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In Defence of Walkability as a Crime Prevention Strategy

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ABSTRACT

New Urbanist ideas promoting walkability have many purported economic, social, public health and environmental benefits. But they have been criticised by proponents of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED), who have blamed street connectivity for facilitating target recognition; providing offenders with access and escape routes, and weakening informal surveillance by making it harder to distinguish locals from non-locals. This view has been corroborated by more recent evidence that has consistently found a positive association between different indexes of walkability and street crime. In this paper, we challenge the consensus portraying walkable neighbourhoods as criminogenic by highlighting two key issues – one methodological, the other substantive - that have been overlooked by CPTED and environmental criminology more broadly. First, the focus on crime counts which confounds crime risk with the number of human interactions in the physical world. Second, the recurring neglect of how walkable neighbourhoods reduce crime beyond their borders, something that becomes clear once motoring offences – the most common form of street crime – are brought within the analytic frame. Once we do this, we argue, it is apparent that - by indirectly promoting car dependency – crime prevention programmes such as *Secured by Design* inadvertently promote criminal harm. Finally, we explore the points of intersection between CPTED and walkability. Neighbourhoods can be made simultaneously more vibrant, sustainable and safe by reducing road - not street – connectivity, as proposed by urban regeneration strategies such as low traffic neighbourhoods.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of ‘walkability’ has been promoted by New Urbanist theorists and planners, who have made a compelling case for the economic, social, public health and environmental benefits of built environments that support walking as a safe, convenient, and appealing mode of travel (Southworth & Owens, 1993; Speck 2012; Moreno 2024). Walkability means creating environments that make it easy for people to get around by walking (or wheeling), and forms of urban planning that so far as possible bring basic provisioning within reasonable distance of people’s homes. Under such guiding principles, a growing number of cities are adopting urban designs promoting density, connectivity, and mixed use, with the aim of reducing car-dependency, facilitating the accessibility of everyday amenities, and improving environmental sustainability and the social vitality of public space.

Despite their multiple benefits, urban reforms promoting walkability have not been without their critics, some noisy, others less so. The ‘15-minute city’ has become an unlikely *bête noire* of right-wing populists who loudly and angrily protest about the threat to mobility freedom posed by planters and bollards, while *Reform UK* leader Nigel Farage mutters gravely about ‘climate lockdowns’ (Marquet et al. 2025). Much of the attendant cacophony no doubt flows from disinformation campaigns (Climate Action Against Disinformation, 2023) funded by state propaganda from hostile countries such as Russia, and/or lobby groups from the oil and

car industry, as it has been shown to be the case with respect to the spread of tobacco, vaccine and climate change disinformation (Warner et al., 2022). With rather less fanfare and hyperbole, another set of critics have also emerged – namely, environmental criminologists and crime prevention practitioners who claim that New Urbanism fosters street crime. It is these critics who are the focus of this paper.

The debate over New Urbanism and crime is a long-standing one (Kitchen, 2005; Cozens & Hillier, 2008). New Urbanism is to some extent founded on the idea that pedestrian activity and mixed-use developments generate forms of informal social surveillance that make urban environments safer, or as Jane Jacobs (1961) famously put it, they provide ‘eyes on the street’. Critics, on the other hand, tend to invoke Oscar Newman’s (1976) concept of ‘defensible space’, arguing that busier, more accessible streets can in fact erode residents’ sense of ownership, making it harder for locals to readily distinguish residents from non-residents, thereby weakening informal surveillance (Cozens, 2008).

This debate came to be formalised and empirically-tested largely through the framework of routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Under the ‘encounter hypothesis’, the presence of pedestrians is taken to strengthen capable guardianship, reducing opportunities for crime in places of greater use. By contrast, the ‘enclosure hypothesis’ proposed that increased activity heightens exposure to motivated offenders, providing offenders with more access points and escape routes, such that more enclosed, less permeable environments may ultimately be safer (Birks and Davies, 2017). The body of literature confronting those two hypotheses has consistently found that greater street connectivity – also referred as neighbourhood permeability – is associated with higher levels of property crime, mainly residential burglary (Nutter & Bevis, 1977; Johnson and Bowers, 2010; Davies and Johnson, 2015). Over the last decade, a new wave of studies has further questioned New Urbanist claims about crime. They have done so by exploring: i) different indexes of walkability, including measures of connectivity, but also other dimensions related to amenities and density; and ii) a wider range of crime types, going beyond residential burglary and encompassing all other forms of street crime (SURF Centre, 2002; Gilderbloom et al., 2015; Foster et al., 2016; Dong 2017; Cowen et al., 2019; Lee & Contreras, 2021; Louderback & Roy, 2019; Wo & Kim, 2023).

The lessons of these empirical studies have taken practical shape under the umbrella of what has become known as Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) (Jeffery, 1971; Armitage, 2013).¹ Since its inception, CPTED has had a large influence over crime policy and practice. A clear example is the UK Secured by Design programme, an award scheme operating since 1989, through which police forces seek to encourage the building industry to adopt crime prevention measures, mainly stemming from CPTED principles (Cozens et al., 2004; Secured by Design, 2025). Most of the recommendations are uncontroversial; for example, ensure adequate street lighting, secure locks, or install reinforced doors. However, Secured by Design, have explicitly endorsed cul-de-sac urban designs, insisting that ‘Cul-de-sacs that are short in length and not linked by footpaths can be very safe environments in which residents benefit from lower crime.’ (Secured by Design, 2025: 20). Beyond discouraging footpaths, they have also promoted car-dependency by

requiring private and pre-defined locations for parking. When it comes to crime prevention both researchers (Wo & Kim, 2023) and practitioners (Knowles, 2003; Cozens et al., 2004; Town & O'Toole, 2005) have repeatedly called for the adoption of single-family, single-access, cul-de-sacs as the safest form of urban design. In their judgement, the case *against* walkable neighbourhoods is compelling, maybe even closed.

There are several grounds on which this judgement might be disputed. One is to observe that making places walkable has a range of objectives that include but extend beyond questions of safety: public and mental health (getting people active and meeting people); social (tackling isolation and loneliness, building social capital); ecological (reducing carbon emissions, particulate pollution and reliance on fossil fuel), and economic (supporting the vitality of local economies). Crime prevention is, in other words, *one* among the possible effects of walkability and has to be approached in a holistic way, rather than as some kind of trump card (Harper 2022).² This is not though the path we take in this paper. We want instead to challenge head-on the current consensus about the criminogenic nature of walkability, and urge a change of course in the theory and practice of CPTED.

We do so by highlighting two key issues – one methodological, the other substantive - that have been overlooked by CPTED and environmental criminology more broadly. Our first critique relates to the adoption of crime counts as opposed to victimisation risk as the predominant outcome variable analysed in the literature, and, relatedly, the excessive emphasis placed on police-recorded property crime, residential burglary in particular (Birks and Davies, 2017). This choice confounds human interaction with risk of victimisation and inevitably points to the conclusion that more seclusion equals greater safety – in extremis, it implies that the only safe urban design is one composed of completely disconnected spaces. We then argue that enclosed spaces do not prevent but rather *increase* crime, elsewhere and in different forms. Specifically, low-density cul-de-sacs neighbourhoods, the alleged safest type of urban design, deepen car-dependency which, in turn, leads to motoring offences and other forms of street crime across the road network. The importance of this second-order effect cannot be understated: motoring offences have grown in number and proportion, accounting for 60% of all cases sentenced in England and Wales in 2024. They consume more criminal justice resources than any other crime type. Yet they have been curiously overlooked by crime prevention research on walkability.

On the back of this critique, we explore some potential points of intersection between CPTED and walkability. Specifically, we highlight the importance of distinguishing between *road* and *street* connectivity, a distinction that is often obscured in the literature. Several successful examples of CPTED have involved hardening access to motor traffic, not to pedestrians. In fact, many of the initiatives seeking to reduce traffic speed and create 'low traffic neighbourhoods' – limiting entry points to cars and vans, narrowing roads, installing chicanes, speed bumps, etc. – align with the animating principles of CPTED, and could be organically integrated within its framework.

2. The mismeasure of exposure to crime

Research exploring the impact of street connectivity and neighbourhood walkability on crime has heavily relied on police statistics. Only a fraction of those studies acknowledge that police statistics are a proxy for criminal activity; as far as we are aware none of them has attempted to adjust for such form of measurement error. This is a profound limitation of the evidence base most likely leading to bias, particularly so for the topic at hand. As is well known, police records fail to capture crimes that are never reported to the police or that they did not proactively detect (Biderman & Reiss, 1967; Skogan, 1977). This leads to measurement error,³ which could in turn lead to biased causal estimates even if the propensity to record crime is completely random (Fajnzylber et al., 2002; Pina-Sánchez et al., 2022; Pepper et al., 2010). That, however, appears to be a strong assumption, as the propensity to report crime is not equal across people (Hart & Rennison, 2003; Tarling & Morris, 2010) or neighbourhoods (Brunton-Smith et al., 2024). Nor is the propensity to detect crime by proactive policing (Chen et al., 2025).

One crucial factor known to be positively associated with crime reporting is community cohesion (Brunton-Smith et al., 2024; Weisburd et al., 2024), a neighbourhood quality that is difficult to foster in the types of single-use, single-family, and secluded residential areas that have been lauded in the crime prevention literature (Gehl, 2011; Rantakokko et al., 2014). Community cohesion – or as Cozens and Love (2017) put it, community connectivity – has been highlighted as a key crime prevention principle among researchers advancing what they term second-generation CPTED (Cozens & Love, 2017; Saville & Cleveland, 1997). These authors seek to move beyond measures addressing the built environment and consider how promoting social life in a neighbourhood helps develop the sense of place that is necessary for community self-policing.

Disconnected, low-density, neighbourhoods disincentivise foot traffic and spending time in public spaces, which in turn disincentivise the creation of public and commercial amenities, further undermining everyday interactions that are necessary to create connections across residents (Gehl, 2011). This negative loop is reinforced by the car-dependency that flows from low levels of walkability. In particular, motor traffic has been shown to increase perceptions of disorder and risk (Loader et al. 2025), both of them factors that further reduce footfall. Even more clearly, motor traffic has been shown to undermine the very community cohesion that facilitates crime reporting (Pina-Sánchez & Davies, 2025).

Beyond systematic differences in crime reporting, a similar form of bias stems from systematic differences in policing and crime detection. Police patrols are more likely to be deployed in urban centres and specific ‘hot-spots’, which also tend to be better connected and more walkable than city peripheries. It is therefore likely that the higher safety attributed to more secluded and less walkable neighbourhoods is due – to some extent – to differences in crime reporting and detecting, rather than genuine differences in criminal activity.

But is criminal activity - even when directly observable⁴ - really the best measure of individual safety or risk of victimisation? We suggest that traditional crime measures, such as the number of crime incidents experienced

in a given location over a certain period is actually a better predictor of police demand (Laufs et al., 2021) than it is of risk of victimisation, which represents the actual construct that most crime prevention researchers seek to study. This is why crime rates - with the resident population included in the denominator or controlled as an explanatory variable - are normally used to remedy the problem. However, such adjustment is only partial since the better connected and more walkable an area is the more people are drawn to it, beyond its resident count.

Most studies try to account for some of the neighbourhood features that are known to attract population flows, such as the type of economic activity, presence of transport hubs, or nightlife venues. This can help control for some of the differences in ambient population (Andresen, 2011; Malleson and Andresen, 2015), but it is always going to be a partial adjustment. So far, no study explicitly aiming to test the effect of neighbourhood connectivity or walkability on crime has made use of direct indicators of the ambient population.

The point can be pressed further. A better measure of personal safety should focus on the individual not the neighbourhood level. Specifically, rather than reflecting crime incidents per person, crime prevention research should seek to measure the number of crime incidents per human interaction. This point can be better conceptualised through an example. Imagine two neighbourhoods with the same population total, population density, and crime rate, each with impermeable borders so no one enters or leaves. The only difference is that neighbourhood A is defined by an urban design where spending time outside one's residence is an appealing activity while neighbourhood B lacks spaces conducive of human interaction in public. Personal safety – and certainly its subjective perception - would be higher in the former than the latter, since the risk of victimisation per interaction with other human beings is lower. However, this difference would have escaped all research based on police statistics, even if they controlled for the residential or ambient population.

In short, when we consider that: i) police statistics systematically overestimate criminal activity in areas where detecting and reporting crime is more likely, and ii) where the ambient population exceeds the resident population, then the corollary is clear: the evidence base portraying better connected and walkable neighbourhoods as criminogenic is highly questionable. This conclusion is corroborated in Foster et al. (2016), the only study exploring the effect of walkability on crime that relied both on police statistics and self-reported victimisation. The authors found the criminogenic effect of walkability widely reported in the literature. However, the sign of this effect was reversed when subjective measures of victimisation were used.

One exception to this conclusion is research focused on burglary. This is the main crime type that has been considered in the literature exploring street connectivity. Focusing on burglary allows researchers to change the unit of analysis from individuals to households, which - for analytical purposes - can be considered to be fixed in time and space, eliminating the fluctuation and systematic differences across neighbourhoods introduced by the ambient population. Similarly, we could expect that questions of social cohesion or differential policing place a lesser role in the probability of reporting or detecting burglaries compared to other forms of street crime. However, the focus on burglary raises additional questions about the external validity of the street

connectivity literature. This is especially so if we consider how burglary rates have fallen over the last three decades across much of the Western world. At its peak, in 1994, a total of 53,019 offenders were convicted with charges of burglary (residential and commercial) in England and Wales (Home Office, 2004); in 2024 this figure has dropped to less than a fifth, recording a total of 9,798 offenders, representing 0.8% of all sentences imposed in 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2025). In stark contrast stand motoring offences, which in 2024 represented 60.6% of all sentences imposed in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2025), over a quarter more than in 2003 when they accounted for 47.4% of sentences (Home Office, 2004). Yet these offences have been completely – and curiously - disregarded in the crime prevention literature focusing on street connectivity and walkability.

3. Motoring offences: A systematically neglected form of street crime

Motoring offences have been overlooked not only by CPTED scholars, but also by the broader parent fields of criminology and crime science. There are several important exceptions (see Loader 2025, for a review). But these pale in comparison with the research efforts devoted to interpersonal violence or acquisitive crime. For the most part, motoring offences are seen more as an engineering problem, best left to transport and public health studies. This is most likely explained by the presumption that, unlike other forms of crime, motoring offences are typically unintentional and committed by that strange criminological subject: the ‘law-abiding offender’. This position, however, is exceedingly short-sighted.

Motoring offences are the biggest offence group processed by the criminal justice system, by far. In 2024, in England and Wales, criminal courts processed 751,536 cases of motoring offences, imposing 695,231 sentences (Ministry of Justice, 2025). Such figures might be dismissed for the multiple motoring crimes that represent less serious summary offences not posing a direct threat, such as failing to put on a seat belt or using a motor vehicle uninsured against third party risk (representing approximately 1% and 10% of the total of motoring offences proceeding against in England and Wales in 2024), or that even when presenting a threat no harm was realised, such as speeding offences (29.4% of the total). Yet, regardless of the level of harm that can be attributed to such offences, their sheer volume represents a significant drain on the resources of the multiple criminal agencies tasked with processing them.

Large volumes of motoring offences represent longer processing times, lower probation monitoring capacity, and lower charge and conviction rates for all other offence types, in turn leading to a higher share of criminals walking free, with a share of those reoffending. This is particularly the case in overstretched criminal justice systems like that of England and Wales (Luo, 2023; Victims’ Commissioner for England and Wales, 2025). Yet the implications of the strain induced by motoring offences is seldom acknowledged in the CPTED literature. Tellingly, Knowles (2003) sought to estimate the hypothetical higher crime for a new urbanist area in terms of the cost for police time; he forgot to consider the strain added by motoring offences to the police while ignoring the crime prevention role played by other criminal justice agencies.

Speeding offences, together with other motoring offences such as dangerous driving, can also undermine individual perceptions of safety. That is, even when no direct harm in the form of a collision occurs, motoring offences can lead to multiple forms of indirect harm, especially when taking place in urban areas. Motor traffic represents the main feature of the built environment identified by both senior citizens and parents of young children when asked for the reasons for not spending time outdoors or letting their children play outside on their own (Egan & Pope, 2024; Rantakokko et al., 2014).

Perhaps hardest to understand is the neglect of the specific subgroup of motoring offences that involve violence. In 2024, in England and Wales, 1,128 convictions for causing serious injury by dangerous driving or by driving while disqualified, and 377 for causing death by dangerous, careless, or otherwise illegal driving, were recorded. These only represent 1.6% and 0.5% of all motoring offence-related convictions in 2024. But they represent a much more meaningful share when compared to equivalent forms of violence from non-motoring offences. For example, the 1,128 convictions for causing serious injury by dangerous driving represent about a quarter of the 4,403 convictions for grievous bodily harm (with and without intent, including racially aggravated cases), while the 377 convictions for causing death by dangerous or illegal driving are almost as high as the 389 convictions for murder recorded in the same year.

A wide range of causes lie behind the commission of motoring offences. Alcohol or drug consumption is a necessary precursor of ‘driving under the influence’ and a likely cause of other offences related to reckless driving, while poverty might be a leading cause of driving without a valid insurance, or without a licence. It is however self-evident that the one common cause behind all motoring offences is motor vehicles. The higher the number of motor vehicles, and miles driven by motor vehicles, the more motoring offences should be expected.

By fostering and supporting car-dependency, crime prevention strategies promoting single-use, single-family, low-density, cul-de-sac urban designs might have managed to reduce residential burglary, but they have done so at the expense of expanding motoring offences. Residents of car-dependent suburbs not only drive more than city centre dwellers; they also tend to be more likely to advocate for policies reducing the cost and inconvenience of driving in the form free parking and unfettered car access to city centres (Henderson, 2013; Klein et al., 2022). For context, the number of cars registered in the UK has grown by 55% in the last three decades, from approximately 21.2 million in 1994 to 32.9 million in 2024 (Yurday, 2025), while the average weight of new cars has grown by 25% in just seven years, from 1,553kg in 2016 to 1,947kg in 2023 (Martin, 2024).

Importantly, car-dependency leads to an extreme form of crime displacement, so much so that even if the street connectivity/walkability literature had considered motoring offences, the criminogenic effect of promoting single-use secluded neighbourhoods would still have been underestimated. Research on the effect of street connectivity and walkability on crime has relied on either: i) cross-sectional designs exploring the variability of spatial units such as neighbourhoods or streets within higher areas such as whole cities, or ii) before and after

comparisons for smaller spatial areas like neighbourhoods following a discrete intervention in time. Such research designs fail to detect the diffusing criminogenic effect of cars, which spills over the location of residence of the owner and spreads through the road network. That is, the literature has failed to notice how making certain neighbourhoods more secluded - and therefore less walkable more car-dependent - leads to a negative externality in provoking motoring offences elsewhere throughout the road network.⁵ Even more rigorous research considering potential crime displacement would have underestimated the full criminogenic effect of promoting secluded neighbourhoods. Because crime displacement induced by car-dependency is diffused through the road network, it reaches far wider than the areas that are customarily considered as potentially affected by a displacement effect, namely the immediately contiguous neighbourhoods to where the crime prevention took place.

This argument holds even if motoring offences are ignored and the focus is restricted to non-motoring street crime, possibly even if the focus is just on residential burglary. Researchers who advocate for rational choice-based theories of crime would acknowledge that cars are a crucial vector for certain types of crime that require weight carrying and where a premeditated escape route has been identified, thereby lowering the cost of crime (Felson & Clarke, 1998).

Yet this is not the only way motoring traffic affects other forms of street crime beyond motoring offences. Motor traffic leads to stress, making violence more likely (Herts et al., 2012), the deterioration of the built environment sending cues to offenders about non-enforceability of the law in the area (Wilson & Kelling, 2011), while the social connections upon which informal surveillance relies whither. We could therefore invoke criminogenic mechanisms highlighted by strain theory (Agnew, 1992), social disorganisation theory (Bursik and Robert, 1988), or collective efficacy (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1997) to anticipate that motoring traffic impacts street crime beyond motoring offences (Pina-Sánchez & Davies, 2025). In fact, there is evidence backing those three mechanisms. Beland and Brent (2018) found that after controlling for temporal and spatial heterogeneity, extreme traffic conditions (above the 95th percentile) in Los Angeles were associated with a 9% increase in domestic violence. Pina-Sánchez and Davies (2025) showed that heavier motor traffic in neighbourhoods lead to increases in perceived street crime partially mediated by a reduction in trust in neighbours and perceived presence of litter and graffiti in the neighbourhood.

4. CPTED and New Urbanism reconciled? Low traffic - and low crime - neighbourhoods

The urban connectivity debate has often been cast as a contest between antagonistic positions - enclosure versus encounter, grid versus cul-de-sac (Cozens & Hillier, 2008). These dichotomies may help empirical researchers in formalising hypotheses. They remain, however, misleading as they are confounded by a third factor, type of traffic.⁶ A close reading of the approaches formulated by the authors often cited as proponents of each position in fact reveals a degree of overlapping consensus around the negative effects of motor traffic. Yet researchers and - most frustratingly - practitioners and policy-makers involved in crime prevention continue to

focus on connectivity as a whole, failing to consider differences in the share of space dedicated to motor and foot traffic.

Jane Jacobs and Oscar Newman – the two authors commonly couched as the main respective proponents of connected and secluded spaces - both place informal surveillance as the foundation of effective crime prevention strategies. Perhaps the most marked difference between them was that Newman expects informal surveillance to be conducted mainly by residents, while Jacobs takes this responsibility to be dispersed among, *inter alia*, shopkeepers and anonymous walkers. Further, Newman depicts outsiders to the neighbourhood as a force undermining the sense of territoriality, whereas Jacobs insists on the benefits for legal compliance of a multiplicity of street users and uses. These differences most likely stem from the specific urban areas they had in mind when elaborating their theories - Jacobs explicitly referring to cities (Jacobs, 1961), while Newman referred to smaller spatial residential areas, most famously to public housing projects (Newman, 1976).

It is, however, misleading to present these views as polar opposites in a debate around street connectivity without first noting that both authors agreed on the criminogenic effect of road traffic. Jacobs – the alleged pro-connectivity figurehead – vehemently opposed the expansion of the road footprint within urban areas, whereas Newman – the supposed poster-boy of anti-connectivity – commonly resorted to road closures as a crime prevention tool. Their positions on footpath connectivity cannot even be considered confrontational: both Jacobs and Newman highlight the importance of facilitating routes that are regularly used and surrounded by outward looking buildings.

Closing roads to motor traffic while maintaining access to pedestrians is exactly what Oscar Newman recommended in some of the most successful applications of ‘defensible space’, as he recognised that through traffic in residential areas reduces the felt sense of ownership of public space. This was the core element, for example, of his ‘mini-neighbourhoods’ regeneration project in Five Oaks, Dayton, Ohio, which stemmed from the realisation that the streets of this neighbourhood had become part of a network of rat-run traffic. ‘The effect’, Newman wrote (1996: 32), ‘was to burden its streets so heavily as to make them unsuitable for normal, quiet residential use’. His proposed restructuring involved cutting vehicular roads to create groups of three to six streets that can only be entered and exited through one point. For Newman, this restructuring:

[...] completely changes the character of the streets (instead of being long, directional avenues laden with traffic, they become places where children can play safely and neighbors can interact). [...] Fewer cars make it easier to recognize neighbors - and strangers. [...] There would no longer be a multitude of escape routes open to them down every city street. A call to the police by any resident would mean that criminals and their clients would be meeting the police on their way out. [...] The subdivision of a community into mini-neighborhoods is intended to encourage the interaction of neighbors. Parents will watch their children playing in the now quiet streets and get to know each other. They will no longer feel locked up in their houses, facing the world alone. (Newman, 1996: 41)

This form of street closure focused entirely on roads; no barriers were introduced to impede pedestrian crossings. As Newman (1996: 43) put it: '[...] traffic is exactly what we are trying to avoid'. The result of this intervention was a 26% reduction in overall crime and a 50% reduction in violent crime. Coincidentally, this drop in crime was achieved while reducing cut-through traffic by 67%, overall traffic volume by 36%, and traffic collisions by 40%. Beyond road closures, Newman also advocates – even if only implicitly – for one directional and narrower roads. In his depiction of the reach of surveillance from street facing buildings, he specifies that only the very central portion of each street is truly non-defensible in nature, as when the building is adequately designed, it can project surveillance over the sidewalk and street. He adds that: 'If the street were narrow, even the activity in this central portion would be considered accountable to neighboring residents' (Newman, 1996: 19).

Nor is this a one-off example. In his review of similar interventions Clarke (2002) found broadly similar results. This landmark study also illustrates our argument regarding the questionable framing of connectivity as a problem without registering differences between motor and pedestrian traffic. Clarke reviewed eleven interventions, ten of them involved road closures preventing access to cars, while allowing footfall through, only one of them specifically focused on closing alleyways (Bowers et al., 2004) preventing pedestrian access.⁷ Yet the report was entitled 'Closing streets and alleys to reduce Crime' and the focus of that one exception in his review was once again residential burglary. In fact, the same argument could be made with regards to the connectivity and crime literature which rarely differentiates by type of connectivity, while predominantly focusing on road (i.e. motor traffic) connectivity.⁸ More flagrantly, much of that literature documents how it is particularly the presence of fast roads that increases the risk of burglary (Taylor & Gottfredson, 1987; White, 1990).

One last recommendation heralded by Newman to create defensible space - with which Jacobs would agree - relates to parking. Newman recommends creating internal neighbourhood courtyards where residents can store their cars. This is so the visibility of the street is not encumbered by cars left in front of the building. We can infer that Jacobs would support Newman's recommendation as she highlighted the importance of adequate visibility to enhance the effectiveness of informal surveillance. Secured By Design (2025), however, explicitly indicates that new developments should provide parking not in the rear but preferably in front of homes, where vehicles can be directly monitored from the building and benefit from informal surveillance generated by footfall, thereby reducing the risk of vehicle theft. Besides revealing the types of crime that the police privilege (preventing vehicle theft is prioritised over other forms of street crime), this discrepancy once again illustrates how framing the debate as connectivity versus enclosure is fallacious. The relevant opposition is car-centricity versus walkability. On that question, Secured by Design has consistently proved to be an ally of the former.

Taken together, interventions seeking to: i) introduce road closures, ii) limit the share of the space dedicated to motor traffic within existing roads, and iii) eliminate parking spaces, not only redefine the framing of the debate from connectivity to car-dependency, but they also form the core of what has come to be known in the

UK as ‘low traffic neighbourhoods’ (LTNs).⁹ These are urban regeneration initiatives aligned to the New Urbanism principle of walkability, that have been growing in popularity, particularly since the Covid pandemic, when they were widely rolled-out as a means of encouraging safe social interaction. These interventions provide the opportunity to move beyond the connectivity debate and estimate the effect of walkability on crime in a quasi-experimentally way. The latest evidence points at such interventions being extremely successful. For example, Furlong et al. (2025) have shown a 37% reduction in all injuries related to collisions and a 37% reduction in deaths or serious injuries within Greater London LTNs compared to adjacent areas. Furthermore, they have also been shown to reduce other forms of street crime. Goodman and Aldred (2021) demonstrated that the adoption of LTNs in the London Borough of Waltham Forest led to a 10% reduction in police-recorded crime, while Goodman et al. (2021b) showed that London neighbourhoods that implemented LTNs during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced a four-percentage-point greater reduction in assaults and other violent crimes against the person, compared to other areas.

As with any initiative limiting car traffic, LTNs have been highly controversial, a focal point in an apparent ‘culture war’ over the social meaning and uses of streets. But their effectiveness in reducing crime is quite compelling. In fact, we posit that their actual crime prevention effect has likely been underestimated. As noted in our previous section, this is due to the reduction of motoring offences in other areas beyond those covered by LTNs.

5. Conclusion

The consensus among crime prevention scholars, practitioners and policy-makers is that principles of walkability stand in opposition to crime prevention: the more secluded an area the lower the level of crime. This premise has been accepted by critics, who since the 1990s have highlighted how crime prevention strategies limiting social connectivity undermine principles of social and environmental sustainability. In this article, we have argued that there is no such trade-off between sustainability and crime prevention. Urban designs promoting walkability and limiting car-dependency do not only lead to more socially vibrant and environmentally sustainable spaces, they also reduce crime. Or expressed in negative terms, crime prevention strategies that undermine principles of walkability, have not just worsened the evolving loneliness, public health and climate crises, they have also inadvertently promoted crime.

We base this argument first on a critique of the internal validity of the empirical literature reporting a positive relationship between connectivity and walkability with crime. We argue that such association cannot be interpreted as causative. The propensity to report crime is higher in areas with higher levels of social trust, a neighbourhood trait that is more easily fostered in walkable neighbourhoods. Crime is more commonly detectable by the police in central areas, since those are patrolled more regularly, but those tend to be more walkable than peripheral areas. Lastly, the number of crimes recorded in each area, even when expressed in terms of the number of residents in that same area, cannot be interpreted as risk of victimisation, as it misses the ambient population, which is of course higher in central and more walkable areas.

Burglary represents one exception to the above criticism since for that crime type the object of analysis is shifted to the household, which unlike the individual, is fixed in place. However, here we raise a second critique pertaining to the external validity of the literature, as this has disproportionately placed its focus on burglary at the expense of other forms of crime. Most notably, it is hard to comprehend how the literature exploring the connectivity and walkability effect on crime has completely ignored motoring offences. This misallocation of research efforts appears particularly problematic if one considers how burglaries currently represent less than 1% of the sentences imposed in England and Wales, while motoring offences stand at roughly 60%.

Yet the core of our critique goes beyond the shocking disproportional attention that different crime types have received, and focuses instead on illustrating the indirect criminogenic effect induced by crime prevention researchers as a result of that oversight. By promoting single-use, single-family, low-density, cul-de-sac residential developments, crime prevention researchers, practitioners and policy-makers have encouraged car-dependency. This, in turn, leads to an increase in motoring offences, not only in those car-centric neighbourhoods, but across the road system. This is a displacement effect that likely goes beyond motoring offences, since road traffic has been shown to affect well-established precursors of other forms of street crime such as collective efficacy, social disorganisation, and stress. Yet these indirect effects have been largely overlooked in the crime prevention literature.

CPTED research failing to see the impact of motoring offences is peculiarly odd given how: i) unlike other forms of violence, traffic harm is preventable, as recently illustrated by the implementation of the European Union 'Vision Zero' strategy by Helsinki, where not a single road death was recorded in the 12-month period up to 2025 (EU Urban Mobility Observatory, 2025); ii) many of the interventions to curb motoring offences (such as speed cameras) have been regularly tested and shown to be effective by studies on situational crime prevention - a sister field to CPTED (Clarke, 2017) similarly based on routine activity theory and rational choice theory (Bourne & Cooke, 1993; Rudlin & Falk, 1995; Simpson et al., 2025); and iii) the two key figures that CPTED recurrently refer to as their main inspiration, Jane Jacobs and Oscar Newman, both saw cut-through traffic and wide roads as criminogenic features of the built environment.

This colossal blind spot on the part of crime prevention practitioners represents a significant case in point of what Walker et al. (2023) term 'motonormativity', the unconscious collective disposition that leads people to accept harms produced by motor traffic they would judge unacceptable in any other domain of life.

Motonormativity shapes what we consider to be a crime, and the levels of culpability we associate with different kinds of offending. Most of us, our friends and family are drivers, making it difficult to attribute nefarious behaviour to motoring offenders and subject them to a standard treatment of 'otherness' (Wells & Savigar, 2017). This outlook might also explain why the recent Police Uplift Programme in England and Wales recruited broadly across policing roles, but didn't reverse cuts in road policing specialists specifically, despite the growing share of motoring offences.

The ever-growing number of motoring offences are a large part of the reason criminal justice systems are under increasing strain. And these are not just seat belt or minor speeding offences. Motoring offences represent some of the most prevalent modes of street violence. In England and Wales practically as many people are killed in relation to dangerous and other forms of illegal driving as a result of murder. More broadly, road injuries represent the leading cause of death for children and young adults aged 5 to 29 globally (World Health Organisation, 2023), whereas in England ‘deaths due to vehicle collisions’ were the leading cause for traumatic deaths for children aged 0 to 17 (Williams et al., 2023).

This is a problem that cannot be left solely to road engineers. A new crime prevention agenda needs to recognise motoring offences as street crime. Crime prevention strategies should not be actively promoting car-dependency. Programmes like Secured By Design encouraging the type of enclosed suburban developments that promote car-dependency should be redefined. Secured By Design does not for the most part acknowledge motoring offences. When it does, pedestrians are blamed and deemed in need of segregation to avoid collisions: ‘Physical barriers may also have to be put in place where ‘desire’ lines (unsanctioned direct routes) place users in danger, such as at busy road junctions’ (2025: 22). Secured by Design guidance makes no mention of the benefit of traffic calming measures, nor does it raise questions about the adequacy or effects of providing road traffic access to every single street in housing developments.¹⁰

But Secured by Design is not alone. A further example of a crime prevention strategy that shows similar neglect for the criminogenic role of motor traffic is the Safer Streets Mission. For example, one of the stated aims in the crime prevention toolkit designed to guide resource allocation from the Safer Streets Fund (College of Policing, 2022) has been to reduce vehicle theft. But it makes no mention of how this could be accomplished by reducing car-dependency – for example, through initiatives encouraging sustainable transport. Another stated aim is to reduce anti-social behaviour. But again no acknowledgement is made of motor traffic as a key vector of antisocial behaviour (reckless driving, road-rage, car-meets, and so on). More broadly, no crime prevention strategy in England and Wales acknowledges the crime prevention benefits of reducing motor traffic or promoting the presence of pedestrians in emptier streets. When examining the evidence base on closing roads, the Safer Streets crime prevention toolkit lumps together roads, footpaths and subway station closures. They then question their effectiveness in terms of budget and time constraints. But closing roads is one of the cheapest crime prevention measures there is, as demonstrated by the rapid deployment of low traffic neighbourhoods during Covid-19 pandemic. Often all it takes is a couple of large planters.

Low traffic neighbourhoods have been proven to be extremely effective in reducing road violence (Furlong et al., 2025; Goodman et al., 2021a), while also reducing other forms of street crime (Goodman and Aldred, 2021; Goodman et al., 2021b). It is time for crime prevention scholars, practitioners and policy-makers to acknowledge the motonormative preconceptions that shape their work and consider afresh the crime prevention potential of urban place-making that enables walkability as the preferred choice of transportation.

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Footnotes

1. CPTED has been defined as: 'The design, manipulation and management of the built environment to reduce crime and the fear of crime and to enhance sustainability through the process and application of measures at the micro (individual building/structure) and macro (neighbourhood) level' (Armitage, 2013: 23). [↵](#)
2. We are not the first to make this argument. In fact, there is a long tradition of critical crime prevention researchers who have raised questions about the social and environmental implications of promoting a narrow CPTED agenda (see, for example, Saville & Cleveland, 1997; Cozens & Love, 2017; Mihinjac & Saville, 2019; Willcocks et al., 2019). [↵](#)
3. Data quality issues affecting police statistics can alternatively be seen as a form of misclassification or missing data (Brantingham, 2018; Uzelac et al., 2025), if crime data is analysed as a binary variable rather than as a count or a rate. [↵](#)
4. For example, when measures are derived from CCTV records (Lindegaard & Bernasco, 2018). [↵](#)
5. This argument resonates with Newman's key design element of geographical juxtaposition, understood as the capacity of surrounding spaces to influence the security of adjacent areas (Cozens & Love, 2015). We take this point forward by highlighting how in relation to motor traffic, geographical juxtaposition does not just refer to the area immediately next to that under analysis, but to all others regularly accessed through the road network. [↵](#)
6. We are not the first to criticise the framing of the connectivity debate in dichotomous terms. See for example, Kitchen (2005), Cozens & Love (2009), and Armitage (2007), who emphasised the importance of context in adopting in formulating crime prevention recommendations pertaining to the adequacy of footpaths. [↵](#)
7. Once again, this study focused entirely on residential burglary. [↵](#)
8. See important exceptions in Armitage (2007) and Cozens and Love (2009). [↵](#)
9. These schemes build on initiatives from elsewhere with which they share a family resemblance, such as the Dutch 'woonerf', and Barcelona's 'super-blocks' programme (see, generally, Appleyard and Appleyard, 2020). [↵](#)
10. Interestingly, such measures are in place in the Dutch equivalent to Secured By Design. The Dutch Police Label Secure Housing recommends slow traffic lanes connecting the residential development to the rest of the network, and traffic islands at intersections to prevent motorists from driving at excessive speeds

(Jongejan & Woldendorp, 2013). This returns us to questions – that lie beyond the scope of this paper – about how crime prevention programmes are shaped by national political and mundane cultures. [↵](#)