

Crime location choice



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An important question in criminology concerns crime location choice: how do offenders select a crime location? Why is a crime committed here instead of elsewhere? Scientific research has provided some insight into this.

Close to home

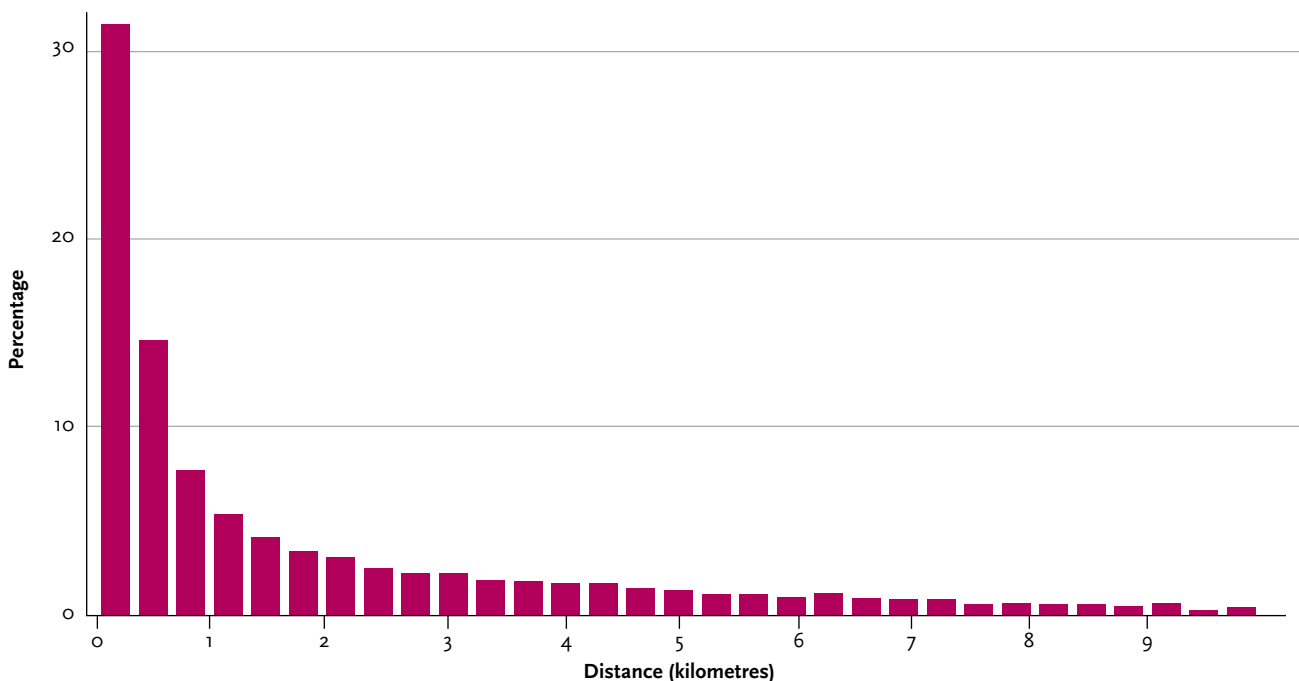
An initial and recurring finding is that of 'distance decay'. The further away the location is from the offender's home, the smaller the chance that he will commit the crime there. Offenders often commit crimes close to home, in their own living environment. This also applies within cities and neighbourhoods. Even in multivariate analysis where the influence of other characteristics is corrected for, distance to their home remains the most important predictor of where offenders commit crimes. With each kilometre

further from home, the likelihood of a crime being committed decreases by 20 to 30%.

Crime magnets

Crime generators and crime attractors are facilities (such as shops, cash machines, petrol stations, restaurants or metro stations) that are visited by many people and therefore attract motivated offenders as well. The proximity of small shops where people often pay in cash seems to

Distance between offender's home and crime location of 16,709 street robberies in Chicago (only distances up to 10 km are shown). Source: Bernasco, Block & Ruiters (2013)



be an important criterion for street robbers, for example. Concentrations of illegal activities (such as drug dealing or prostitution) also attract robbers.

Comfort zone

Recent research has revealed that we understand criminal location choices better if we consider not just where the offenders live, but also take into account other locations they are familiar with. For example, it has been shown that offenders not only commit crimes in the vicinity of their current home, but also near their former homes and near homes of family members. The chance of the current neighbourhood being chosen as the crime location is four times as high as neighbourhoods where the offender never lived. For a former neighbourhood, the chance is more than twice as high. That effect is the strongest if the perpetrator lived there for a long time and has left only recently. The chance of a neighbourhood being targeted is also more than twice as high if a family member (parent, child, brother or sister) lives in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, offenders often commit crimes at locations where they previously committed crimes. If offenders strike again within several days of the initial crime, then the chances of this happening in the same neighbourhood are 20 to 30 times greater than elsewhere. Even six months later, that chance is still twice as high. These findings point to the fact that offenders mainly commit crimes within their own comfort zone.

Plan or golden opportunity?

A lot of research on crime location choice is based on the assumption that offenders set to work with an existing motivation and a premeditated plan when they select a crime location. However, most empirical findings can be explained just as well if we assume opportunistic offenders who strike unprepared whenever the chance arises or if they are challenged.

Cross-border crime

Little is known about offenders who travel great distances to commit a crime. That is partly because with the existing police databases, it is not easy to collect information about interregionally or even internationally active offenders. Research based on DNA traces has revealed that internationally active offenders do not even account for five percent of the crimes committed in the Netherlands. Cross-border criminality in the Netherlands is mainly a local phenomenon that is largely limited to the border regions in Limburg, North Brabant and Zeeland. This finding also points to the limited action radius of most criminals.

Tool for detective work

The knowledge acquired about location choice can be used in two ways. During investigations, detectives can use this knowledge to track down the most likely perpetrators of a given crime. For example, detectives will often search among people who live, work, attend school or spend their free time in the vicinity of the crime location or who have done so in the recent past. They will also focus on people who are known to have previously committed a similar crime in the vicinity of the crime location. Findings from scientific research about the criminals' location choice provide an empirical basis for this strategy.

Tool for urban planning

The outcomes could also be important for urban planning, especially if data about the locations where potential offenders spend a lot of time will also become available. The proposed location of a new school, shopping centre or *coffeeshop* (cafe selling cannabis) could then be assessed for potential criminological exposure up front.

Further reading

- Bernasco, W., Block, R., & Ruiter, S. (2013). Go Where the Money is: Modeling Street Robbers' Location Choices. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 13, 119-143.
- Lammers, M., Menting, B., Ruiter, S. & Bernasco, W. (2015). Biting Once, Twice: The Influence of Prior on Current Crime Location Choice. *Criminology*, 53, 309-329.
- Menting, B., Lammers, M., Ruiter, S., and Bernasco, W. (2016) Family Matters: Effects of Family Members' Residential Areas on Crime Location Choice. *Criminology*, 54, 413-433.

NSCR

De Boelelaan 1077-A
1081 HV Amsterdam

Postal address

PO Box 71304
1008 BH Amsterdam

Phone: 020 598 5239
E-mail: nscr@nscr.nl

The Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR) is a national research institute of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).