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# The Columbine High School Massacre and criminal justice system response: an exploratory case study

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## Abstract

Framed in the situational criminological perspective, this case study examines the effect of the Columbine High School Massacre on a pretrial services unit. The massacre decreased intakes into the jail, increased the proportion of persons detained for violent crimes, and made bond commissioners less willing to facilitate the release of persons arrested for violent crimes. Pretrial release rates for domestic and other violence-related cases were not affected. Implications for situational criminological theory and criminal justice system policy are discussed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Since 1992 a veritable epidemic of lethal violence has erupted in schools across the United States. These incidents of violence have received extensive national attention for three distinct reasons. First, the assailants in these school shootings were extraordinarily young, ranging in age from 11 to 18. Second, these violent acts were not spontaneous interpersonal conflicts or “fist-fights” between students. Instead they were premeditated plots involving weaponry. Third, these incidents of violence have produced high casualties. See Table 1 for a list of recent school shootings.

This wave of violence reached its crescendo on Tuesday, April 20, 1999 near Littleton, CO. At 11:21 a.m., two heavily armed gunmen opened fire and detonated home-made explosives at the suburban Columbine High School. During the 4 hr rampage, 12 students and 1 teacher were murdered, 23 students were wounded and subsequently hospitalized, and \$50 million of school property was damaged. The assailants, later identified as two Columbine students, committed suicide. Witnesses to the shooting indicated that the gunmen laughed and taunted victims especially targeting student-athletes, students involved in Christian organizations, and

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Table 1  
School shootings in the United States, 1992–1999

Date	Location	Dead	Wounded
05/01/92	Oliverhurst, CA	4	10
10/30/95	Richmond, VA	0	4
02/02/96	Moses Lake, WA	3	1
02/29/96	Saint Louis, MO	1	1
07/26/96	Los Angeles, CA	0	2
02/19/97	Bethel, AK	2	2
10/01/97	Pearl, MS	2	7
12/01/97	West Paducah, KY	3	5
12/15/97	Stamps, AR	0	2
03/24/98	Jonesboro, AR	5	10
04/24/98	Edinboro, PA	1	3
05/19/98	Fayetteville, TN	1	0
05/21/98	Springfield, OR	4	22
05/21/98	Saint Charles, MO	1	0
05/21/98	Houston, TX	0	1

ethnic minorities. It was later discovered that the gunmen, who were heavily interested in right-wing paramilitary ideology and Naziism (the massacre occurred on the birth-date of Adolf Hitler), had planned the shooting for over 1 year. They intended to detonate explosives to destroy the school (their goal was to murder approximately 500 students), murder neighbors living adjacent to the school, and ultimately, hijack an airliner and crash it into a large city.

The Columbine High School Massacre, the deadliest school shooting in United States history, galvanized the American public. Nationally, the incident reignited the feud between the National Rifle Association and gun opponents, spawned numerous copy-cat incidents in schools across the country, and begged a policy-receptive explanation for the massacre.<sup>1</sup> Locally, the massacre, like severe weather, radically affected the routine activities of countless lives: traffic routes were altered, school classes were canceled, businesses temporarily closed, professional sporting events were postponed, churches maximized their services, the international media arrived in Colorado, and an army of law enforcement officers and investigators was mobilized. Framed in the routine activities—situational crime theoretical perspective, this research investigates the effect of the massacre on the operation of an adult pretrial services bond commissioner unit. Were court officers more punitive or lenient in wake of Columbine? Were these criminal justice agents more compassionate or vengeful? Did their discretion become more subjective?

## 2. Theoretical background

Criminology has traditionally been people-driven. Researchers have focused on the sociological characteristics of criminal offenders (e.g., gender, age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status) to not only explain crime but also to help develop policies which may reduce crime. This criminology consistently indicated that crime was disproportionately the domain of the young, not old, males, not females, the impoverished, not wealthy, and minorities, not Whites.

These statuses applied for offenders and victims—they were often of the same ilk. There was nothing inherently criminogenic about these statuses, however the lifestyle, behavioral, and interactive patterns common to persons embodying these statuses coincided with the temporal and spatial occurrence of crime. It was from this empiricism that a different criminological approach emerged. Crime was now interpreted as a routine activity—a banal, not exceptional phenomenon just like conventional activities. New theoretical perspectives (e.g., lifestyle, rational choice, and routine activities) made explicit the importance of the mundane, situational characteristics of the criminal episode. Consider passages from these respective theories:

For a personal victimization to occur, several conditions must be met. First, the prime actors—the offender and the victim—must have occasion to intersect in time and space. Second, some source of dispute or claim must arise between the actors in which the victim is perceived by the offender as an appropriate object of the victimization. Third, the offender must be willing and able to threaten or use force (or stealth) in order to achieve the desired end. Fourth, the circumstances must be such that the offender views it as advantageous to use or threaten force (or stealth) to achieve the desired end. (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978, p. 250)

This ‘rational choice’ perspective on crime assumes that offenders seek to benefit themselves by their criminal behavior; that this involves the making of decisions and choices, however rudimentary on occasions these choices might be; and that these processes, constrained as they are by time, the offender’s cognitive abilities, and by the availability of relevant information. (Cornish & Clarke, 1987, p. 933)

Each successfully completed violation minimally requires an offender with both criminal inclinations and the ability to carry out these inclinations, a person or object providing a suitable target for the offender, and *absence of guardians capable of preventing violations*. (Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 590)

Lifestyle, rational choice, and routine activities approaches have generated appeal in criminology because of their ability to accurately convey the “nitty-gritty” of crime.<sup>2</sup> Crime is an earthy, serendipitous, yet often unsurprising convergence in time and space of offender and victim. For fuller articulations of these theories (see Clarke, 1980; Cohen, 1981; Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cohen, Felson, & Land, 1980; Cohen, Kluegel, & Land, 1981; Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Felson, 1987, 1994; Felson & Cohen, 1981; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, pp. 15–44; Hindelang et al., 1978; Liska & Warner, 1991).

### 3. Empirical background

Studies have supported the situational perspective (Gibbons, 1983; LaFree & Birkbeck, 1991), lifestyle theory (Riley, 1987; Maxfield, 1987), rational choice theory (Corbett & Simon, 1992), routine activities theory (Roncek & Maier, 1991; Felson, 1997), and routine activities theory as it pertained to homicide (Messner & Tardiff, 1985), general deviant behavior (Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996), property crime (Bennett, 1991), and property victimization (Miethel, Stafford, & Long, 1987). Additional research has explored the situational effects of using weather, season, and holidays as independent variables to explain variation in crime. All of these phenomena have a disruptive character which is compatible with lifestyle, rational choice, and routine activities theoretical perspectives. Weather alters

human behavior directly by inducing psychological and physiological responses in humans and indirectly by changing routinized interaction patterns. Excessive cold, sweltering heat, increased humidity, torrential rain, and snow blizzards alter human activity which contributes to reductions in crime (e.g., Chang, 1972; Cohn, 1990; Field, 1992; Cheatwood, 1995; Loftin & Cheatwood, 1996). Crime has a temporal element. Its occurrence varies by day, week, month, and season. For example, Tennenbaum and Fink (1994) found that homicides tend to peak in late summer, while Stack (1995) found that homicides increased during Spring, Summer, weekends, and around major holidays. Certain holidays increased specific types of crime such as the case of Halloween arson in Detroit (Maciak, Moore, Leviton, & Guinan, 1998).

In sum, all of this research demonstrated the common sense finding that certain times and conditions were not only more conducive for the commission of crime, but also that certain conditions were more facilitate of the exertion of official social control from criminal justice system agents. Temporal and weather conditions differentially impacted the degree to which the individuals who comprise the criminal justice system would “do their job.”

#### **4. Policy background and hypotheses**

Crime prevention policy research rooted in the situational criminological perspective (for a review see Weisburd, 1997) usually focused on how police can disrupt the routine activities of criminal offenders in order to deter crime. In this sense, the criminal justice system was a policy tool resulting from situational criminological theory. The current research investigates how criminal justice system response, like crime itself, is a situational, routine activity. Since such a rich literature exists in describing the situational characteristics of crime, it makes sense that the criminal justice system similarly reacts to the sociology of the situation. The hypotheses of this research are:

*Hypothesis 1:* The Columbine High School Massacre decreased the number of defendants to be interviewed by the bond commissioners.

*Hypothesis 2:* The Columbine High School Massacre made bond commissioners less likely to contact judges for early release of personal recognizance bond candidates.

*Hypothesis 3:* The Columbine High School Massacre resulted in a larger proportion of persons arrested for violent charges.

*Hypothesis 4:* The Columbine High School Massacre decreased bond commissioner release rates for defendants charged with domestic violence or child abuse.

*Hypothesis 5:* The Columbine High School Massacre decreased bond commissioner release rates for defendants charged with violent crimes (e.g., non-domestic assault).<sup>3</sup>

#### **5. Methodology**

Whereas most empirical research framed in the situational perspective focused on criminal offending (e.g., Sherman, Gartin, Buerger, & 1989; McCarthy, 1995) or situational crime

prevention policies (e.g., Felson, 1998, pp. 166–183), this is the first study framed explicitly in the situational perspective to explore criminal justice response to a current event. Given the exploratory purpose of this research and the epiphenomenal nature of the Columbine High School Massacre, a case study method was most appropriate. The massacre itself served as the independent variable. The dependent variable for this study was the response of the pretrial services bond commissioner unit of Boulder County.<sup>4</sup> It was selected for three reasons. First, Boulder County is adjacent to Jefferson County Colorado where Columbine High School is located (other adjacent counties are Adams, Arapahoe, Clear Creek, Denver, Douglas, Gilpin, Park, and Douglas). This proximity allowed for investigation of the direct effects of the massacre on justice system response. Second, other than members of the special weapons and tactics team and canine-bomb unit, Boulder County did not lend much criminal justice support to the Columbine effort. That responsibility was filled by criminal justice personnel from Adams, Arapahoe, Denver, and Jefferson counties. The criminal justice systems in these counties were on disaster protocol. The routine operating procedures were radically transformed to the degree that the entire county was mobilized to handle the massacre. For this reason it was impossible to investigate how the criminal justice system response might change because of the massacre since the *only criminal justice response was mobilized toward the massacre*. Conversely, the Boulder County justice system remained intact, operated normally, and allowed for investigation of justice system response to the massacre. Third, Boulder County had a large enough criminal justice system to monitor possible changes in protocol because of the massacre. The sparsely populated mountain (e.g., Clear Creek, Gilpin, and Park) and rural (e.g., Douglas and Teller) counties had criminal justice systems too small to allow for experimental variance.

The selection of a pretrial service bond commissioner unit (especially since research commonly uses the police) as unit of analysis was advantageous for four reasons. First, whereas criminal justice processing (e.g., law enforcement) is only one of many police functions, criminal justice processing (e.g., administering bond interviews, preparing arraignment narratives, and compiling criminal histories) is the sole function of bond commissioners. Any effects of the massacre on criminal justice system response are more efficiently measured using the bond commissioner unit. Second, pretrial service units are discretionary agencies. This strengthens the experimental variance of this study since the Columbine High School Massacre is likely to have variable effects on individual bond commissioners. Third, based on their location in the criminal justice system, pretrial services units are not only receptive and reactive but also independent and proactive. New arrestees pass through the bond commissioner office prior to appearing in court. Thus, bond commissioner units are also an indirect measure of official police activity. Fourth, bond commissioners process defendants arrested by all peace officers (e.g., probation officers, parole officers, immigration officials, charging district attorneys, judges, and federal law enforcement), not just police. The unique location of the bond commissioner unit allows it to serve as an indirect measure of the total enforcement component of the criminal justice system.

To control for possible temporal effects, descriptive data for total interviews, violence-related interviews, violence-related bond commissioner releases, domestic-related interviews, domestic-related bond commissioner releases, and personal recognizance candidates “left” for court were collected for the month of April from 1990–1999 as well as the week of April

20–26 (the day of the Columbine Massacre and the week after) for the years 1990–1999. These trends will demonstrate whether the massacre had any effect on the performance of the pretrial services unit. See Table 2 for descriptive data for bond commissioner activity in April 1990–1999 and April 1999.

Supplemental qualitative data were derived from 1 hr interviews with the entire bond commissioner unit (10 bond commissioners total). No questionnaire or measurement instrument was used. Because of the small sample of bond commissioners, qualitative data were collected to augment official measures of the activity of the pretrial services unit. The bond commissioner unit was comprised of five males and five females. All were Caucasian. Six of the bond commissioners occupied salaried full-time positions, the remaining four were hourly-rate part-time employees. The unit operated 24 hr per day. Day shift (08:00–16:00 hr) was primarily responsible for appearing at arraignments. Swing shift (16:00–00:00 hr) was primarily responsible for processing all cosigned personal recognizance bonds, coordinating with arresting agencies, and performing bond interviews. Grave shift (23:00–09:00 hr) administered the majority of all bond interviews. Years of experience in the unit ranged from 1 to 10 years with a mean of nearly 6 years. The personnel ranged in age from 22 to 49 years with an average age of 36. Four of the bond commissioners were parents. None of the bond commissioners had family or personal friends directly involved in the shooting (e.g., as students or teachers).

The test values, occurring in the year 1999, were compared to monthly and weekly trends from 1990 to 1998 in order to determine effects of the Columbine High School Massacre on bond commissioner functioning. The independent samples were compared using the *t*-test for significance.

Table 2  
Bond commissioner activity for April 1990–1999 and April 20–26, 1999

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Range
Interviews	413.3	35	374–468
Releases	131.9	11.22	114–147
Release rate (%)	32.2	4.96	25–39
Interviews (violence)	92	14.67	72–113
Releases (violence)	16.9	9.06	8–40
Release rate (violence %)	18.8	10.04	7–42
Interviews (domestic)	70.4	16.69	40–96
Releases (domestic)	19.2	7.27	10–31
Release rate (domestic %)	27.1	7.89	17–44
Interviews, April 13–19	98.3	22.47	72–139
Interviews, April 20–26	124.6	8.91	106–137
Interviews (violence)	23.5	7.96	12–35
Releases (violence)	5.9	3.93	1–11
Release rate (violence %)	24.8	14.71	5–52
Interviews (domestic)	15.5	4.95	10–22
Releases (domestic)	5.1	3.03	1–10
Release rate (domestic %)	31.1	14.01	9–57
Left for court, April 20–26	3.2	2.66	1–9

## 6. Results

April 1999 was the busiest April in the 10-year period for the bond commissioners evidenced by total interviews, violence-related interviews, and domestic-related interviews. For the week April 13–19, 1999, the pretrial services unit interviewed 139 defendants. This was greater than in any other year. Conversely, during the week of the massacre (April 20–26), the unit interviewed 106 defendants. This was less than in any other year. Although the unit had processed more defendants since 1990, the unit was least active during the week of the massacre. According to a male grave-shift bond commissioner with 10 years of experience:

I was really slow the night of the shooting, and a few days afterward. I don't think the officers were in any mood to arrest, plus the weather was not great [a moderate snow storm occurred the day after the shooting]. It [the lack of business] was fine with me.

Bond commissioners may contact on-call judges after hours to release persons under investigation for violence-related charges who are otherwise personal recognizance bond candidates. Bond commissioners may also “leave early releases for court,” that is, recommend the defendant receive a personal recognizance bond at their first court appearance. Defendants are “left” to receive a personal recognizance bond in court for two reasons. First, the allegations in the arrest report might indicate a particularly violent or abusive situation where release in court seems more appropriate. Second, sometimes the demeanor of the defendant is so poor that bond commissioners decide the defendant should spend the evening in jail. Both are discretionary, just desserts measures. The week of the massacre, nine defendants were left for release in court. This is significantly greater than in any other week in April of the decade. Several members of the unit mentioned a reluctance to early-release anyone during the week of the Columbine Massacre. According to a female swing-shift bond commissioner with 6 years experience:

If you're going to hit your spouse or children, tough! You're not getting out of jail—don't hit your family ever, especially after this [the massacre]. I am not calling judges who are parents to release some child abuser. What are people thinking? You should be happy your kids come home from school alive [in the wake of the shooting]. (Male, supervisor, day-shift, 10 years experience) I wanted someone to blame for this shooting. I was very angry and really did not care about what happened here at work. I did not call to early release anyone that week. I was really angry if they [defendants] were young—18, 19, 20 years old. I wanted to blame them. I'm going to be really careful in the future if anyone is in for ccw (carrying concealed weapons) or possession of explosives, particularly if it's a young kid.

During the week of the massacre, the unit administered more violence and domestic-related interviews and facilitated more releases than in previous years. However, the violence and domestic-related bond commissioner release rates were not appreciably different than in previous years. See Table 3 for *t*-test coefficients comparing bond commissioner activity in the week of the Columbine Massacre to activity in the prior decade.

In sum, three of the five hypotheses were supported. In the wake of the Columbine rampage, “business” slowed considerably. A larger proportion of arrestees processed by the pretrial services unit were for violence-related crimes particularly domestic violence. Bond commissioners left more defendants for release in court during the week of the massacre than in any

Table 3  
Columbine Massacre effects on bond commissioner activity (monthly and weekly effects)

Variable	95% C.I.	Value	<i>t</i> -value
Interviews	388–438	468	–4.943*
Releases	132–140	115	4.763*
Release %	29–36	25	4.589*
Interviews (violence)	81–102	113	–4.527*
Releases (violence)	10–23	19	–0.733
Release % (violence)	12–26	17	0.566
Interviews (domestic)	58–82	96	–4.85*
Releases (domestic)	14–24	28	–3.828*
Release % (domestic)	21–33	29	0.761
Interviews, 4/13–19	82–114	139	–5.728*
Interviews, 4/20–26	118–130	106	6.6*
Interviews (violence)	18–29	30	–2.581*
Releases (violence)	3–8	9	–2.494*
Release % (violence)	14–35	30	–1.118
Interviews (domestic)	12–19	22	–4.153*
Releases (domestic)	3–7	8	–3.024*
Release % (domestic)	21–41	36	–1.106
Left for court	1–5	9	–6.897*

Note: Test values are for 1999.

April during the prior decade. However, release rates for crimes of violence were not lower in the week of the rampage than in previous years.

## 7. Theoretical implications

With the exception of Cohen and Felson's (1979) concept of capable guardians, situational theorists (e.g., Hindelang et al., 1978; Cornish & Clarke, 1987) often neglect the role of criminal justice system personnel in determining whether a criminal event will occur. This same neglect characterizes situational-inspired empirical work (e.g., Osgood et al., 1996); measures of routine crime commission focus on offender and victim, but not social control agents. This is surprising since a criminal offense implies the existence (by presence or absence) of offender, victim, and criminal justice system. Situational theorists imply that the mere presence of "capable guardians" is sufficient for social control. But what happens when criminal justice system are present (or "on the job"), but unmotivated and emotionally unwilling and unable to apprehend criminals? Given the extraordinarily discretionary nature of many criminal justice system positions, future research could focus on how accurately situational criminological theory predicts the subjective nature as to whether criminal justice personnel administer justice.

The current research presents preliminary evidence that situational exigencies might determine whether criminal justice system personnel are willing and able to deter crime. Just as extreme weather, holidays, and seasons have been found to inhibit crime (e.g., rain is the policeman's friend), the current research indicated that a sensational current event like the Columbine High School Massacre affected criminal justice system response. The massacre created a pall which decreased intakes into the jail except for violence-related crimes and

made bond commissioners less likely to contact judges for early releases. Anecdotal data indicated that bond commissioners expressed reluctance to follow normal procedures when attempting to release personal recognizance bond candidates. Given the circumstances of the Columbine shooting, “normal” criminal justice system response seemed inappropriate. This inappropriateness occurred for the same reasons that police are less zealous to arrest during dire weather conditions or on a major holiday. Weather, holidays, and the Columbine Massacre are disruptive events which induce exceptional, not normative responses from persons working for the criminal justice system.

Perhaps the detection of crime and apprehension of criminal offenders are just as serendipitous as the commission of crime itself. Police could become more sensitive to crimes of violence, particularly domestic violence, in the wake of the Columbine Massacre which would result in more of those arrests. Similarly, bond commissioners can become depressed by tragic news and alter their behavior at work (e.g., express reluctance to release personal recognizance bond candidates or become ambivalent about performing job duties generally) as simply as a motivated offender can stay home because of poor weather. Both responses are mundane and determined by situational context. Just as offenders need to be motivated to offend, criminal justice personnel need to be motivated to apprehend. Offenders, victims, and capable guardians have discretion that is potentially altered by situational conditions.

## **8. Policy implications**

Anticipating situational crime scenarios and rationing personnel is a common feature of criminal justice systems. For example, officer saturations are used to increase drunk-driving arrests coinciding with celebratory holidays such as New Year’s Eve and Independence Day. Conversely, criminal justice systems operate with minimum personnel for familial holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas and ostensibly shut down during times of extreme weather. In the wake of cataclysmic current events like the Columbine High School Massacre, preliminary evidence presented here indicates that criminal justice personnel behave differently. Resources could be allocated differently in the wake of such serious historical events. Police and pretrial service administrators might consider if and how any disaster, natural or human, impacts their personnel. More generally, this exploratory research offers a glimpse into how criminal justice system agents react to situational cues usually reserved for offenders and, to a lesser extent, victims.

## **Notes**

1. In the wake of the Columbine Massacre, students across North America imitated the rampage. One week after the disaster in Littleton, a disgruntled ninth-grade dropout killed a student and wounded another at the W.R. Meyers High School in Taber, Alta., Canada. In Pennsylvania, 52 bomb scares were reported the week after Columbine. Additional bomb scares, weapon violations, accusations of threatening behavior, and discovery of plans to mimic the Columbine incident were reported in Alabama, Alaska, Delaware,

- Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia, and Washington DC.
2. For a discussion of prior research which similarly linked rational choice, lifestyle, and routine activities theories, see Osgood et al. (1996).
  3. Domestic violence crimes in this study included false imprisonment (class three misdemeanor), harassment (class three misdemeanor), third degree assault (class one misdemeanor), violation of restraining order (class one misdemeanor), child abuse (ranges in seriousness from class three misdemeanor negligent child abuse to class two felony will cruelty/abuse to child resulting in death), and menacing (class three misdemeanor). Non-domestic violence crimes in this study included first degree assault (class three felony), second degree assault (class four felony), robbery (class four felony), vehicular homicide (class four felony), vehicular assault (class five felony), menacing with deadly weapon (class five felony), and harassment/stalking (class five felony).
  4. Any county or city may establish a pretrial services program or bond commissioner unit pursuant to a plan formulated by a community advisory board created for such purpose and appointed by the chief district judge of the judicial district. Such program shall establish a procedure for the screening of persons who are detained due to an arrest for the alleged commission of a crime so that such information may be provided to the judge who is setting the amount of bail and type of bond. The program shall provide such information as will provide the court with the ability to make a more appropriate initial bond decision which is based upon facts relating to the defendant's risk of danger to the community, danger to recidivate, and risk of failure to appear for court (Colorado Revised Statutes, 1998, p. 40).

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