

# The geography of crime in the Swedish capital<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Filip, my twelve year son, surprised me these days with the following question:

–“Why is it important to know where crime happens?”

–“...because this kind of information helps the police to catch the bad guys” I replied. What I actually meant to say was that when a crime occurs, it happens at a certain location. As the event takes place, the target (or victim) and offender must be in exactly the same place at the same time. Thus, the intersection of these elements exemplifies why *place* plays a vital role in understanding why crime occurs. The police have long recognized the inherent geographical component of crime by initially marking maps with pins and using them as a basis for crime prevention.

– “Having knowledge about location of crimes and when they happen, helps society to *prevent* them”.

This should perhaps be a better answer to his question as most places in the city have no crime and most crime is highly concentrated in and around a relatively small number of places. If these patterns are identified, crime can better be prevented. For instance, police patrols can be sent to certain places at critical times, resulting in better targeting and use of society’s resources.

In this article, I review examples mostly from my own research on how place (the city environment and its demographic and socio-economic contexts) is an important element for crime and crime prevention. Stockholm is used as the study area.

Stockholm is regarded as a dynamic place – a place of social interactions where sometimes, and only sometimes (and in some places), crime happens.

## 2. The city as a crime place around the clock

Crime tends to be concentrated in cities, but not in a homogenous way. It has been long recognised that some places are more risky than others. City centres, areas with mixed land use, and transport nodes, are often more criminogenic places than residential areas. For instance, in Stockholm in early 1980s, offences data showed a rather strong concentration in the inner city for some but not all offences. The criminologist Per Olof Wikström indicated that vandalism in public areas and theft of and from cars showed a marked concentration in the inner city, or at least in certain parts of the inner city (Figure 1a). Although residential burglaries tended to have the highest rates in some outer city wards, half of all residential

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<sup>1</sup> In: *Sociala risk och social oro*, Länsstyrelsen Stockholm, 2014.

burglaries still happened in inner-city wards. Since the early 1980's Stockholm has become a more international and a more segregated city and new patterns of mobility have been imposed with the arrival of, for instance, out of town retailing. Renewal programs have stimulated population turnovers and there are indications of an accentuated gentrification process in the inner city areas. All these changes are expected to impact on offence patterns.

The geographer Vania Ceccato and colleagues took the challenge to review the geography of crime in Stockholm in the late 1990s (Figure 1b). They found that whilst there had been no dramatic changes in the geographies of these offences in Stockholm, some shifts both in terms of geographical patterns and in their association with underlying socio-economic conditions were noticed. Vandalism and theft of and from cars were offences that took place mostly in the inner city where administrative, commercial and cultural activities are still located. Maps showed concentrations around the Central Business District (CBD), and other small areas in the South and West of Stockholm. Although these offences still have a concentrated geography, they became more scattered than in the 1980's. Outside the inner city, areas with traditional social problems are the main targets but new areas have also emerged as being of high risk for these types of offences. High risks of theft of and from cars were seen in more affluent areas perhaps because of declining levels of guardianship or because offenders were themselves more mobile.

Ten years later, Ceccato and Uittenbogaard found similar geography for property crimes (including theft of and from cars). What was striking at this time was that the geography of crime varied over space and time (Figure 1c). This is because the risk of crime in a place varies as a function of the place's location, the characteristics of its built environment and most importantly, the human activities that the place generates at a particular time (the social-demographic content) — all this together — determines different opportunities for crime.

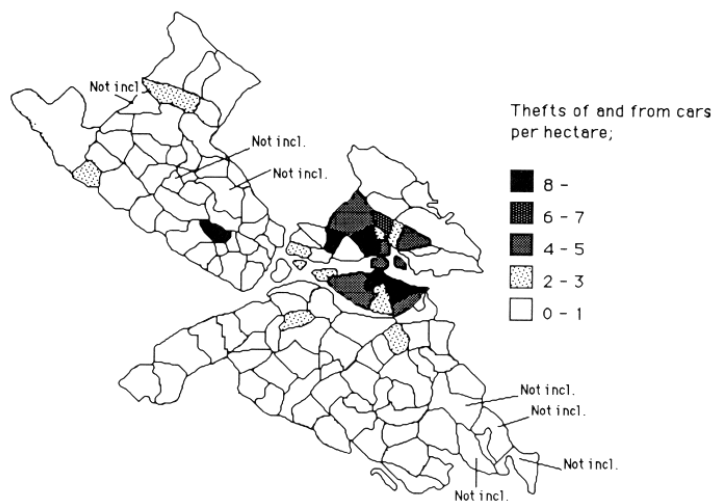


Figure 1a. Clusters of thefts of and from cars per hectare in Stockholm 1982.

Source: Wikström (1991), p.206.

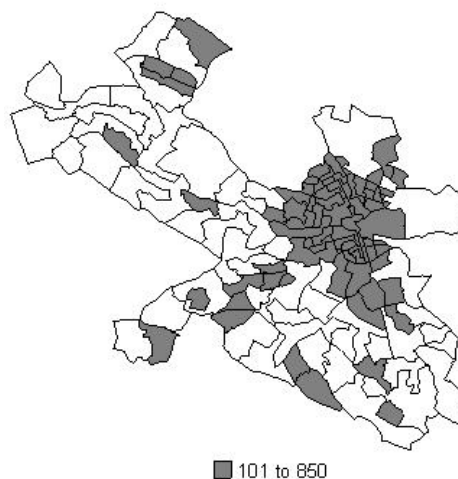


Figure 1b. Clusters of theft of and from cars – areas with higher risk–Stockholm 1998.

Source: Ceccato et al. (2002), p. 40.



Figure 1c. Clusters of property crimes at 6am (Lowest frequency) and 5pm (Peak), Stockholm 2006-2009. Source: Uittenbogaard and Ceccato (2012), p. 152.

### 3. Crime along the way

Crimes cannot be properly explained, nor effectively prevented, without a deep understanding of the environments in which they occur. Nowhere is this more apparent than in urban public transport (Smith and Clarke 2000:169) as they concentrate crime.

Using Stockholm as study area, Ceccato and colleagues showed that the share of cells with bus stop(s) has almost four times greater pick pocketing than cells with no bus stop(s), namely 8.3% and 2.2%, respectively. The same applies to underground stations. In Stockholm's underground system but also in other metro systems in the USA and in the UK, the design and environmental characteristics of underground stations influence the rates of crime and public disorder.

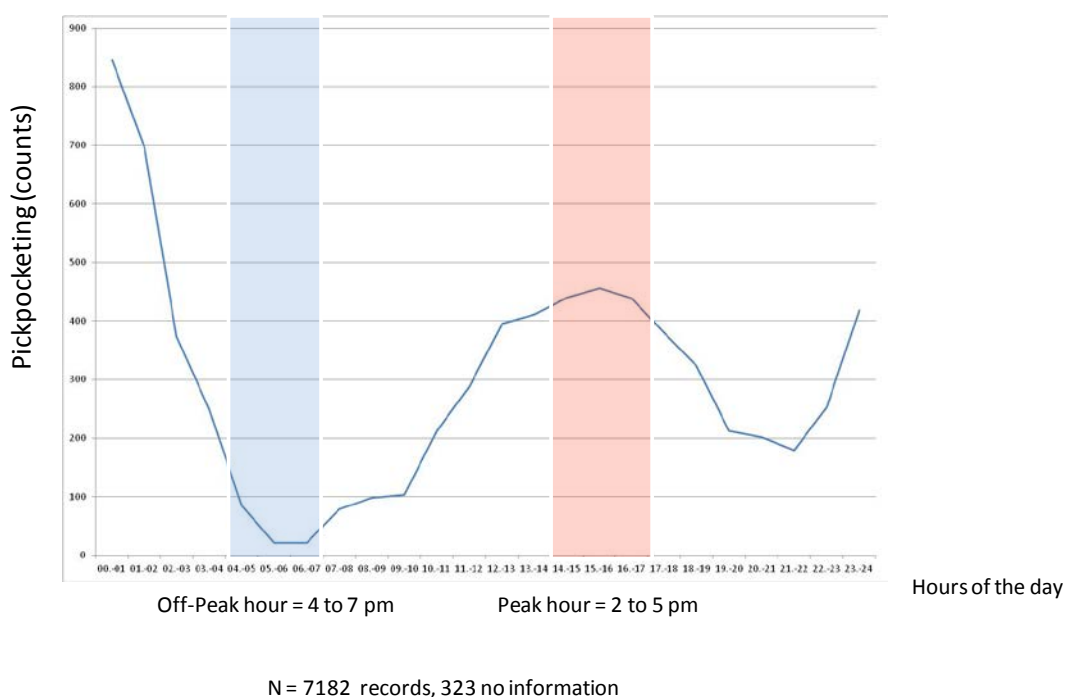


Figure 2 – Peak hour and off peak hours for pick pocketing, Stockholm, 2008.

In Stockholm, crime and events of disorder tend to happen in the evenings – nights, holidays and weekends – and, at least for theft, in the hotter months of the year. Although the highest number of events is found in the central station, the so-called ‘end-stations’ show often higher rates than those located in the inner city. Results showed that opportunities for crime are dependent on stations’ environmental attributes, type of neighbourhood in which they are located and city context. The effect of stations’ physical and social environments on crime varies over time. For example, crime is concentrated in peripheral stations with fewer people around during peak hours (when individuals are intensively moving around and perhaps because offenders run a lower risk of being caught at those transport nodes) but, during off-peak hours, the crime dynamics change. Peak hour for pick pocketing is in the afternoon while off peak is in the night, early hours of the day (Figure 2).

### 4. Rape in public spaces

For women, regardless of which part of the city they live in, the home tends to be more dangerous than any outdoor environment. Paradoxically, still most women feel more often unsafe outdoors than indoors. In Stockholm, although outdoor rape constitutes the minority of the cases (most rapes take place indoors committed by a person the victim knows), these are the ones that can potentially be affected by the urban landscape. Until recently, not much was known about these rape places. The knowledge about the nature of rape places has so far provided little basis to understand the role the place has in target selection and, in practice, lead to failure to learn about opportunity rape reduction.

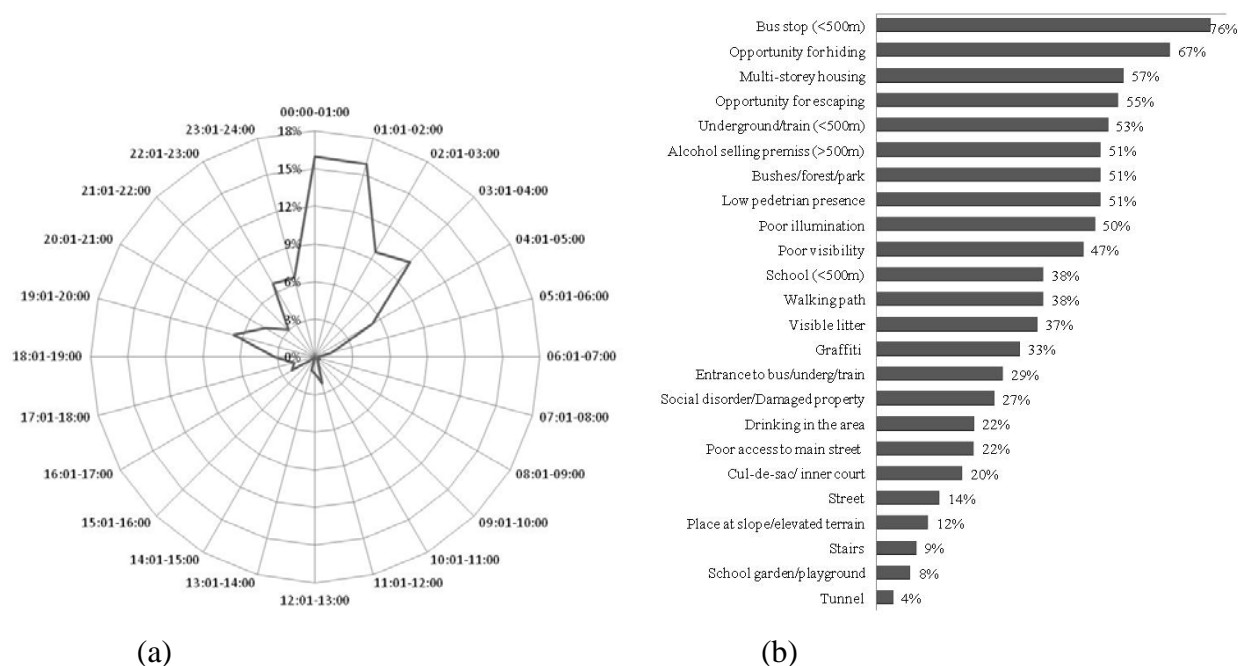


Figure 3(a) Rape by hour of the day, Stockholm, crime records 2008-2009.

Figure 3(b) – Environmental features in rape locations, 2012.

(a) Source: 2011's fieldwork of 76 Stockholm's cases that reached court, 2008-2009.

(b) Source: Stockholm Police.

Ceccato analysed the urban landscape in which outdoor rapes takes place in Stockholm showing that outdoor rape concentrates in the inner city areas and in the periphery. Particularly in the inner city areas, rapes are often associated with unstructured routine activities in the evenings/nights, weekends and holidays and hot months of the year. Figure 3a shows when most rapes happen over the day. Rapes take place at or close to green areas, in places with poor visibility, but offer an easy escape (close to public transportation) from the crime scene (Figure 3b). The study ends by assessing whether these findings contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of a third of Stockholm's total rape cases, and making suggestions for interventions aimed at improving women's safety in public places.

## 5. Promoting safe cities: a wishing list

Safety is a basic human right and therefore any society should strive to have it fulfilled. Planning for safe environments, I suggest, imposes a number of challenges which are not problem-free. We – as researchers, planners or practitioners – have to come to terms with the

idea that our actions can make a city safer. Thus, we cannot doubt the importance of the urban environment (and the activities they may attract) in creating opportunities for both crime and fear of crime. As it has been shown in this article, there is no such thing as a place free of crime but some places can be planned to attract less crime than others. The discovery of spatio-temporal patterns of regularities is the first step in the definition of more finely targeted resources to tackle unsafe places and formulate preventive strategies. This development potentially affects how safety services are guided by the level of detailed data on individuals across the city in time and space. This is particularly important when we are on the move. Interventions should strive to adopt *a whole journey approach* to safety.

Gendered violence, particularly sexual violence, follows clear spatial patterns. A relevant question is: If women's victimisation belongs to the private spaces and women's fear is mistakenly redirected to the public sphere, what is the role of urban planning and crime prevention when safety is the goal? Interventions are often guided by the dichotomy between private versus public spaces, which often creates sectorial blindness: physical planning and police deal often with safety of outdoor environments, whilst social care deals with domestic violence. An open discussion about what are the current accepted norms of socialisation and gender roles among children (perhaps as young as my son Filip I mentioned in the beginning of this article) and young adults should be encouraged at various levels of society as preventive measures to gender violence. This is perhaps one of the most important structural challenges in preventing violence against women.

Finally, we must be aware that safety measures may impose restrictions on space that will be perceived, at least by some, as discriminatory. Thus, our actions must be based on knowledge of what works and what does not work. Most importantly, we must strive to make an effort towards actions that are inclusive and fair, so that urban environments can turn into places worth to be experienced by all.

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