

The Human Side of Security

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What is the most important thing we have learned in the last 20 years of the study and practice of security

The need for “guardianship”. The most critical factor in crime causation, within a security frame, is the separation of guardians from targets. This simple and obvious – almost laughably obvious – point is still largely ignored in planning and design, and is often not adequately applied in security plans. Closely associated with this is the question of the capacity of guardians that are attached to targets.

The idea of guardianship was crystallized in 1979 in a seminal article by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson, titled “Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach”. The authors demonstrated how the flood of crime in the 1970s was less the result of moral decay or poverty than prosperity and the freer lifestyles that went with the post-War economic boom. There was much more to steal – more light-weight high-value easily transportable goods. People were out and about much more, exposing themselves to robbery and assault, and leaving their homes and workplaces vulnerable to burglary, vandalism and graffiti. In my view, Cohen and Felson (1979) underestimated the influence of relative inequality within prosperous welfare states with high crime rates. Nonetheless, they made the vital point: in rich egalitarian free societies, opportunity frequently “makes” the criminal. If crime opportunities arise out of the changed routine activities of people, then we need to develop routine precautions that close down those opportunities. However, this need not entail simply contracting in a security firm to install an alarm system or conduct security checks during the night. Guardianship is a much broader concept.

In his book “Crime and Everyday Life,” Marcus Felson (2002) contrasted modern societies that have high opportunity structures for crime with communities in the “Foxfire era”. “Foxfire” refers to an American television series about close rural communities where people knew and looked out for each other, young people were fully occupied, and there was little scope for people with criminal inclinations to act outside community surveillance. Such societies can, of course, be stifling; but there are important lessons from the Foxfire model, especially in terms of the closer integration of accommodation, leisure and work. I saw something of this in my own childhood, where the local school principal lived on the school grounds; the local pastor and his family lived on the church grounds; and the grocer lived at the back of the store. There were obvious benefits from these arrangements in natural surveillance, territoriality, deterrence, the capacity to challenge strangers, rapid response and

denial of benefits. However, one downside was reduced privacy, which is one reason such practices fell out of favour.

The obvious implication then is that guardianship needs to be restored – but in a more conscious, informed, proactive and organized manner. And what really needs to be emphasized is the human factor in guardianship. Technological substitutes have not lived up to the hype associated with them. We need more human guardians to deter offenders, to call for help and to intervene – subject to safety and capability considerations. In learning from the Foxfire era, one option is to reinvent forms of 24-hour occupation of premises. This can be done in various ways. Consider the enormous problem of theft, vandalism and arson against schools out-of-hours. There are no simple solutions, but strategies could include discounted accommodation on school grounds for teachers or janitors, who provide a guardianship role in return. In such cases, the location and structure of the accommodation should maximize natural surveillance. Similarly, problems of domestic trespass and burglaries can be addressed in part by creating larger housing complexes where residents can each pay a small amount of money to employ a permanent on-site caretaker with security responsibilities. This need not entail outright rejection of alarms, CCTV and other security devices, or even security patrol services; however, these are likely to work better in concert with a first-response presence on location. “Place management” is a good term to cover standard facilities management integrated with CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design), strategic use of security hardware and a human presence. Of course, reinstating people at the centre of security has its own risks. When human guardians substitute for the owners of property, the owners need means of reassurance that the guardians can be trusted!

What are the most important trends or innovations that are influencing, have influenced, or will influence the future of the study and practice of security?

The most important trend is a shift in consciousness away from reliance on police, human nature or luck for protection from crime; towards self-provision of crime prevention through the management of tailor-made, site-specific security. One source of evidence for this continuing shift in consciousness is the continuing growth of security services despite declining official crime rates in many places since the late 1990s. The repeated shocks of upward crime rates might no longer be with us, but lessons from that period have been learnt. Public police would always be spread too thin and would be unable to respond with sufficient speed to provide an adequate deterrent to crime. One effect is that police are then hamstrung even further by the need to put resources into painstaking investigations and prosecutions after crimes have been committed. This was not understood in the 1960s when the dream of police-based prevention still dominated the thinking about crime.

Furthermore, while big increases in crime may be behind us, crime rates remain at very high levels in many countries. The possibility of crime is a constant for most people, except those lucky few who live in close harmonious communities. The rest of us need to take measures to defend our person and property. If we manage a business or an institution, then we also need to ensure that we are protecting our workers and visitors, as well as the facilities and merchandise.

This shift in responsibility is exemplified in motor vehicle security. Early motor vehicles were fairly much free for the taking. It was the job of police to deter and detect car thieves. Manufacturers were slow to take responsibility for built-in security because of the additional costs. High volumes of motor vehicle theft obliged governments to step in to mandate built-in security, partly because it was unfair for taxpayers to pay for dealing with the problem. However, greater coordination between government and business is still required to remove or upgrade older vehicles in order to drive down motor vehicle theft even further, and to develop better systems for identifying and tracking stolen parts.

If security providers and governments can work more cooperatively to establish comprehensive mandated site-specific security systems that reduce volume crimes like motor vehicle theft and burglary, then public sector policing resources can be focused more appropriately on crimes that are more difficult to prevent through security measures, such as domestic violence, sexual assault and murder.

If you were setting the research agenda for the next 10 years, what would be your priority and why?

Again, my focus would be the human side of security, rather than the technical side. And my agenda would be summed up in one word: “Professionalization”. This picks up on the earlier point about how to trust substitute guardians. Readers will know the basic facts about the size and growth of the industry: the fact that in their everyday lives people are much more likely to encounter security providers (and security devices) than police. However, police training, accountability and remuneration are generally at much higher levels than those for security providers. Not that the security industry lacks sophistication. The big problem is the unevenness of standards. How can clients reliably pick the good from the bad without government intervention; and how can third parties be protected from incompetent, corrupt or violent security staff, if governments do not intervene in the market? Sure, we need to keep pushing ahead with research and development in security technology – in finding better identity screening devices or making computer systems impenetrable to raiders – but what about the quality of personnel who manage and operate these systems?

There are two key areas that I would like to see developed under the heading of professionalization. The first is to see security operatives involved in raising standards. The main players in professionalization have been security firms through their professional associations. We need more input from the personnel side of the industry. Take the huge problem of violence associated with crowd controllers. Where is the leadership from the smart responsible crowd controllers? We need to find out how to get these people involved, and we need to do research that uses their experience and knowledge to improve training and management.

The second area is closely related to the first and concerns the development of “smart co-regulation”. How can governments, professional associations and operatives work together to create the highest possible standards in security work? This requires regulatory agencies with a standing research capacity. And it can only be done by

establishing a research agenda that uses innovative methods to address the following types of questions:

1. Is much of the work in security inevitably boring, low paid and transient? Can anything be done to improve job satisfaction and retention among front-line security personnel?
2. What is the extent of harm associated with security work? What can be done to reduce conflict, injuries and deaths among security officers, offenders and the public as a result of security work?
3. Are current legislated training systems and testing standards adequate to ensure entry-level competencies for security providers? Should regulators also develop in-service professional development opportunities or even require on-the-job testing for maintenance of skills and knowledge – or is this overly interventionist?
4. Will higher skill levels and other entry controls adversely affect the cost of labour and ease of entry into security work? Will it undermine one of the chief attractions of security personnel – the relative cheapness of labour *vis-a-vis* police?
5. Should licensed security providers be given additional powers to better service the legitimate requests of clients? Is existing law adequate to both restrain security providers from infringements of civil liberties, while empowering them to provide protection and justice for clients?
6. Should enlarged powers be linked to a larger public service role for security providers? For example, should move-on powers adjacent to private property entail a responsibility to assist crime victims or injured persons outside premises?
7. Do on-going problems with security provider conduct require a higher level of regulatory control that includes such relatively intrusive measures as fingerprinting, drug and alcohol tests, psychological tests, surprise inspections and covert surveillance?
8. What is happening in the field in terms of compliance with legal and ethical standards? Are the occasional media scandals over security provider conduct simply unavoidable aberrations, or are they the “tip of the iceberg” of larger systemic problems that need to be addressed by tighter regulation?
9. Does effective security require greater regulation of general managers with security responsibilities? For example, should hotel and nightclub managers undertake compulsory courses in alcohol-related violence reduction and management of crowd controllers? Should managers of major facilities, such as airports and railways, be required to hold qualifications in security?
10. Are systems of complaints investigation and discipline adequate to remedy misconduct by security personnel and deter further misconduct? Are they reasonably fair and satisfactory to all parties involved?
11. Are licensed security providers receiving value for licence fees in terms of the standing of the industry and exclusion of unfair competition? Should licence fees be a form of tax that goes into general revenue or should fees match the cost of regulation?
12. How does the provision of security match the rhetoric of advertising by security firms? Are clients receiving value for money?

These are the types of questions that should be addressed by a dynamic regulator working closely with industry partners and other stakeholder groups. Findings should feed into policy development and refinement of regulatory strategies; and detailed reporting in annual reports that are publicly available will facilitate democratic accountability. Strategies like these should help make guardianship a much more informed, widespread and effective practice.

References

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