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Chapter IV

Disaggregating the Journey to Homicide

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Abstract

This research examines the distance traveled by offenders and victims to their involvement in homicide. Key research topics include (1) the differences in distance traveled by offenders and victims by homicide motive, (2) the differences in distance traveled by offenders and victims by sex and age, and (3) the relationship between street distance and Euclidean distances by type of homicide. Findings indicate that there are clear differences in travel behavior between victims and offenders. In addition, travel distance to event location varies according to the demographic characteristics of the offender and victim. Related to the method of measurement, street distance is always longer than Euclidean distance and there is a strong and consistent linear relationship, making it possible to predict street distance from Euclidean distance. A Pareto-exponential function was determined to be a good model for representing the distances that offenders travel to their crimes. This research will assist police practitioners with respect to

investigations (for example, aid in refining suspect lists) and homicide prevention (for example, by developing richer information about activity spaces of offenders and victims).

Introduction

One aspect of homicide that has rarely been examined is the distance from the residences of the offenders and victims to the location of the offense. The individual travel patterns of victims and offenders intersect at a particular moment in time to set the stage for a homicide to occur. These travel patterns are not random, but instead reflect the individual, purposeful actions by victims and offenders, although their reasons for travel are often different. By achieving a better understanding of these travel patterns, improved strategies for investigation and prevention can be developed.

Geographical theory provides the foundation for research on journeys to crime. For example, Horton and Reynolds (1971) coined the term "action space" to describe the area with which residents are familiar and "activity space" to describe the area in which residents usually conduct their daily lives. Further research (Chapin & Brazil, 1969; Harries, 1999; Orleans, 1973) showed that the sizes and shapes of action spaces vary depending on factors, such as place of residence (suburban versus urban), sex, socioeconomic class and age. For example, the activity spaces of women and children were generally smaller and more compact than those of men and young adults. Both individuals with lower socioeconomic status and those who lived in urban areas had more compact activity spaces than those with higher socioeconomic status and residences in suburban areas.

Two important criminological theories built on this earlier work – environmental criminology (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981) and routine activity (Cohen & Felson, 1979). As explained by Brantingham and Brantingham (1981), a crime occurs when four things are in concurrence – a law, an offender, a target and a place. The law specifies behaviors that are acceptable to society and prohibits actions that go against those behaviors. Without the existence of a law, a crime does not formally take place. Offenders and targets must also be in concurrence in order for a crime to occur. Targets can, of course, include persons, residences, automobiles and so forth. Criminologists study offenders and targets by asking questions about the motives of offenders, why offenders choose certain targets, how the target can be secured against crime, and related topics. Under environmental criminology, the fourth dimension of crime is place, defined as a discrete location in time and space at which the other three dimensions come