Campus Security: Situational Crime Prevention in High Density Environments

by George F. Rengert, Mark T. Mattson and Kristin D. Henderson

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Reviewed by Mark Busbee

As a municipal police officer, my knowledge of the special problems of policing in a campus environment is limited. Indeed, the issues of crime and public safety are unique on a college campus. This uniqueness is born from the physical, the social and (with decreasing frequency) the political environment that defines many university campuses. The volume reviewed here examines the development and use of a three-dimensional crime-mapping technology as a tool for campus planning and public safety provision.

The authors open with a discussion on the nature of crime on college campuses. They then offer a listing of what makes the campus environment unique. Some of this discussion includes an increasing strategic focus on campus safety issues that are properly nested into the challenges and opportunities provided by the broader community where campuses are located. The desire for better information systems and public safety planning stems from these internal issues, as well as from larger political and civil liability forces affecting college campuses.

College communities are often different from the surrounding areas where they are situated. The authors describe a typical college community as one where the majority of the people who work and attend classes do not live on the grounds of the institution. Adding to the problem of place ownership and natural surveillance is the fact that most campuses are open and thus allow free movement to those with business on campus, as well as to outsiders. For this reason, campuses offer crime problems relating to uncontrolled entry and exit that other private facilities do not face. Add to this problem the fact that the typical user of a college campus is a young adult, lacking parental control, with easy access to alcohol and drugs, and you have created a unique mix of problems.

The book provides a brief history of the changing face of campus security and policing. While municipal policing is geared more towards a strict law enforcement role, campus policing deals more in physical security, public relations and fear abatement. Thus campus officers are more naturally inclined toward promoting a crime prevention role as well as an educational one, with law enforcement taking a secondary position in their job activities.

The real meat of the book is concentrated on crime prevention planning activities occurring in one particular context, the main campus of Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. In their research, the authors concentrate on the University's efforts to implement high-definition Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in evaluating problem areas in the University and designing answers for those problems. As the campus is a typical urban campus, with high-rise buildings and complex facilities such as dorms, sports areas and science labs, high-definition GIS would enable more precise crime analysis by identifying the location of crime events inside buildings.

The authors identify the limits of a traditional GIS system as its two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional capabilities. What the authors mean by this is that most GIS programs consider only the physical address or location in a particular area; there is no distinction made between a single-story office building and a multi-story parking garage. As part of their overall research, the authors coupled victimization surveys with official reports of police data to map the true problem areas on campus.

Overall, the book is well organized and provides meaningful information to the reader about problems unique to college security and policing. The authors show where the use of GIS and crime prevention strategies could help reduce crime and the fear of crime in a college setting. Both campus facilities managers and public safety officials will find this a handy guide, which provides useful ideas and information to prevent and deter crime on their campuses.

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