

FIFTH EDITION

Crime

and

**Everyday
Life**

**Marcus Felson
Mary Eckert**



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PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

The purpose of this book is to help you play a role in reducing crime. To achieve that goal, you need to think clearly about crime and to discern very practical ways to act against it.

We start the book by helping you overcome popular fallacies about crime. Then we offer the fundamentals for thinking about crime in tangible terms. We continue with important examples and principles for crime reduction in real life. Throughout the book we focus on practical ideas and specific crime problems, and what to do about each.

Our book uses plain language and plain thinking. That means avoiding grand theorizing. Instead, we build the book on a middle-range theory—the *routine activity approach*. With the help of the “crime triangle,” that approach is easy to learn and remember. We also offer very practical methods for reducing crime, drawing from situational crime prevention.

Instead of studying “criminality” in a broad and general sense, we focus on criminal acts in a more specific way. This book emphasizes *modus operandi*—who, what, when, where, and how each specific type of crime occurs. We always ask, “What can be done *here and now* to prevent crime from happening?” The answer requires learning how the offender thinks and what the offender wants. Even violent offenders respond to practical changes in the settings where violent acts occur. In explaining criminal events and offender decisions, we offer you a clear perspective for thinking about crime and a practical guide for acting against it.

This is the fifth edition of a book that first appeared two decades ago. The book keeps changing. The current edition is filled with material never presented elsewhere. We offer additional details, refined ideas, and updated references. We add entirely new information on crime multipliers, and on

routine activity trajectories as youths develop. We elaborate greatly how juvenile delinquency occurs and how juvenile street gangs emerge. We offer new examples of situational crime prevention, and clarify principles on how to secure residential neighborhoods.

Despite these changes, this edition is shorter than the last. We worked very hard to streamline the writing, saying more in fewer words. We use the first-person singular through most of the book in order to personalize the message and strengthen communication. Our purpose is simple: ***We want you to remember what we teach long after you have graduated.*** Your long-term assignment is the most important one—to find practical ways to reduce crime.

Marcus Felson and Mary Eckert
Austin, Texas
August 2014

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marcus Felson is the originator of the routine activity approach and of *Crime and Everyday Life*. He has also authored *Crime and Nature*, and serves as professor at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. He has a B.A. from University of Chicago, an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, and has received the 2014 *Honoris Causa* from the Universidad Miguel Hernandez in Spain. Professor Felson has been given the Ronald Clarke Award by the Environmental Criminology and Crime Analysis group, and the Paul Tappan Award of the Western Society of Criminology. He has been a guest lecturer in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Denmark, El Salvador, England, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, and Switzerland. He has applied routine activity thinking to many topics, including theft, violence, child molestation, white-collar crime, and corruption.

Mary Eckert, his wife and life partner, has an M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from New York University. Her B.A. is from the College of New Rochelle. Dr. Eckert has devoted an active career to applied research in criminal justice and program evaluation. She served as research director of the New York City Criminal Justice Agency, Inc., where she authored many research reports and guided that agency's diverse research agenda, including work on pretrial risk assessment, court-case processing, and evaluating alternative-to-incarceration programs. She also worked for the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, with a special focus on statistical evaluation of vehicle stops to assist the New Jersey State Police in reducing the potential for racial profiling. Her work has been recognized by the New York Association of Pretrial Service Agencies and the State of New Jersey. She has been an adjunct professor at New York University, Montclair State University, and Texas State University.

*To Virginia Raphaelson Felson, who turned 100 years old
on October 12, 2014. Stubborn. Independent. Humorous.
Fast on her feet. College graduate. Ahead of her times.*



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EIGHT FALLACIES ABOUT CRIME

I don't believe in grand theory. Instead this book is built on a "middle range theory" that does not try to cover all human misbehavior on a very general level. Instead I offer you a practical understanding of crime and its prevention, organizing information so it will be easy to learn and remember.

That requires controlling our emotions. We are all angered when we learn of suffering crime victims, people wrongly convicted of crimes, or people who destroy their own lives or those of others. But we cannot let our natural emotions prevent us from examining all the facts and thinking clearly about crime.

I have developed the routine activity approach as a middle-range theory to help you study crime without getting lost. It is very practical for policy, too, for it treats the criminal act as a *tangible* event occurring within the physical world. The routine activity approach focuses on exactly how, when, and where crime occurs. In this book I hope to teach you something about crime you do not know already. First, I ask you, as the reader, to overcome these eight fallacies about crime:

1. Dramatic fallacy
2. Cops-and-courts fallacy
3. Not-me fallacy
4. Innocent-youth fallacy
5. Ingenuity fallacy
6. Organized-crime fallacy
7. Big gang fallacy
8. Agenda fallacy

These fallacies keep coming back again and again via the media and in unusual stories people tell that misrepresent what *normally* happens with crime. A Chicago home is burgled. The owner calls police, expecting them to show up with a crime-scene team and to go find the burglar. In reality, big-city police may not show up at all for an ordinary burglary! Or they might arrive after the burglar has been gone for some time. If the victim demands a full investigation, the officer might declare, “Lady, you’ve been watching too much television.”

On television big crimes have big investigations, but that does not represent real life. This book is about crime as it really happens. My challenge to you is not only to learn these fallacies, but to fortify yourself with them and withstand the daily bombardment of dramatic misinformation about crime.

THE DRAMATIC FALLACY

Note that I call my middle-range theory “the routine activity approach.” I work very hard to avoid being distracted by dramatic crimes. One semester a student came to me before the first class and asked, “Is this about serial murderers?” and I told her no—this class will emphasize ordinary thefts and fights. She dropped the course. Are you willing to learn about most crime as it really occurs?

Dramatic crimes get more attention because they make a better story. News media know that perfectly well. In fact, plenty of people make money talking about nonrepresentative crime. Included are 24-hour news cable channels that compete with the networks for viewers—CNN, Fox, C-SPAN, and MSNBC—plus many specialized cable channels, such as TNT, A&E, HBO, TBS, and Spike TV.

Even before cable news existed, television and other media would seek strange and violent incidents to keep their ratings high. The media are interested in romantic murders by jealous lovers, shootouts between felons and police officers, and extreme or clever types of murder—whether the events were true or made up for movies or fictional series.

Yet most criminal acts are not very clever or romantic. The *dramatic fallacy* states that the most publicized offenses are very distant from real life. The media are carried away by a *horror-distortion sequence*. They find a horror story and then entertain the public with it. They make money on it while