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978-1-107-02952-1 - Place Matters: Criminology for the Twenty-first Century

David Weisburd, John E. Eck, Anthony A. Braga, Cody W. Telep, Breanne Cave, Kate Bowers, Gerben Bruinsma, Charlotte Gill, Elizabeth R. Groff, Julie Hibdon, Joshua C. Hinkle, Shane D. Johnson, Brian Lawton, Cynthia Lum, Jerry H. Ratcliffe, George Rengert, Travis Taniguchi and Sue-Ming Yang

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Place Matters

Over the last two decades there has been increased interest in the distribution of crime and other antisocial behaviors at lower levels of geography. The focus on microgeography and its contribution to the understanding and prevention of crime has been called the “criminology of place.” It pushes scholars to examine small geographic areas within cities, often as small as addresses or street segments, for their contribution to crime. The authors describe what is known about crime and place, providing the most up-to-date and comprehensive review available. *Place Matters* shows that the study of the criminology of place should be a central focus of criminology in the twenty-first century. It creates a tremendous opportunity for advancing our understanding of crime, and for addressing it. The book brings the collective knowledge of eighteen top scholars to provide a comprehensive understanding of crime at place.

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Place Matters
Criminology for the Twenty-first Century

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We have titled this book *Place Matters: Criminology for the Twenty-First Century*. Our choice of this title was not coincidental. It reflects a view of all of the authors regarding what should be important in criminology and crime prevention. As we note in Chapter 1, the approach we offer is not a dominant one in traditional criminology. Indeed, it represents in many ways a radical departure from the mainstream of criminological thinking. But our purpose in developing this work was not to divorce ourselves from the mainstream of criminology, but rather to argue that our interests should become a central part of criminological interests. We make that case throughout the book in terms of what the empirical evidence says about basic and applied research in this area.

In his presidential address to the American Society of Criminology in 2003, John Laub (2004) observed that criminology as a discipline could be viewed as having a developmental life course. Laub and Sampson (2003) offered a radical critique of traditional criminological understandings of criminal careers when they argued that the life courses of criminals were affected not just in the early formative stages of their lives, but also by the experiences they would have as adults. The life-course perspective recognized that people would change many times in their lives, and an immutable idea of inevitable criminal behavior based on experiences in youth was just wrong. Laub (2004) argued that, much like the offenders that he and Robert Sampson studied in identifying life-course criminology (Laub and Sampson 2003), criminology also could be seen as having a life course that had important turning points that fundamentally influenced the directions that the field would take.

In contrast to continuity in the intellectual trajectory of the discipline, a turning point refers to a radical new way of viewing criminology, which allows us to stake out new territory and to make significant new discoveries about crime and criminality. A turning point in a discipline can be seen as a recognition that new ideas develop that are pursued, and often lead to important

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insights. The successful development of criminology is dependent on being open to new ways of understanding crime. Laub (2004) identifies a number of turning points that have enriched criminological understandings.

Our argument in this book is that it is time for criminology to take another turn in direction. The change is embedded not in a particular theory, but in the units of analysis that criminologists focus upon. The first major turning point that Laub (2004) identified in American criminology was also concerned with units of analysis. The fundamental changes in our understanding of the crime problem that came from the Chicago School of Sociology were linked strongly to its insights about the importance of communities in understanding crime (e.g., see Shaw and McKay 1942). This geographic criminology, as we describe in Chapter 1, had an important influence on criminology. But it is very different from the “places” that we focus upon in this book. Our interest is in “micro-geographic” units, specific places where crime is concentrated. We spend a good deal of time in the chapters of our book defining these units and why they are so important to understanding and controlling crime. We think that a turning point in criminology that would focus in on such places is important for criminology in the twenty-first century.

As we note later, study of crime at microgeographic units of analysis began to interest criminologists in the late 1980s (Evans and Herbert 1989; Felson 1987; Pierce et al. 1988; Sherman et al. 1989; Weisburd and Green 1994; Weisburd et al. 1992). The roots of such approaches can be found in the efforts of scholars to identify the relationship between specific aspects of urban design (Jeffery 1971) or urban architecture (Newman 1972) and crime, but broadened to take into account a much larger set of characteristics of physical space and criminal opportunity (e.g., Brantingham and Brantingham 1975; 1977; 1981; Duffala 1976; Hunter 1988; LeBeau 1987; Mayhew et al. 1976; Rengert 1980; 1981; Stoks 1981). These studies drew important distinctions between the site in question and the larger geographical area (such as the neighborhood, community, police beat, or city) that surrounds it. In a 1989 article in *Criminology*, Lawrence Sherman, Patrick Gartin, and Michael Buerger (1989) coined the term “criminology of place” to describe this new area of study. The criminology of place (see also Weisburd et al. 2012) or “crime and place” (see Eck and Weisburd 1995) pushes us to examine very small geographic areas within cities, often as small as addresses or street segments (both sides of a street from intersection to intersection), for their contribution to the crime problem. It pushes us to examine and understand why crime occurs at specific places, rather than focusing our interests on the more traditional criminological concern of why specific types of people commit crime.

In our book we will argue that the study of crime at place offers important new insights about the crime problem and what we can do about it. Indeed, our thesis will be that the potential to understand and control crime that this approach offers represents an important opportunity for criminology and crime prevention. Put simply, a turning point is warranted because of the strong

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evidence we already have at this early stage of research in this area. But another reason for a turning point in the developmental career of criminology is drawn from the present state of criminological knowledge. Continuing with business as usual will likely not add dramatically to our generation of important insights for theory or policy. This point was made strongly by Frank Cullen in his 2010 Sutherland Address to the American Society of Criminology. He argued there:

For over a half century, criminology has been dominated by a paradigm – adolescence-limited criminology (ALC) – that has privileged the use of self-report surveys of adolescents to test sociological theories of criminal behavior and has embraced the view that “nothing works” to control crime. Although ALC has created knowledge, opposed injustice, and advanced scholars’ careers, it has outlived its utility. The time has come for criminologists to choose a different future. Cullen 2011, 287

Cullen (2011) suggested areas that provided promise for advancing criminology and crime prevention. These included life-course criminology (e.g., see Laub and Sampson 2003), biological social theory (Moffitt 1993), criminal decision making (e.g., see Nagin and Pogarsky 2001), and the study of crime events (e.g., see Clarke 1980). The criminology of place suggests a radical departure from current interests, and that is why we argue for a turning point in the life course of criminology. Its concern is with the units of analysis of criminological study rather than with the measurement of crime or the theory used to understand crime. In this sense, each of the innovations that Cullen describes can be examined or applied in the context of micro-crime places. In this context, the criminology of place offers a promising new direction for criminology, which has tremendous possibilities for advancing criminology as a basic and policy science.

In Chapter 1 we provide evidence suggesting that the criminology of place has received little focus in criminology. This fact presents a particular opportunity for young scholars looking to advance criminology and their careers. In contrast to the traditional concerns that Cullen (2011) critiques, which have been the focus of thousands of papers and studies, crime and place has occupied a marginal location in empirical research in criminology. There is much room to make new discoveries and to examine new problems. This is a field about which we know little and the landscape of knowledge is wide open to young scholars for exploration.

And these questions are not only about understanding crime, they are also about doing something about crime. One of Cullen’s main objections to continuity in the life course of criminology is that it has little promise for helping us to do something about crime problems. He argues that “[w]e have contributed valuable work to knowledge destruction – showing what does not work – but have not done much to show what does work through knowledge construction” (Cullen 2011, 318). In contrast, the criminology of place from the start has focused on what we can do about the crime problem. In Chapter 6 we

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provide strong evidence of effectiveness for place-based interventions. This evidence has been developed when the focus of criminologists and crime prevention experts has ordinarily been on other concerns. If the turning point we are suggesting were to develop, it would seem that a host of new and effective interventions could be developed.

It is time for another turning point in the life course of criminology. That is the underlying lesson of our work, which summarizes what is known about the study of crime at place. It is time for criminologists to focus their attention on place. This will enrich criminology and crime prevention. Place matters! And indeed it should be a key focus of criminology in the twenty-first century.

It is important in introducing the book, that I note something about the processes that led to its development. This book evolved out of the activities of the Crime and Place Working Group (CPWG), which is housed in the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (CEBCP) at George Mason University. Cynthia Lum and I formed the Working Group when the CEBCP was founded in 2008 to advance study of crime at microunits of geography. We thought at the time that there was no organized locus for scholars in this area, and that the conduct of this work and its advancement would benefit much if we could bring key scholars together on a regular basis. So began the group and its meetings, which have led not only to greater interaction among scholars working in this area but also the production of specific products and activities.

The initial activities of the group were supported by a start-up fund granted to me by the former Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at George Mason, Professor Jack Censer. Initially the CPWG was seen as a vehicle for creating a sense of shared identity among a diverse group of scholars who were writing about crime at place. The initial meetings at GMU helped to reinforce the sense among participants that there was a community of crime and place scholars, in part because the group included a range of scholars at different points in their careers, from graduate students to senior scholars.

From the first meeting it was decided that the CPWG would focus on activities that helped raise the visibility of crime and place studies among criminologists, and that offered opportunities for younger scholars to do work in this area. The CPWG members also agreed that bringing the criminology of place into the mainstream of criminology was a key goal of the group's activities. With that in mind the group sponsored (and continues to sponsor) sessions at the American Society of Criminology's annual meetings and developed special issues in elite criminology journals, including the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* and the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*. These special issues not only increased the visibility of crime and place research, but they also provided opportunities for young crime and place scholars to publish in high-prestige journals in the field.

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The idea for a book that summarized knowledge about crime at microunits of geography developed out of discussions of the importance of having a text that would place the study of crime at place in the context of broader criminological questions. Our model for developing the work was the National Academy of Sciences (NAS)/National Research Council (NRC) reviews of evidence that were developed by the NRC Committee on Law and Justice. As a member of the committee, I suggested that NAS do a summary of knowledge in this area, but there was not sufficient interest to develop a panel. That led me to look to the CPWG to carry out a similar effort. The CPWG acted as the panel, and indeed it represented a broad array of interests and experience in this area, as well as including many of the most important crime and place scholars. We set out to review the field, dividing up the work on individual chapters among members of the CPWG. Importantly, the overall outline of the book was developed in meetings of the group.

We began by outlining what needed to be included, and then divided up into small working groups that would draft the initial chapters. We then reviewed those drafts in a meeting at GMU, and the small working groups revised the drafts. We had four meetings overall, including one in San Diego, California, sponsored in part through efforts by Jim Bueermann (now President of the Police Foundation), who was very supportive of our work and gave us important advice at the outset. We had a final meeting to discuss the revised drafts, and at that point John Eck, Anthony Braga, and I worked on drafting introductory and concluding chapters, as well as redrafting chapters so the manuscript would have a single overall voice. We decided not to develop the volume as an edited book, because all of the CPWG members who participated in writing (a few were not able to devote time to this project) participated in the overall organization and review of the manuscript. We wanted this to be a book about crime at place, not a collection of essays on the topic.

With that in mind, all of the writers are listed as authors on the volume. Weisburd, Eck, and Braga are listed first because of their job as editors. Cody Telep also played a key role in consolidating the manuscript, and is listed next. Finally, Breanne Cave, who was a graduate student when we were completing the manuscript, played a key role in developing the final draft and creating consistency across the chapters. Breanne is listed for this reason as the next author. The rest of the CPWG writers follow in the listing in alphabetical order. At the outset of each chapter (except the introduction and conclusions) a footnote lists the CPWG members who led writing of that chapter. I want to thank at the outset Matt Nelson and Alese Wooditch, who helped us with editing of the chapters when the drafts were completed by authors. Their careful work helped a good deal in finishing the work.

When we began this effort it was not clear that we could be successful. But the result follows closely what we set out to do at the outset. This volume provides the most comprehensive synthesis of knowledge about crime at place

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that is presently available. It is a collective effort in the best sense in that a work this comprehensive could not have been put together by just a few authors. The work represents the broad array of skills, knowledge, and experience of the CPWG. We think that when you are finished reading this work you will agree that a turning point in the developmental career of criminology is warranted.

David Weisburd
Fairfax and Jerusalem, 2015