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# International Summaries

A Series of Selected Translations in Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

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From West Germany

## ACQUISITIONS

### Urban Design and Crime

*This empirical test of the relationship between architectural surroundings and the incidence of crime examines, in particular, the importance of "informal social control" in crime prevention.*

**By Monika Plate, Ulrich Schwinges,  
and Rudiger Weiss**

A survey of crime victims suggests to the West German Federal Criminal Police Office that "informal social control," exercised through clearly arranged architectural planning and construction and close neighborly contact, correlates inversely with crime.

"Informal social control" is a relatively new term in criminology. It means the control of potential criminal behavior stemming from the "presence" of residents in a given neighborhood rather than any systematic supervision of neighbors.

This is a summary of *Strukturen der Kriminalität in Solingen: Eine Untersuchung zu Zusammenhängen zwischen baulichen und sozialen Merkmalen und dem Kriminalitätsaufkommen*, "Special Edition of the BKA (Federal Criminal Police Office) Scientific Series," Wiesbaden, Federal Republic of Germany, 1985.

NCJ 101044. 229 pages plus appendixes. The original includes four-color maps, bibliographic references, survey instruments including coding, and reproductions of newspaper clippings concerning the survey.

Summary published June 1986.

Such symbols as well-tended front gardens manifest this social concern to the would-be criminal. They seem to the criminal to increase the risk of being detected and thus act as a deterrent to crime. Studies in the United States credit such social controls with pivotal importance in controlling crime.

#### Background and methodology

Both official records ("reported offenses") and a victimization survey ("unreported offenses") were utilized in the study.

**Stage 1: Reported offenses.** In the first stage of data collection, Solingen police carried out a comprehensive survey of all offenses reported to them in 1981. Characteristics relevant to the study were compiled according to the nature of the criminal offense and of the described suspect. Because Solingen is subdivided into very small units, it was possible to classify crime scenes and the suspects' domiciles into discrete housing blocks.

**Stage 2. Unreported offenses.** In the summer of 1982, Hamburg University cooperated in surveying a representative sample of 1 percent of the resident population over 14. Interviews disregarded crimes other than unreported

robbery and other theft, property damage, and bodily injury. But regardless of whether respondents had been victimized, interviewers asked about their apartments' residential and social structure, environment, social contacts, family structure, and level of education and vocational training.

**Reporting the data.** To preserve confidentiality, the University analyzed and processed the data on unreported crimes and reported only aggregated results to the Federal Criminal Police Office. Similarly, that office analyzed the reported-crime data gathered by the local police and reported their aggregate results concerning spatial distribution of crime to the University.

Finally, a comprehensive comparison of the two parts of the survey, using path analysis, indicated the relationship between crime and housing structure. The researchers recommend a comprehensive crime prevention program to serve as a basis for urban redevelopment in Solingen, a middle-sized city.

The Solingen study assumes that informal control depends on social factors such as whether the inhabitant owns or leases home property. The study also postulated that such control is a function of the structural characteristics of a building

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(such as the number of apartments) or the area in which a building stands.

## Influence of social and structural conditions

Survey results support this postulate. They suggest that informal social control gains through clearly arranged architectural planning and construction.

For example, in less densely developed areas, there is less crime. The survey also shows that residents of buildings in such spread-out (less densely built-up) areas maintain closer neighborhood contact with each other.

Such low-density building is preferred by Solingen's higher income households, since they are able to afford homes or apartments less closely packed together.

## Spatial distribution of crime density

Analyzing the number of all criminal offenses per unit area in a district results in only a very weak correlation between the social structural variables, such as income and class, and *crime density*. Socioeconomic class correlates negatively with crime density. That is to say, where the number of households with above-average income is small, there is a relatively high rate of crime.

In such an area, the *type* of building is the most influential factor in crime incidence: the lower the number of multistory buildings, the higher the crime density.

Solingen data indicate that the population density influences crime density both directly and indirectly. Independent of the type of building, the *denser* the population, the higher the crime density. Similarly, the closer the neighborly contacts in a building, the lower the rate of crime in terms of density.

## Statistical portrait of the city

Solingen has a low crime rate. Of 40 West German cities with populations between 100,000 and 250,000, Solingen ranks 16th in population but only 36th in crime rate—2,799 incidents of crime per year per 100,000 population.

For robbery and burglary, Solingen ranks 31st and 28th, respectively, among the 40. In 1981, according to the survey, there were only 81 cases of robbery and 396 cases of burglary of buildings and basements. The survey of unreported crime provided low numbers compared with surveys in Gottingen and Bothum.

In fact, the low level of crime limited the survey's ability to examine crime patterns in Solingen at the planned microlevel—112 separate districts surveyed covering 1,000 housing blocks—because there was no crime or relatively little in so many of the smaller social units.

## The "accessibility factor"

Breaking the city down by broader districts, however, the survey confirmed for Solingen a finding reported from many other German and foreign cities: the greatest concentration of crime occurred in the downtown or central area.

For Solingen, however, this appeared to be a matter of accessibility. When the city was broken up into districts ranked by their ease of access—through well-built streets, private traffic, or readily available public transportation—the more accessible the sector of the city, the higher its rate of crime.

Solingen tends to be topographically unique in that its populated districts cluster in a series of river valleys cutting through the city from east to west. Thus Solingen does not match the geographic model noted by Burgess (*The Urban Criminal*) and by Shaw and McKay (*Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*). Those studies suggest levels of criminal activity decreasing in successive "rings" of neighborhoods outward from the inner city.

Breaking down neighborhood crime rates by type of crime—robbery, property damage, and bodily injury—makes little change in the ranking of districts. The inner city continues to have the highest crime rates, although the other districts exchange rankings in an irregular pattern according to type of crime.

In the city generally, reported crime tended to occur more often than unreported crime, but with a striking difference in one district, Wald, which reported 18.7 percent of the city's total crime compared with 38.9 percent in the inner city.

In Wald, the reporting rate both for property damage and bodily injury is lower than the rate of unreported crime and strikingly lower than the reporting rate in the rest of the city. Yet "expensive" property damage was higher in Wald.

The authors hypothesize that there is no relationship between readiness to report property damage and social class in Wald, that in Wald the residents have less "social interest" in their habitations and neighbors and, thus, less interest in social control either formal or informal.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The low overall crime rate in Solingen is of decisive importance in formulating an appropriate crime prevention program. Exaggerated impulses toward security, particularly when oriented to individuals and not to the social group, can increase the fear of crime and thus damage community well-being.

If police were to launch large-scale crime prevention efforts without specific justification (such as a sudden dramatic rise in vehicle break-ins in a particular parking lot), the effort would be exaggerated in terms of cost effectiveness and the likelihood a citizen would be victimized.

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If instead the police confine themselves to providing advice and counseling to individuals requiring it, they strengthen the citizen's feeling of security from crime. Such counseling must come from competent officers and consist of ways to enhance personal security using very simple means.

**Storefront police station.** A possible way of providing this information would be establishment of a "police store" in an easily accessible part of town. Police should invite citizens who have been victims of crime or who fear victimization in the future to attend counseling sessions either at the advisory center or at home.

In specific residential areas where there has been a series of burglaries, counseling would be particularly useful, reducing excitement and fear in the community and offering an objective perspective on crime prevention.

**Strengthening social control.** The authors recommend local government initiatives to enliven neighborhoods and promote individual residents' identification with the neighborhood, rather than traditional police control methods such as increased patrolling.

Neighborhood-based social initiatives directly or indirectly strengthen informal social controls. However, the authors warn against negative showings of community involvement—public suspicion, interference, and neighborhood mistrust. Social control of crime should not consist exclusively of defense against criminal attack.

Such a defensive posture promotes an unwanted community self-righteousness in dealing with crime; indeed, it prevents citizens from feeling they are part of a neighborhood "social contract" in which the group is responsible for the origin and continuation of any criminal career that springs from its community.

**The Neighborhood Service Center.** One means of promoting such community views on social behavior is through establishment of "Neighborhood Service

Centers" (NSC) comparable to those in the United States. Such a center would essentially be a locally established social teaching center set up in an easily accessible building, perhaps a former store.

It would provide "in-patient" and "out-patient" services for the particular problems of the district. It would provide assistance to those segments of the community that most need it—the lower income, higher density areas where the psychotherapeutic advice available to higher income groups is not present.

The NSC concept's goal is to offer the amount of help necessary without trying to alter or influence citizens' lifestyles. Services offered would include filling material and nonmaterial needs for advice, information on personal rights, referral to administrative authorities, and even individual and group psychotherapy.

The NSC stimulates self-organization and self-help for individuals who feel threatened by crime or feel they have been victims of crime, as well as providing care for potentially delinquent youths from broken family structures.

Police may or may not be integrated into such a center; if they are, the center will serve as an alternative to the "police store." The police, however, represent only one of many possible resources in the prevention of social problems.

Most important, the NSC removes crime prevention from isolation and puts it in its rightful place in society.

**What Solingen should do.** Establishing a Neighborhood Service Center is difficult in a medium-sized town such as Solingen, with its limited financial resources. Because of Solingen's decentralized structure, several centers would have to be established.

The researchers, however, recommend an initial pilot project in a northern district of Solingen, where there is a concentration of delinquent youth.

Crime prevention in the traditional "police blanket" has proved ineffective, consuming scarce public resources and producing negative social effects. Solingen, as a prototype of a town with a low crime rate, has the chance to attempt a new community crime prevention strategy.

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**Urban Design and Crime** (West Germany) NCJ 101042

Explores how architecture and density seem to influence life in a middle-sized city with a low crime rate; offers suggestions for reducing crime still further.