precautions among the more affluent or the impact of higher income on reducing individuals' criminal motivations. When there are inadequate controls for these other factors, it is impossible

to attribute the net impact of family income to any particular source. Such problems continue to plague studies that rely on secondary data, both within and outside the discipline of criminology. The poor link between theory and data in most criminological studies should make our substantive inferences from empirical analyses cautious about the validity of current theories.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Crime requires both an offender and a victim, but criminological theory strangely neglects this elementary fact. The current study explores possible connections among offenders, victims, and facilitating contexts by testing an integrated model of crime that explicitly recognizes each of these elements.

The current study extends previous work by examining the predictive utility of both theories of criminality and theories of victimization in explaining aggregate rates and individuals' risks of predatory crime across different contexts. Using a variety of data sources (e.g. census data, NCS data, a city-wide telephone survey), we describe the social ecology of predatory crime within and across geographical units, identify individual-level factors associated with victimization risks, and test various hypotheses that are derived from current theories. Statistical analyses are performed to indicate the correlates of predatory crime, the inadequacies of models which ignore either aspects of criminality or victim-selection factors, and the influence of socio-economic conditions in the wider geographical area on individuals' risks of victimization.

There are four major questions underlying the current study. First, what are the major aggregate- and individual-level factors that account for variation in crime rates and individuals' risks of victimization? Second, are similar conclusions reached about the importance of target-selection factors and aspects of offender motivation across different types of predatory crime, units of analysis, and contexts? Third, does the integration of both elements of criminal motivation and target-selection factors advance our understanding of predatory crime beyond what is known from each theory treated separately? Fourth, how does the neighborhood context of routine activities and crime control influence individuals' risks of victimization? Do aspects of the wider geographical area enhance, impede, or have no impact on residents' vulnerability to crime? Answers to these questions will provide the basis for evaluating the explanatory power of criminological theories and their implications for public policy on crime prevention.

These questions will be addressed in the following chapters. Chapter 2 will describe the major theories of criminality. We focus on those macro-social theories that have been most widely used to account for variation in crime rates. Four major criminogenic factors (i.e., low socioeconomic status, population mobility, ethnic heterogeneity, and single-parent families) are identified. We discuss the significance of each of these factors from various theoretical perspectives.

Recent theories of victimization and target-selection processes are summarized in chapter 3. Attention focuses on the similarities of various opportunity theories of victimization (i.e., routine activity and lifestyle approaches) and the predictive utilities of the major components underlying these theories (i.e., exposure to crime, proximity to offenders, target attractiveness, and guardianship). Chapter 4 presents an integrated perspective which unites aspects of offender motivation, victim characteristics, and the social context for crime. Chapter 5 describes the data sources that will be used to test theoretical propositions, and chapter 6 provides descriptive summaries of the social ecology of predatory crime, and the bivariate relationships among measures of theoretical concepts, crime rates, and individuals' risks of victimization. Subsequent chapters evaluate (1) the ability of criminality and victimization theories to explain crime rates in geographical areas (chapter 7), (2) the predictors of individuals' risks of victimization (chapter 8), and (3) the impact of individuals' routine activities and lifestyles on victimization risks as influenced by aspects of the wider social context (chapter 9). The final chapter discusses the implications of our study for future research on criminological theory and for social policy on crime control.