PART I

Theoretical foundations

Introduction: why situational prison control?

This book examines the control of problem behaviour in prison from a situational prevention perspective. This examination of situational prison control is prompted by the accumulating evidence of success for situational prevention initiatives in reducing criminal behaviour in a wide range of community settings (Clarke, 1992, 1997; Poyner, 1993). The situational perspective on crime is a relatively recent criminal justice paradigm (Clarke, 1992, 1997; Cornish and Clarke, 1986) that shifts the attention from the supposed criminal disposition of the offender to the features of the potential crime scene that might encourage or permit criminal behaviour. Situational techniques involve the systematic manipulation of aspects of the immediate environments of potential offenders in an attempt to block or inhibit criminal responses. In this book it is argued that the same principles of situational management used in crime prevention may be usefully applied to the prison setting to help reduce incidents of assault, rape, self-injury, drug use, escape, collective disorder and so forth.

The situational approach depends upon a dynamic view of human action, one that stresses the fundamental variability of behaviour according to immediate circumstances. According to the situational perspective, behaviour can only be understood in terms of an interaction between the characteristics of an actor and the characteristics of the environment in which an act is performed. People behave the way they do because of who they are and where they are. The relationship between situations and behaviour can be examined from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Some authors see situations primarily as 'opportunities' that potential offenders rationally exploit (Clarke, 1997; Cornish and Clarke, 1986). Thus, for example, an offender might succumb to the temptation to steal if they encounter goods

that have been left unattended. For these authors, situational prevention involves reducing crime opportunities by making criminal behaviour a less attractive option. Other perspectives propose a more intimate and deterministic relationship in which situations may influence individuals in ways that they may not even be aware and induce them to perform behaviour that they would otherwise not perform (Wortley, 1997, 1998). For example, psychological stress associated with overcrowding might produce heightened levels of aggression and precipitate a violent response. In these cases, prevention may involve a range of strategies that reduce the inclination to offend.

The book adopts an eclectic view of the person–situation relationship and an inclusive approach to situational prevention. Accordingly, a broad perspective is taken here of the situational nature of prison behaviour and of just what situational prison control entails. Notwithstanding the breadth of this interpretation, two general defining features of the situational approach can be identified. First, situational interventions are unashamedly ephemeral in their effect on potential offenders. No particular claim is made for situational strategies to maintain an impact on behaviour once an individual has left the situation in question. The efficacy of situational prevention is based on the situational dependence of behaviour. By this same logic, a potential offender who leaves a 'crime-proofed' situation without offending will continue to be susceptible to situational conditions when he/she enters a new criminogenic situation. That is, situational intervention is about creating safe situations rather than creating safe individuals. In this regard, the situational approach in prison is clearly distinguished from attempts to change prisoner behaviour through therapeutic means such as counselling, therapeutic communities, anger-management programmes, assertion training, and so forth. That is not to say that such programmes do not have a situational element, however. It may be argued, for example, that prison programmes contribute to reductions in prison misbehaviour through their time-structuring properties, irrespective of their content and therapeutic rationales.

Second, situational prevention is unashamedly reductionist in nature. As far as possible, a situational analysis focuses on the relationship between *particular* aspects of the environment and *particular* kinds of behaviour. In the case of situational prison control, this means identifying specific components of, or locations within, the prison environment that are problematic. For example, a situational analysis might seek to discover if disorder is more prevalent in a particular wing, or a particular part of a wing, and if so, what it is about this sub-environment that allows or encourages problems

to occur. Similarly, the situational approach also means breaking down the concept of prison disorder into separate kinds of behaviours. The causes of – and solutions to – assaults by prisoners against other prisoners may be very different from the causes of and solutions to assaults by prisoners against guards. Taking this even further, it is probable that there are a number of useful distinctions to be made among various kinds of assaults by prisoners against other prisoners. Assaults associated with theft and those motivated by revenge might require quite different methods of control. The desired endpoint of a situational analysis is an intervention that is tailor-made to meet the conditions of the particular problem under consideration. In this sense, situational prison control is a bottom-up model of prevention whereby overall reductions in problem behaviour are achieved through the accumulation of small successes.

Despite the empirical success of situational methods in community settings, it is likely that a situational approach to prison control will not be universally welcomed. Situational crime prevention remains a controversial – and, it must be said, largely peripheral – model in criminology. The perspective suffers from a serious image problem. In particular, there is a tendency to credit situational prevention as involving little more than a locks-and-bolts approach to controlling behaviour. In equating the situational approach with obtrusive, target-hardening techniques, critics have created a 'straw man' that they proceed to knock down on two counts. The first is theoretical. Situational prevention, it is said, ignores the criminal dispositions of the offender and so can never make more than a trivial impact on criminal behaviour. The second criticism is ideological in nature. Even if situational strategies are shown to work, it is argued, they represent a sinister move towards an Orwellian state, and *ought not* to be employed. Both of these general objections to situational crime prevention are also likely to be raised in the specific case of situational prison control.

The efficacy of situational prison control

Situational crime prevention is invariably attacked by its critics as being simplistic and misguided (Bottoms, 1990; Trasler, 1986). To the extent that situational approaches are shown to work, acknowledgement of that success is grudgingly given. The observation that crime might be controlled by locks and bolts is seen as both trivial and common sense. Moreover, at best such situational strategies are thought to offer no more than pragmatic, stop-gap solutions to crime problems. It is argued that situational prevention does not attack the root causes of crime, and

thus it leaves the criminal disposition of the offender intact. Blocking crime avenues at one location, the argument goes, will simply encourage potential offenders to seek out more conducive locations. Thus, the critics contend, situational prevention may displace crime but will not prevent it.

Approached from this position, a situational analysis of prison control might be considered not only superficial, but also somewhat redundant. After all, at first glance the prison would already appear to be the epitome of a regulated, target-hardened environment, purpose-built to maximise control over behaviour. Since Bentham's panopticon vision of 200 years ago, approaches to prison design and management have been driven largely by the desire to monitor and contain prisoner activities. Observation towers, guards, thick walls, bars, razor wire, electronic surveillance, and so forth are all situational elements specifically calculated to reduce opportunities for prisoners to misbehave. In fact, situational prevention has been disparagingly equated with prison-like conditions (Weiss, 1987: 121). What, then, it might be asked, can prison administrators learn from the situational approach?

But traditional approaches to prison security and control are narrow and often crude applications of situational principles. For one thing, despite the appearance of pervasive control, most prisons offer prisoners ample opportunities to misbehave and the prevention and detection of rule violation is at best haphazard. The very fact that prisons have problems with assault and other forms of disorder is evidence of this. Moreover, the thinking behind traditional methods of control is not really situational at all. Sole reliance on coercive and oppressive control methods derives from a conviction that prisoners are inherently unpredictable and dangerous, and must therefore be constrained at all times. That is, traditional approaches to prison control have evolved from static, dispositional models of prisoner behaviour. According to this view, prison regimes might succeed in physically suppressing and containing trouble, but in the final analysis the causes of prison misbehaviour are to be found in the antisocial tendencies of prisoners.

The interaction between situations and behaviour is more subtle and complex than prevention approaches exclusively based on physical containment immediately suggest. Situations affect behaviour in fundamental ways. The problem in promoting this broader picture of situational prevention, however, is that it is based on a counterintuitive premise. Human beings have an entrenched cognitive bias to see individuals as the authors of their own behaviour. Even when someone's actions are unambiguously forced upon them by circumstances beyond their control, observers typically

underestimate the role of these outside pressures and construct causal explanations that assume personal agency on the part of the actor (Jones, 1979; Ross, 1977). Fundamental attributional error, as this propensity is called, is accompanied by an exaggerated belief in the stability of the personal characteristics of others and overconfidence that their behaviour is therefore relatively constant from one situation to the next. No doubt the tendency to categorise others in terms of predictable dispositions is an efficient information processing strategy that helps people to deal with the complexity of the world around them. However, this ingrained faith in personal control over behaviour makes the efficacy of situational prevention difficult for people to accept.

The person-centred bias is evident not only in naive accounts of other people's actions, but also in the traditional way psychologists and psychiatrists have sought to explain behaviour. Classic personality and psychodynamic theories locate the determinants of behaviour firmly within the individual. These theories stress the role of internal constructs such as traits, attitudes, needs and drives. Within this framework, personality inventories, projective tests and clinical interviews can be employed to reveal the underlying psychological mechanisms that govern behaviour. Following diagnosis of the problem, the task of modifying misbehaviour requires effecting changes to the individual's basic personality structures.

When applied to the problem of prison control, this approach has meant that a great deal of the research effort has gone into constructing personality profiles of those prisoners considered most likely to be violent, to do themselves injury or to escape. Prevention of particular problem behaviours in prison has been seen in terms of more effective classification systems that identify those prisoners who require special attention. These studies, however, have yielded modest returns. At best, prediction models built upon prisoner characteristics are able to account for 30 per cent of the variance (Carbonell *et al.*, 1985). The large number of false positives these models typically produce (i.e. unfulfilled predictions that certain prisoners will misbehave) means that management decisions tend to be conservative. Many more prisoners than necessary are subjected to special precautionary conditions.

In his seminal book, *Personality and Assessment*, Mischel (1968: 281–301) challenged the dominant view of personality as a cross-situationally consistent and longitudinally enduring predisposition. In fact, Mischel argued, behaviour is highly situationally specific. A person who may be described by others as aggressive does not behave uniformly in an aggressive manner. Rather, aggression is displayed occasionally and only when certain

favourable conditions are met. Similarly, most people, if they think for a moment about their own behaviour, will recognise that there is a great deal of variability in the way that they act. They realise that they are neither always confident nor timid, polite nor rude, or honest nor dishonest. Rather, they are aware that, as they move from one situation to the next, how they behave depends upon where they are and whom they are with. They will admit, too, that at times they have done things that they regard as completely out of character and will explain these aberrations as having been caused by particular circumstances at the time. However, it is more difficult for people to see the same variability in others. The behaviour of others often appears more stable because people tend to encounter their friends and associates in similar contexts from one occasion to the next. That is, often what is interpreted as dispositional stability is in reality situational stability.

Mischel was not the first to highlight the crucial role of situations in behaviour, but his cogent articulation of the issue had a major impact on the theoretical debate about the location of the determinants of behaviour. Most modern psychological theories now acknowledge to a greater or lesser extent the importance of the person–situation interaction. Thus, far from being simplistic and atheoretical, the situational perspective reflects contemporary theorising about the fundamental nature of human behaviour. Situational prevention does not ignore the 'root cause' of behaviour; situations *are* a 'root cause' of behaviour.

In fact, there ought to be less resistance to situational thinking in the prison context than has been the case in the crime prevention field. It can be argued that a quasi-situational perspective on prison behaviour predates by forty years the development of situational crime prevention. The classic micro-sociological descriptions of prison life presented by Sykes (1958), Goffman (1961) and others pioneered the idea in criminology that behaviour is profoundly shaped by current circumstances and events. Prison was seen as a generator of – not just location for – aberrant behaviour. Violent and otherwise pathological behaviour of prison inmates was not, these theorists contended, the result of 'imported' deviance, that is, the simple and inevitable consequence of the concentration of so many (supposed) antisocial individuals in one place. Rather, prisoner behaviour, regarded as deviant by the standards of the general community, was a form of adaptation to the social and psychological deprivations of the institutional prison regime – a normal reaction to an abnormal environment. Misbehaviour in prison, then, could be understood as a feature of a defensive and oppositional prisoner subculture produced by the 'pains of imprisonment'.

The deprivation model of prison behaviour has been a major theoretical force behind the argument that the key to changing prison behaviour lies in changing the prison itself. However, despite the undoubted seminal role of the deprivation model in orienting researchers towards broad environmental solutions to prison problems, fully-fledged situational analyses of prison misbehaviour are rare. The theoretical rationales underpinning the deprivation model have remained largely at the socio-cultural level. Prisoner deviance is seen as a sociological phenomenon stemming ultimately from the social organisation inherent in the total institution. Addressing the problems of imprisonment is seen to require at the very least an institution-wide approach and, more likely, changes to the system as a whole. This global, systemic view of prisoner deviance does not readily lend itself to the more fine-grained, individual-level analysis that situational prevention usually entails and that is the primary focus of this book. The deprivation model provides a starting-point for a situational analysis of prisoner behaviour, but further theoretical work is required to develop a true situational model of prison control.

The propriety of situational prison control

Some of the fiercest attacks on situational prevention have been made not because it is assumed that situational techniques will not work, but rather because it is feared that they might. These criticisms question the social and ethical desirability of situational methods. Situational crime prevention has been cited as just another example of the inexorable trend towards increased, pervasive social control (Bottoms, 1990; Garland, 1996; Weiss, 1987). Critics have painted an apocalyptic vision of the target-hardened society constrained and divided by locks, bars, electronic alarms, surveillance cameras and security guards. Any benefits in reduced crime are judged to be not worth the social and human costs involved.

Few critics of situational prevention have commented specifically on the desirability of applying situational measures to prison. (The few exceptions include Bottoms *et al.,* 1995 and Sparks *et al.,* 1996.) However, in general terms social scientists have shown a deep suspicion of any suggestions to increase controls on prisoners and, certainly, few academic commentators would support moves to make prisons even more fortress-like in the way outlined above. On the contrary, the weight of learned opinion is that prisons need to become less oppressive and pay greater attention to prisoners' rights (Bottoms *et al.*, 1995; Clear, 1994; Levinson, 1982; Sparks *et al.*, 1996).

Situational prison control need not be incompatible with these goals. Like the criticism of the efficacy of situational prevention, the attacks on the propriety of situational methods typically centre on target-hardening aspects of the model. But, as has been argued, situational prevention is more than target hardening. The charge that situational prevention will lead to a fortress society in which fearful and distrustful citizens barricade themselves against potential victimisation has been vigorously defended (Clarke, 1997: 37–9; Felson and Clarke, 1997). Many situational interventions employed in the community to restrict criminal activities are unobtrusive and, rather than create social division, actually make people feel safer. Better street lighting is a simple example (Painter and Farrington, 1997). Some interventions do not involve trying to block behaviour at all but, rather, attempt to eliminate environmental conditions that invite a criminal response in the first place. These interventions often involve making environments more pleasant and liveable. Thus, night-club violence may be effectively reduced by modifying the situational factors – excessive alcohol consumption, lack of food availability, lack of entertainment, crowding and so forth – that encourage violent responses (Homel *et al.*, 1997).

Following this argument, when situational principles are applied systematically in prison there is the potential to design a *less* fortress-like environment. Creative and targeted situational interventions may allow a more general easing in restrictions. Improved perimeter security, for example, may reduce the need for restrictive internal controls. Modern technology, often regarded as emblematic of the dehumanising nature of the situational approach, can reduce the reliance on traditional heavy architecture and hard physical barriers (Atlas and Dunham, 1990: 57). Personal staff alarms can permit greater prisoner–staff interaction, the thick, high walls of the traditional prison can be replaced with less obtrusive electronic perimeter systems, viewing windows made from new plastics can replace metal bars and grills, and so on. Further, to the extent that prison disorder is caused by pressures in the prison environment, prison reform and prison control may actually go hand in hand. Put simply, frustrated and angry prisoners are difficult to control and it is in the interests of prison administrators to ensure the needs of prisoners are met.

An added dimension in prison, of course, is the unequal distribution of power. Prisoners are in a vulnerable position and particular care does need to be taken to ensure that abuses do not occur in the name of control. Felson and Clarke (1997) argue that the ethical test for a situational intervention is whether it satisfies liberal-democratic principles of fairness, equity and respect for individual rights. Historically, the treatment of prisoners has

frequently violated these standards. However, there is no reason to suppose that situational control has inherent difficulties passing these tests. Any form of treatment can be misused and situational approaches are no more susceptible to abuse than any other control methods. They may even be less susceptible. Attempts to change prisoners' values and behaviours through therapeutic interventions, for example, are arguably more paternalistic, intrusive and disregarding of individual rights than are situational methods of control. Similarly, control methods that depend upon the identification of dangerous or at-risk prisoners are more likely to unfairly discriminate against particular groups than are environmental changes that are applied uniformly across the institution. Maintaining ethical standards of treatment for prisoners is an important matter that requires ongoing attention, but it is not an issue specifically linked with the use of situational control methods.

All that said, it is undoubtedly true that situational control in prison might be coercive and force prisoners to do things that they would prefer not to do. This, at the end of the day, is the inescapable nature of imprisonment. Even the most liberal prison regimes restrict prisoners in fundamental ways (such as not allowing them leave when they please). Some level of coercion is an obvious political reality. Society expects to have a prison system in which prisoners are under control. Moreover, a well-controlled institution is in the best interests of prisoners. Perhaps the most persuasive defence of situational prison control is that those who suffer most from a lack of effective control in prison are prisoners themselves. There is a tradition among many social scientists to write about disorder and control in prison as a battle between oppressed prisoners and an authoritarian regime. Sykes and Goffman fall into this category to varying degrees. The fact is that the greatest risk faced by a prisoner is victimisation from other prisoners. It is now argued by many commentators that one of the unintended consequences of the development of more liberal regimes in the 1970s and 1980s was a power shift from staff to prisoner elites and an accompanying increase in prison violence and disorder (Carroll, 1982; DiIulio, 1987; Ekland-Olson, 1986; Engel and Rothman, 1984; Unseem and Kimball, 1989). On the question of ethics, a fundamental right of prisoners is surely the right to live in a safe and certain environment.

Conclusions and scope of the book

Prisons are enclosed, all-encompassing environments that exert powerful influences on the day-to-day behaviours of prisoners. Too often the influence of the prison environment has been to produce violent and unproductive