

# **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CRIME-DETERRENCE\***

by

Robert Shellow, Ph.D \*  
President, IMAR Corporation  
Bethesda, Maryland

**F**ear of criminal victimization often inspires the vain hope for absolute protection. And vendors of security systems and services often play to these hopes by implying that their proprietary product provides that cocoon of security.

**I**t therefore should not come as a surprise that proprietors of commercial establishments have become increasingly dubious about the effectiveness of heavily marketed security programs. In some cases skepticism may result in the choice to go without rather than try to sort out the claims and counterclaims. And to go without may very well expose themselves, their customers and employees to unnecessary risks of criminal victimization.

**W**e are now at the point where it is not only the obligation of the security professional, but in the best interests of the field, to clearly inform customers as to what can realistically be expected from our industry. One way to do this is by explaining how those technologies and services are intended to work in terms that make psychological sense.

**A**ll security strategies begin with some sort of theory -- a theory of psychological deterrence. In Psychology, a theory is an

explanation of why people behave as they do and suggests how human behavior can be influenced. Starting with a set of assumptions a theory strives to predict how people will act in a given set of circumstances. Much of "common-sense" is built upon implicit theories of human psychology.

**S**ecurity professionals employ theory when they classify criminal actors into types and design deterrent measures accordingly. Taking the time to lay out the psychological rationale behind suggested security measures can go a long way towards bringing a client's expectations in line with the protective limits of those measures.

## **THE CRIMINAL ACT IN A CHAIN OF EVENTS**

**T**he criminal act like all human behavior can be seen as the end-product of a psychological process. The actor is moved to action in response to a felt need for something -- cash, a sense of mastery or competence, sexual satisfaction, sadistic pleasure. A string of events is set in motion each moving the actor closer to the satisfaction of his or her need.

**G**uiding this chain of behaviors is a selective process that continually weighs prospects for gratification against the possibility of frustration and calamity. As risks are set against benefits one step leads to the next until the actor has reached a point of no return and is irreversibly committed to the final act in a criminal venture.

**B**ut until that point is reached there is always an opportunity to block unfolding

events and prevent the completion of the act. If intervention occurs before the actor reaches the point of no return, behavior may be deflected and a "situational deterrent" is achieved. The bottom-line purpose of the security industry is to supply such situational deterrents where and when they are needed.

Never before have security planners had such a wide range of tools for carrying out their mission. The devices available range from bio-identity access-control technologies, miniaturized surveillance, computer driven servo-mechanistic barriers to the low-tech standby measures of door-bolts, increased illumination, security-oriented space design and old fashioned manned-patrol. All serve to notify those who would rob, steal or assault that the risk they are about to take may be unacceptably high.

There is no question that security programs and applied technologies can and do work --- but they do not work all the time in every circumstance.

Career burglars report that their principal worry is the risk of being surprised in the act. They study their targets for signs that the premises they enter are unoccupied, and shy away from ones showing the telltale signs of habitation -- a light on, a radio playing, a barking dog, dirty dishes on the kitchen table. Much preferred is the quiet place with an empty driveway. They try to get in and get out fast without calling attention to their presence. A floodlit yard, a fence, doors with deadbolts block the way in. Every minute spent breaching security barriers, especially if it requires violent effort and

noise, increases the probability of discovery, capture, injury or worse.

Similarly, cash-oriented armed robbers look to avoid "hassles". They shy away from effective armed guards, try to preserve their anonymity by avoiding image-recording systems, prefer high cash-yield targets with few people to control and require an unimpeded escape route with quick access to cover. As one journeyman armed robber recently testified: " I look for easy and quick...no security of any sort, whether they got alarm system or not..you know, if they notify the police you gotta control the situation beforehand."

These, of course, are the competent, experienced and rational individuals who are serious about staying in their business and keeping it profitable. Unfortunately, what works as a deterrent with this group, does not necessarily work with others.

Whether a criminal act takes place depends on the nature of the opportunity, the effectiveness of deterrents, and the competency and perceptual state of the actor. It is helpful to think of those who would rob or commit burglary as operating out of a certain mental state at the moment of embarking on their criminal venture. Whether, in this mental state, they can perceive and judge risks in a rational manner will determine their response to standard security barriers.

Many security measures assume such a presence of mind. And it is reasonable to expect that the experienced, goal-directed "professional" robber or burglar would fit this description -- to a lesser extent the novice, amateur and those mildly impaired by alcohol or drugs.

## **DETERRENTS DESIGNED FOR THE "RATIONAL" CRIMINAL**

Clearly, the security barriers designed to discourage the rational criminal breakdown if the would-be actor, somehow, misperceives the risk these measures are designed to convey. As recently as one decade ago, most armed robbers were seen as fundamentally rational beings who responded to the elements of danger in their work in a cautious and expected manner. Not so today.

More and more victims report (and this is confirmed by examinations of jail and prison inmates) that criminal actions are increasingly driven by states of intoxication or pathology or a more lethal combination of both. Just how criminal acts are influenced, depends on the depth of intoxication, the drug involved and the nature of the psycho-pathology. It also depends on what effect the substance has on the individual. Alcohol can slur speech, undermine coordination and impair the senses and judgment. It can also give rise to rage states and may, as other drugs do, precipitate a psychotic state in those with "borderline" personalities. All too frequently, PCP or the cocaine derivative "crack" produce paranoid states where a victim's innocent gesture may be misinterpreted as a threat evoking a hair-trigger defense.

Deterrents designed with the cautious, goal-directed criminal in mind are not as effective with those whose rational faculties are diminished by their physiological state or psychological disorder.

Fortunately, the "rational" group is still in the majority.

Office buildings with electronic access control make unauthorized after-hours entry difficult. Office burglars must run the risk that they will be remembered if they piggy-back their entry onto someone with a card or key. By adding the additional technology of a security revolving door, piggy-backing virtually can be eliminated. With these measures in place, the burglar must use force or the threat of force against other people. The risks entailed in physically controlling another human being along with the likely loss of anonymity pose too great a risk for most persons intent only on the theft of property.

A parking lot with a fence around it and controlled entrance and exit points increases the risk of detection and encumbered escape compared to a wide open unfenced lot. Introduce checkout attendants, high-intensity lighting or an elevated surveillance booth and the prospects for committing a trouble-free crime are further reduced. In order to undertake a venture in that environment the prize to be gained must have considerable value or the motivation to act considerably powerful. That is to say, crime occurs when a person who is looking to satisfy a need for cash, property, excitement, sex or dominance encounters a low-risk opportunity to do so. Whether or not the situation triggers the criminal act depends on the strength of the need and the perceived difficulty in satisfying it.

## **LIMITS OF DETERRENT MEASURES**

**F**or those who misjudge the danger to their own safety or liberty or who are prepared to fight their way out, if need be, risks posed by standard security measures may appear acceptable. Security programs in most commercial and residential properties are not designed to deter this type of actor; though systems in place might very well serve to discourage or slow down an attempt.

**O**nly where the targets are particularly valuable and vulnerable are extraordinary security practices warranted. National defense, nuclear facilities, movement of large amounts of cash, heads of state, controversial government officials or foreign visitors, etc. all require elaborate security precautions rarely seen in everyday life.

**L**ittle that has to do with human behavior allows for one-hundred percent predictability. The psychology of situational deterrence is no exception. If the use of security measures is firmly grounded in a knowledge of criminal behavior patterns and shaped by a careful analysis of each site where they are to be applied, the risk of crime can be profoundly reduced. The majority of would-be predators will receive the message that they are about to enter a high-risk domain and that the odds are, by no means, in their favor.

**I**t is important to keep in mind that a few will not respond to that message. They may have missed the cues that should have warned them -- due to a physiological state of intoxication, fatigue

or hunger or perhaps, an internal preoccupation arising from some psychological disturbance. Or they may very well be aware of the danger, but have, in the past, been lucky enough to survive similar situations and tend to downgrade the risk. Experience with apprehended felons reveals a small subset that sees the risk but do nothing to avoid it out of a need to prove themselves fearless or out of a depressive need to be caught, injured or even killed.

## **DISCEPTIVE OVER EMPHASIS ON TECHNOLOGY**

**T**he good news is that the rational novice still dominates the criminal population. The bad news is that the violent, hard-to-deter fringe seems to be growing in numbers. Though it is essential to keep track of who and what methods defeat deterrent systems, it would be a mistake to devote disproportionate energies and resources to defending against the most unpredictable, reckless and irrational actors. Statistically, the principal threat is posed by the novice, journeyman and professional predators, who, fortunately, lack the skill to defeat many measures and have the good sense to recognize the fact.

**C**urrent crime-control policy relies too heavily on the promise of highly sophisticated "air-tight" technologies, which tend to be directed towards actors endowed with guiding commonsense. Until we more thoroughly understand the decision processes of a changing criminal generation we are likely to squander energy and riches on technologies with diminishing returns...

*\*Dr. Shellow Is an independent security consultant who applies Psychology in his security planning practice. His clients have included large and small companies, corporate flight departments and agencies of local, state and federal governments... He is a former President of the International Association of Professional Security Consultants (IAPSC) and is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA). Information on his background as well as other security experts may be found on the IAPSC homepage at <http://www.iapsc.org>.*