Marcus Felson

CRIME & Everyday Life

Second Edition

Crime and Everyday Life

Second Edition

Marcus Felson
Rutgers University
School of Criminal Justice

PINE FORGE PRESS
Thousand Oaks • London • New Delhi

For information:

Pine Forge Press
A Sage Publications Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(805) 499-4224
Internet: sales@pfp.sagepub.com

Sage Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Production Coordinator: Windy Just

Production Editor: Sanford Robinson

Production Assistant: Karen Wiley

Designer: Lisa S. Mirski

Typesetter: Rebecca Evans

Cover Designer: Ravi Balasuriya

Indexer: Will Ragsdale

Print Buyer: Anna Chin

Printed in the United States of America

98 99 00 01 02 03 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Felson, Marcus, 1947—
Crime and everyday life / by Marcus Felson. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8039-9097-9 (pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Crime—United States. 2. Crime prevention—United States.
3. Social control. I. Title.
HV6789.F45 1998
364.973—dc21 98-8877

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets Environmental Protection Agency standards for recycled paper.

To Mary A. Eckert, pretrial specialist, research director, flower arranger, companion, and kind and reasonable person who makes her husband romantic at 50.

About the Author

Marcus Felson has been a leader in the study of how everyday routines can produce more crime or less. He is Professor at the Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice and has served as professor at the University of Southern California and the University of Illinois. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and his B.A. from the University of Chicago. Professor Felson has been guest lecturer in Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. Professor Felson is the author of 80 professional papers, spanning theory and practical crime prevention, including "Redesigning Hell: Preventing Crime and Disorder at the Port Authority Bus Terminal." He is coeditor of two books, *Business and Crime* and *Routine Activity and Rational Choice*.

About the Publisher

Pine Forge Press is a new educational publisher, dedicated to publishing innovative books and software throughout the social sciences. On this and any other of our publications, we welcome your comments and suggestions.

Please call or write to

Pine Forge Press
A Sage Publications Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, CA 91320
805-499-4224
E-mail: sales@pfp.sagepub.com

Visit our new World Wide Web site, your direct link to a multitude of online resources: http://www.sagepub.com/pineforge

Preface

After the first edition of this book appeared in 1994, crime rates in the United States declined for several years in a row. Criminology also has changed in noteworthy fashion and more quickly than I would have dreamed in writing the first edition. We know much more about situational crime prevention. In addition, those of us who study how everyday life produces or prevents crime have gathered more facts and ideas. We also are better able to tie together loose ends and to know what to study next. The whole topic of repeat victimization has bloomed as a field for both science and crime prevention.

Accordingly, the second edition offers much more than did the first. It has more meat, and it is entirely revised and rewritten. New chapters are added, and old chapters merged and reworked. New topics and concepts are developed everywhere, and almost every idea found in the first edition is taken to greater depth here. The second edition offers many diagrams to help explain crime as a tangible phenomenon in everyday life. Updated references offer easy entry into the larger and recent literature. This new edition, however, does not move toward the clouds. If anything, I have tried to get even more down-to-earth about crime as a tangible phenomenon.

This book challenges many traditional approaches to the study of crime. Such a competition of ideas can only enrich students, even those who do not agree with my approach. Many faculty reported that they and their students liked the first edition for precisely this reason. I am grateful to those who disagreed with me on many issues but were open-minded enough to give this book a chance.

Although I express a clear viewpoint, this book is not as personal as it might seem. Many scholars and researchers in different nations, of various disciplinary training, and using divergent terminology are converging on the same approach to the study of crime. They are treating crime as highly tangible and very much generated by the opportunity to carry it out. To quote William Shakespeare,

> How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds
> Makes ill deeds done! (*King John,* 4.2.219).

Many scholars have worked hard to learn exactly how criminal opportunity leads people to commit crime. This book compiles many such efforts for a broad audience. We must never forget that good teaching, good science, and good practice are intricately related. This is an exciting period, with criminology offering the public more tangible facts about crime as well as something that works to prevent it. By designing local environments properly and using situational crime prevention, a number of people have found a pragmatic alternative between Utopia and futility. This is a chronicle of their thinking and practice.

Acknowledgments

I still appreciate those acknowledged in the first edition, especially Travis Hirschi and Paul and Patricia Brantingham. Ronald V. Clarke is the most creative and scientific criminologist I have ever met. I much appreciate what he has taught me since I called him up cold at the Home Office in London 15 years ago. I have not forgotten how much I learned from Lourdes Ongkeko, Malcolm W. Klein, Carlfred Broderick, Mike Gottfredson, and Jan Gorecki, or the contribution of David Bordua to the routine activity approach. I gained both general and specific assistance from a family of unforgettable, indefatigable, and pithy people, including my witty mother, Virginia Raphaelson Felson, age 83, who still takes college courses but doesn't take any pills; my warm and ingenious father, the late Ben Felson, who helped systematize radiology but never tried to systematize his children; my logical and organized brother, Steve, an appeals lawyer and playwright; Nancy, a scholarly and dedicated classicist; Rich, who transformed the social-psychological study of violence into a science; and Ed, an outstanding defense lawyer and jazz bass player. It is better to brag than to envy.

The second edition was written entirely while I served on the faculty of the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University. Phyllis Schulze—head of the wonderful criminal justice library and a person of energy and wisdom—played an ongoing role in my education but never asked me for anything but a small donation to the coffee fund. Among the staff members offering daily assistance were Dean Alan Futernick, Jean Webster, Shirley Parker, and Sandra Wright. My students keep teaching me and getting me to clarify; I wonder if they know how much they contribute to me?

I am very grateful to Steve Rutter and the staff at Pine Forge Press, especially those listed on the copyright page. They not only have done an excellent job themselves but also have recruited consultants to improve the manuscript. These include Rebecca Smith, an excellent development editor, and the following reviewers: Douglas J. Adams, Allen F. Anderson, Ronald Boonstrom, Marshall Fishwick, Christopher Hunter, Judson R. Landis, Kimberly Kempf Leonard, William P. Nye, John C. Phillips, Daniel Quinn, Marc Riedel, Mike Ryan, Lynne L. Snowden, Jackson Toby, James Tucker, Bryan Vila, Cecil L. Willis, L. Thomas Winfree, Jr., and R. Dean Wright. Remaining errors are at least 98% mine.

Contents

1

Fallacies About Crime

For years, Roberto Alomar had been the model major league baseball player—polite, professional, and competent. No one had an ill word to say about him. Then one day he lost his temper and spit in the face of an umpire. Worse still, he did this on national television, and his act was replayed over and over for millions of people who were not even interested in baseball. He was punished, as he deserved, but his overall reputation was ruined by one incident. Even though the facts were reported accurately, they gave an unfair overall impression of the man, who also deserved credit for his good acts.

Similarly, the more severe fallacies about crime arise from a poor selection of facts. This chapter tries to help the student of crime acquire a better focus by taking a number of these fallacies and filling in some facts.

Sources of Information About Crime

Many people rely on nonprofessional sources of information about crime, including the news media, personal experience, and friends, family, and associates. There is nothing wrong with using this information as part of the recipe, but some ingredients should be added from professional sources. There are at least seven systematic sources of crime information:

- Reports to police
- Reports by victims
- Self-reported offending
- Business data
- Medical reports
- Mortality statistics
- Systematic observations

The first three of these types provide the broadest coverage. The most famous American police data are the *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR), compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from local police agencies (see FBI, 1995; U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995b).[1]

People do not report all crime to the police. To get beyond that shortcoming, surveys ask the general public about crime victimizations. The most widely known victim reports are in the National Crime Victim Survey

(NCVS), which interviews a large sample of citizens about whether they were victimized personally or as a household (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995a, 1995b). These surveys turn up about twice as many crime victimizations as show up in the UCR, adding millions of offenses never reported to the police. Many offenses, however, do not have a clear and immediate victim. To cast a still wider net, it makes sense to interview people about their personal criminal behavior. The most widely known self-report survey is Monitoring the Future, consisting of interviews with high school seniors (see U.S. Department of Justice, 1995b). This annual survey asks questions about underage drinking, using marijuana and more serious drugs, minor shoplifting, and other offenses. Some of the questions ask about delinquency in the prior month, thus giving some currency to the indicators without creating so much threat that respondents will not answer.

More specialized sources also turn up important information about crime. To learn about stealing by customers and employees, businesses have used not only surveys but also accounting studies of merchandise that should be there but isn't—"shrinkage." Businesses often keep their records confidential, but the National Retail Security Survey (Hollinger, 1993, 1997) and other business studies (see Beck & Willis, 1995; DiLonardo, 1997) have compiled some of their information.

Medical reports include compilation of emergency room episodes by the Drug Use Warning Network and the National Institute of Justice's Drug Use Forecasting Program, which is based on testing already arrested adults for the presence of drugs in their bodies (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995b). Given that homicide victims do not report their own demise on self-report surveys, vital statistics compiled from morgues have provided an important supplement to the UCR homicide data (Department of Health and Human Services, 1995).

Last, one can observe criminal behavior systematically. It usually is inefficient to wait around for crimes to happen, but it is not so difficult to count prostitutes on the street (McNamara, 1994), drunks hanging out, graffiti scrawled on walls, vandalized public telephones (Challinger, 1992), or pieces of litter or piles of dog droppings (Coleman, 1985). You can see that there is no shortage of facts linked to crime. The problem is how to put these facts together.

This is the only negative chapter in an otherwise positive book. In this chapter, I point out several fallacies about crime, but I could not resist slipping in some positive ideas in presenting these fallacies.

Ten Fallacies About Crime

No human mind is completely consistent. Inside our minds, each of us holds some of the fallacies listed here, but also some ideas contrary to the fallacies.

As you read on, you will recognize these as fallacies. But can you resist them? Even though I am the author, I often fall back on these simple fallacies, to my own surprise. Perhaps naming and explaining the fallacies will help all of us to resist them.

The Dramatic Fallacy

Watching television leads us astray in studying crime (see Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 1993). The "cop shows" and news shows have the same problem: They need to keep people watching. Television and other media seek strange and violent incidents to keep their ratings high; thus, they are interested in such events as romantic murders by jealous lovers, shoot-outs between felons and police officers, and fiendishly clever types of murder. These portrayals give a highly inaccurate general picture of crime, or even of murder. I call this the *dramatic fallacy.*

In the UCR, the FBI lists just under 2.9 million offenses in 1994 for the eight categories of major crime: murder,[2] forcible rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, and arson. Almost 9 out of 10 of these crimes are property crimes: burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and larceny-thefts. Murder and rape, which get the most attention in the media, are greatly outnumbered by the other violent offenses. Indeed, murders are less than 1% of the major crime total, and we have not yet begun to consider all the minor criminal offenses reported or all the offenses not reported.

Sherlock Holmes would have no interest whatever in most of the 22,076 murders reported in the United States for 1994. Only 20 involved poison or explosives. Only 22 were by narcotics overdose. Some 78 murders were classified as involving rape. Just 15 involved prostitution and commercialized vice. Sniper attacks make good television, but only two such homicides occurred in the entire United States in 1994. About 1.7% of the murders involved romantic triangles (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995b, Tables 3.110, 3.127, 3.124, and 3.126). Although 1,157 of the murders were coded as juvenile gang killings, the world's leading expert in juvenile gangs, Malcolm W. Klein (1995), has warned that police often overdo their coding of gang involvement. Thus, if a store owner gets shot in a robbery and the offender seemed to be a gang member, many departments count that incident as a gang murder rather than something more plain. Gang members may be highly criminal, but that does not mean that most of the crimes they commit are of, by, or for the gang itself. Members do most crime for themselves, as explained in a later section.

Michael Maxfield reminds us that we often do best to regard murder not as a crime but as an outcome (Maxfield, 1989; Block & Block, 1992). A murder is not much different from an ordinary fight, except that someone

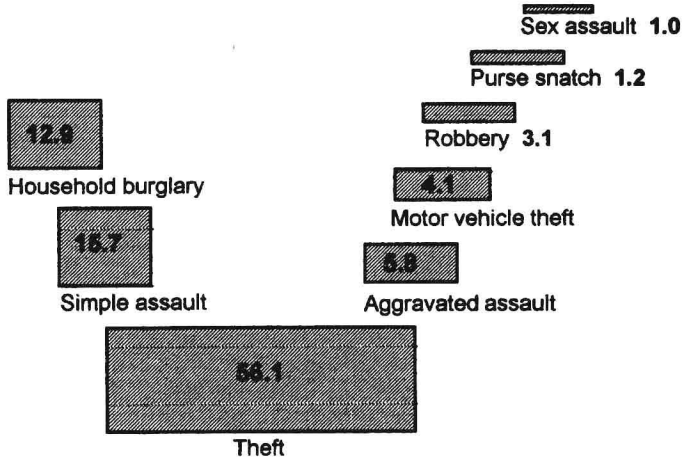

Figure 1.1 Types of Crime Victimization Reported
Source: *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics* (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995b, Table 3.1). Household and personal victimization are combined.

happened to die. Murder is in general the tragic result of a stupid little quarrel.[3] Indeed, murder has two central features: a lethal weapon too near and a hospital too far. Indeed, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) find many parallels between murder and simple fights. Some murderers, though, intend to kill from the outset (see Felson & Messner, 1996). Even so, murders usually are carried out for mundane reasons. In any case, they are swamped by the vast numbers of minor offenses.

The 1994 total of arrests for all reasons is 14.6 million. This number includes 1.2 million arrests for minor assaults, which outnumbered murders 55 to 1 (1995b, Table 4.1). Most of these arrests were for drunkenness, disorderly conduct, liquor violations, teens running away from home, and the like. Some were for drug violations, which are not included in the major crime index because police have great discretion in arrest decisions when they encounter drug use or sales, and in searching for these offenses. For each homicide reported in the major crime index, police arrest about 700 people for other offenses.

Victim surveys also make everyday crime look more ordinary and less ornery. The 1994 NCVS estimates about 40 million victimizations nationally, as shown in Figure 1.1. This dragon diagram shows that rapes and sexual assaults are greatly outnumbered by the more ordinary crimes. Thefts outnumber robberies about 19 to 1. Simple assaults outnumber aggravated assaults. Nine out of 10 aggravated assaults do not involve a firearm. Nor do victims usually act dramatically: Only 6 in 1,000 attacked the offender using

a weapon, and only 1.5% threatened the offender with a weapon (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995b, Table 3.17).

Self-report crime surveys also tell us that crime is not very dramatic. These surveys pick up a lot of illegal consumption and minor offenses, but little major crime. About four out of five high school seniors admit to underage alcohol consumption. About half of them admit drinking alcohol in the 30 days prior to the interview. Self-report data indicate that it is also common for adolescents to engage sometimes in shoplifting, theft, small consumption of marijuana, and other minor delinquency (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995b, Table 3.41). The more extreme behaviors are less common. About 6% admit ever having tried cocaine. Some 2% say they used cocaine in the past 30 days (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995b, Table 3.60).

Even police work is by and large mundane. Ordinary police activity includes these sorts of activities:

- Driving around a lot
- Asking people to quiet down
- Hearing complaints about barking dogs
- Filling out paperwork
- Meeting with other police officers
- Waiting to be called up in court

To quote the standard line, "Police work consists of hour upon hour of boredom, interrupted by moments of sheer terror." Some police have to wait years for these moments. Most seldom or never take their revolver out of its holster. Most are never shot at and never shoot at anybody else. In 1994, some 76 officers were killed. Of these incidents, 6 occurred in ambush situations and 16 during robberies in progress. Few of these incidents involved federal officers (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995b, Tables 3.158 and 3.159; FBI, 1995). This is not to deny that police have legitimate concerns about such incidents. They do not like a persistent threat, and close calls are no fun. They are justifiably upset to have a friend shot, or even an officer they do not know by name. Overall, however, their mortality rates are not high. Their more common problems are rude encounters with people who cannot keep their mouths shut.

We can see, then, that most offenses are not dramatic. Property crime swamps violent crime. Even violent crime is largely minor and leaves no lasting physical harm. Even when there is harm, it is usually self-containing and not classified as aggravated assault, much less homicide.

Meanwhile, the "cop shows" prefer dramatic plots, interesting offenses, stunning conflicts, thrilling car chases, and struggles to the death—anything but ordinary criminal acts. The TV screen is smaller than life. Something must jump out from it, or people will turn it off or go in the other room. My brother

Stephen Felson, an appeals lawyer and playwright, explains the three principles that screenwriters consider:

- Find a cohesive story.
- Present a single character's inner conflict.
- Show a time or place unlike all others.

Because television has to fight so hard for the attention of the audience in their own homes, this medium has to keep its story clear and dramatic. To achieve that, a screenwriter has no choice but to rearrange reality. The "real crime" story is usually not much of a story: Someone drinks too much and gets in a fight. There is little inner conflict: He saw, he took, he left. Not much is resolved: He won't give it back.

Newspapers offer more space than does television for covering ordinary criminal events. Historically, newspapers were able to go into greater detail and to present information that was less dramatic and more deep. Newspapers today, however, have to compete with the other media. An ordinary break-in, theft, or minor assault might make a small-town, community, or college paper, but the big-city papers are not interested. They gravitate instead to such stories as the Oklahoma City bombing, which killed and maimed hundreds, the killing of TV star Bill Cosby's son, the O. J. Simpson case, or hate crimes (see Jacobs & Potter, 1997). A lot of media attention surrounded the gang rape in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, a town I drive through daily to get to my office. It seems quite peaceful to me. By the time this book is in your hands, there will be other dramatic crimes to distract you from thinking clearly about crime.

I am reminded of my late dog, Lucia, a gentle border collie that kids would pet and smile at. Even people afraid of dogs usually were not afraid of Lucia. One month, the television news got hold of some stories of pit bull attacks on people, including the death of a child and serious injuries to some adults. Lucia was transformed immediately from neighborhood sweetheart into a terrifying criminal. People started screeching at me, "Is that a pit bull?" even though a border collie-spaniel mix looks nothing like a pit bull. This is a reminder of the sheer power of the press and the images it presents. That power challenges every student of crime to resist media images and stick to the facts.

The Cops-and-Courts Fallacy

It is easy to exaggerate the importance of the police, courts, and prisons as the key actors in crime production and prevention. I cannot deny the importance of the criminal justice system, which goes beyond the individuals processed by it (Gorecki, 1979). We must not forget, however, that crime itself happens first. The criminal justice system merely responds. The ***cops-and-***