The return of displacement
CPTED’s nightmare
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Displacement goes back a long way


Repetto published one of the first ever studies on displacement – on a police enforcement project in New York. He uncovered numerous kinds of displacement; physical, temporal, functional, tactical, perpetrator.

Mainstream research from situational crime research suggests displacement isn’t inevitable, crime levels are cut through displacement and there may even be benefits from displacement – the so-called diffusion of benefits.

CPTED, Situational Crime Prevention and Crime Displacement - A re-examination
Catherine Phillips (2011)

Research at Nottingham Trent University in the UK by Phillips discovered that most displacement studies are focused on physical displacement, including a new statistical tool – WDQ. She discovered few researchers actually interviewed offenders to dig deeper.

She also discovered that research supporting the orthodox belief about displacement may be incorrect due to selection bias. She reviewed offender studies and found up to 80% displacement. For situational crime prevention and 1st Generation CPTED this is a potential nightmare.

The origins of contemporary CPTED stem from Jacobs, Wood, Jeffery and Newman as well as the Westinghouse studies and the Hartford research of Gardiner. That work used the concept of motive reinforcement stemming back to the social ecology studies of the Chicago school of sociology.

The early work from Chicago attempted to dig at the roots of crime motives. Hartford and in Portland achieved some success cutting crime with both physical and social strategies.

By 1980 a new group of scholars emerged who built on Jacobs and Newman’s work, but ignored social motives. Instead “place and crime” researchers studied crime opportunity.

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By choosing only physical crime opportunity, the social motives at the roots of crime were ignored. Motive reinforcement vanished and target hardening appeared. By hacking at the branches vs digging at the roots, crime displacement became a major criticism of opportunity theory.
The city of Saskatoon in Canada has a long history of CPTED and SafeGrowth training. Students and planners assess crime locations. One crime hotspot suffering street disorder was a McDonald’s Restaurant corner.

Police calls for service data were available to study displacement at this corner over a 5 year period. Interviews were also conducted to assess displacement impacts.

After unsuccessful attempts to prevent problems with enforcement and 1st Generation CPTED, the owner demolished the building.

Calls for service mapping and crime analysis examined the neighborhood a few years before the demolishment and a few years after. A large cluster of hotspots to the west comprise an independent and unrelated crime cluster at a hospital.

By 2011 the McDonalds hotspot emerges and remains a trouble spot.

By 2012 a hotel north of McDonalds emerges as another crime location but McDonalds corner gets worse. The Lighthouse, a homeless shelter to the south, expands. For a year little changes, until the McDonalds shuts down.

McDonalds restaurant demolished in 2013 during an decline in overall crimes in the area. The hotel hotspot remains but interviews suggest very few of the McDonalds offenders are migrating north. Rather they are beginning to travel south to the Lighthouse.
Calls for service drop in all locations. Calls at the McDonalds plummet along with the demolished building. The Lighthouse experiences a significant increase in calls for service, suggesting a “diffusion of detriment”. Interviews suggest the increase is unrelated to the hospital or hotel crime decrease.

Monthly call loads indicate an almost nine-fold increase in Lighthouse call loads compared to McDonalds in earlier years.

Interviews indicate a number of the McDonalds offenders have displaced their activity to the Lighthouse. The 9-fold increase may represent a diffusion of detriment as relocated offenders may be not only locating at the shelter but also victimizing people in this area, including the homeless at the shelter, causing multiplicative negative impacts at Lighthouse.

This is on-going exploratory research. Preliminary results suggest Phillips' warning regarding displacement theory may be correct.

Preliminary results also suggest a diffusion of detriment may have emerged from displaced offenders. That in turn may have resulted not in an overall crime reduction, but a crime increase.

More thorough ethnographic research with in-depth offender interviews are needed. Not on spatial displacement, but on all kinds. The WDQ will not reveal the problem of diffusion of detriment.

Displacement remains a major concern for CPTED practitioners.

Is there convincing research that displacement isn’t a nightmare?

What does displacement mean for the ethical practitioner?

Opportunity reduction tactics like target hardening (or demolishing a building) are vulnerable to displacement problems. That is because they hack at the branches, they don’t dig at the roots.

Research on displacement is embryonic, spatially biased, and lacks ethnographic and detailed offender studies. Conclusions from current research are premature.

CPTED practitioners must consider all forms of displacement, prepare communities for its possibility, and ensure they avoid the potential harm from diffusion of detriment.