



Place-Based Vulnerability of Christian Sacred Spaces

A Four-Component Environmental Criminology Framework for Function-Preserving Protection

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Abstract

Aim: This study conceptualises the place- and time-specific vulnerability of Christian sacred spaces and develops a framework linking openness, religious and community functions, and proportionate protection.

Methodology: The study employs a targeted integrative synthesis of scholarly literature and policy documents. The 30-source corpus was analysed qualitatively and thematically to organise recurring concepts and mechanisms within a coherent framework.

Findings: Functional openness and the predictability of routines may shape exposure to criminal opportunities; symbolic significance may influence target salience and potential harm to the community; and layered guardianship is posited as a source of protective capacity. Vulnerability can be understood through specific configurations of micro-places and micro-time windows.

Value: The study's original contribution lies in translating the four components into a framework for structured site-level diagnosis, a graduated intervention model and an incident-based learning cycle. The framework supports proportionate, function-preserving protection but is neither a predictive tool nor a validated risk-scoring instrument.

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Introduction

The central challenge in protecting Christian sacred spaces is to preserve openness while proportionately reducing vulnerability, rather than to close them off entirely. A church and its immediate surroundings constitute more than a built environment requiring protection: they are places of worship, contemplation, encounter, mourning and celebration, as well as community support and charitable assistance. Such sites are often accessible without visitors having to identify themselves in advance, yet this openness may also create opportunities for crime in particular places and at particular times. Protection is therefore a matter of both security and function. Inadequate supervision may create opportunities for theft, vandalism, threats or targeted violence, whereas constant or excessively conspicuous controls may deter visitors and undermine the welcoming character of the site. Religious communities need security that is compatible with their mission and identity, rather than simply more protection (Scheitle & Ulmer, 2018).

Incidents associated with sacred spaces do not constitute a uniform category of events. Access and gaps in supervision may be decisive in opportunistic theft; peripheral areas and periods at the margins of regular activity may be decisive in vandalism; and religious symbolism, timing and the message intended for the community may be decisive in bias-motivated or targeted acts. Victimisation therefore cannot be attributed exclusively to prejudicial motivations; crime opportunity structures arising from patterns of access and use may also play a role (Corcoran et al., 2020; Corcoran et al., 2026; Ulmer & Scheitle, 2020).

The religious character of a site does not, in itself, establish a bias motivation; determining such a motivation requires the offender's conduct, messages, timing and other bias indicators to be assessed together (Dinók, 2013; OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [OSCE/ODIHR], 2025). Symbolic significance thus primarily shapes target salience and potential harm to the community, rather than increasing exposure arising from access (Iganski, 2001). International documents link the protection of religious sites to the preservation of openness, proportionality and community participation. The European Commission emphasises respect for the original character of the site (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2021). The United Nations (UN) highlights the cycle of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery

(United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2022), while European guidance focuses on human factors, local capacities and inter-agency cooperation (Dugato & Carbone, 2024; Lazari et al., 2025; OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). These documents offer important practical recommendations, but do not provide a unified criminological explanation of the relationships between access, routines, symbolic significance and local protective capacity. This study therefore organises these dimensions into a four-component, place- and time-specific framework for application. Given their distinct theoretical roles, the components cannot be treated as additive risk variables. Openness and routines are factors shaping exposure to criminal opportunities; symbolic significance may influence target salience and potential harm to the community; and layered guardianship represents a hypothesised protective capacity. Offender motivation and the external threat environment can be regarded as contextual conditions; the unit of analysis is the configuration of a micro-place and a micro-time window; and potential harm to the community constitutes a consequence dimension.

The study's original contribution lies in developing a four-component conceptual framework, six diagnostic domains and a three-level intervention model based on that framework, and an incident-based organisational learning cycle. In this study, the term Christian sacred space denotes a religious site or place of worship, together with its functionally connected surroundings, where religious, community, cultural or charitable activities take place. This may include areas of a church, chapel, monastery or pilgrimage site that are open to visitors, as well as congregational spaces, courtyards, car parks and relevant transitional zones. The framework does not treat these sites as homogeneous: differences in denomination, settlement context, heritage status, tourism and opening hours form part of the diagnosis. Vulnerability is distinct from hazard and from quantified risk. A hazard is a potential source of harm, while risk combines the probability of an event with its consequences. In this study, vulnerability denotes the spatial, temporal, organisational and symbolic conditions that may facilitate the commission of an act, influence target selection or reduce the likelihood of detection and intervention. Potential harm to the community is a separate consequence dimension, which symbolic significance may amplify. In the absence of incident-based probability data, the study does not produce an aggregate risk score or predictive ranking.

The range of events considered may extend from threats and harassment through vandalism, theft and arson to targeted physical violence. These categories differ in their mechanisms, severity and underlying motivations, and therefore do not form a linear escalation sequence. Recurrent events, site-specific patterns and critical warning signals that do not result in harm may provide organisational

knowledge that is not necessarily captured in formal crime statistics. Guardianship extends beyond physical guarding and technological surveillance. A capable guardian pays attention to the target and may deter an offender through their presence or actions (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The operation of guardianship can be described as a process involving willingness to supervise, the ability to detect events and readiness to intervene (Reynald, 2009; 2010). A capable guardian can be distinguished from a place manager, who has the authority and responsibility to shape a site's rules, access arrangements and day-to-day operation (Eck & Madensen, 2018; Felson, 1995). Resilient, function-preserving protection integrates prevention, preparedness, response, recovery and learning into a coherent system of capabilities. Its aim is not to eliminate hazards entirely, but to enable the community to maintain its religious and social functions while managing threats. A measure is function-preserving when it is necessary, proportionate and sustainable, and does not unduly restrict access, participation or the experience of being welcomed.

The study addresses three research questions:

- 1) Through what mechanisms may functional openness and the predictability of routines shape exposure to criminal opportunities, and symbolic significance shape target salience and potential harm to the community?
- 2) Through what theoretical and organisational mechanisms may layered guardianship contribute to reducing vulnerability within specific configurations of micro-places and micro-time windows?
- 3) How can the four-component theoretical framework be translated into a proportionate, function-preserving framework for site-level diagnosis, an intervention model and an organisational learning process?

Methodology

The study is theoretical and conceptual in nature and employs a targeted integrative synthesis of scholarly literature and policy documents. Integrative synthesis organises concepts from different disciplines within a common framework (Snyder, 2019). Thematic analysis of the documents served to identify recurring categories (Bowen, 2009), while framework development followed the logic of concept identification, comparison and synthesis proposed by Jabareen (2009). The study is neither a comprehensive systematic review nor an empirical impact evaluation. The source base comprised 30 items: three methodological works, 22 theoretical or empirical scholarly publications, and five institutional

or policy documents. The methodological works provided the foundations for the approach adopted; the theoretical and empirical scholarly works informed the interpretation of theoretical mechanisms; and the institutional and policy documents served to identify practical principles. As this is not a primary empirical study, population estimates, confidence intervals and effect sizes relating to individuals or sites are not applicable. Sources were identified through repeated targeted searches, citation tracking from key works and reviews of the public document repositories of international organisations; the corpus was closed on 23 August 2026. To be included, a work had to address at least one of the following: access and routines, spatial or temporal concentration, guardianship and place management, symbolic target selection, site-level vulnerability, proportionate protection or organisational learning. Selection sought to cover these thematic categories rather than exhaust the entire literature. The analysis comprised four sequential stages: identifying recurring concepts and mechanisms; distinguishing theoretical, empirical, normative and operational claims; organising findings thematically; and, finally, translating the components into questions for site-level diagnosis, intervention levels and a learning process based on repeated measurement. The main organising categories were access, routines, symbolic significance, guardianship, micro-places, micro-time windows, organisational capacity and proportionality. Given the heterogeneity of the source material, no uniform, score-based quality appraisal was conducted. Some policy recommendations draw on expert experience and institutional consensus rather than impact evaluations and therefore do not demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions. The synthesis is theoretical and heuristic: neither incident probabilities nor predictive site rankings can be derived from it. Its applicability and measurement reliability require examination through further site-based research.

Theoretical foundations and the four-component framework

Foundations in environmental criminology

The routine activity theory developed by Cohen and Felson (1979) explains the occurrence of crime in terms of the convergence in space and time of a motivated offender and a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian. Its relevance to the study of sacred spaces lies in the way the rhythm of religious activities determines when and where people and valuables are present, when entrances are open, and when gaps in guardianship arise. Routines are not inherently problematic; they underpin community life. Their criminological

relevance stems from the way they structure target availability and the intensity of guardianship in space and time. Empirical research on religious congregations also highlights the importance of crime opportunity factors. Institutional activities may be associated with property-crime victimisation through the exposure of people and property (Corcoran et al., 2020). Ulmer and Scheitle (2020) examine the relationships between crime opportunity factors, structural disadvantages and incident types, while Scheitle and Halligan (2018) suggest that the adoption of security measures is also associated with perceived threat and organisational structure. A church should therefore be understood as both an organisation and a site whose exposure varies. Situational crime prevention focuses on modifying the immediate conditions that create opportunities for offending. In the framework proposed by Clarke (1997), interventions follow four principal approaches: increasing the effort required and the risk of detection, reducing anticipated rewards, and removing excuses. In sacred spaces, however, the selection of measures is also shaped by the requirement to preserve openness, accessibility and dignity. A theoretically justified control may be disproportionate if it is unacceptable to the community, unsustainable, or restricts the essence of religious practice. Situational prevention should therefore be applied as an approach that aligns the problem, place and time, rather than merely as a catalogue of technical measures. Priority is given to interventions that address a specific zone, time window or incident type, rather than continuous controls across the entire site. The aim is not to control every entry, but to reduce gaps in guardianship where and when the functioning of the site and previous experience warrant it.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) holds that the built environment shapes visibility, the clarity of spatial use, access and community control (Cozens et al., 2005). Natural surveillance, a well-maintained environment, legible routes and signs of territorial responsibility may reduce uncertainty, but the physical environment alone does not guarantee active intervention. Reynald (2011) therefore links CPTED to the potential for active guardianship. Guardianship in sacred spaces involves multiple actors: it may encompass informal vigilance by visitors and congregation members, designated roles for volunteers, place management responsibilities held by employees or clergy, the presence of a private security provider, and support from the police and local government. The wider organisational and regulatory environment can strengthen or weaken the work of those exercising direct supervision (Sampson et al., 2010). Layered guardianship thus consists of roles, reporting and information flows, authority and feedback. Incidents may be disproportionately concentrated within small spatial units, although the degree of concentration depends on the

method of measurement and the spatial unit used (Lee et al., 2017; Weisburd, 2015). Movements and activities also shape criminal opportunities (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1995). This study defines a micro-place as a functionally distinct part of a property or its surroundings with its own profile of access, visibility and guardianship, such as an entrance, foyer, courtyard, car park or transition to the street. Applying the concept of micro-places within a site is an analytical extension, rather than an empirically established finding. Temporal differentiation is equally important. Ordinary weekday opening with low visitor numbers, Sunday worship, major religious festivals, cultural events, arrival, departure and the period immediately after closing produce different patterns of footfall and guardianship. This study defines a micro-time window as a short, recurring period associated with a particular activity. Vulnerability is therefore not a constant attribute of the site as a whole; it can be understood through specific configurations of micro-places and micro-time windows.

The four-component framework

The synthesis organises the four components into a relational and configurational framework of place-based vulnerability. Openness and routines do not in themselves cause crime, but may shape the conditions that create opportunities for offending; symbolic significance may influence target salience and potential harm to the community. Layered guardianship is posited as a mitigating mechanism within the framework. The components are not additive factors. Functional openness means that, by virtue of its mission, a sacred space enables entry, participation and presence. It does not imply a complete absence of control: a site can remain open while providing clear information, maintaining a visible community presence and following consistent, non-stigmatising operating procedures. Its relevance to vulnerability lies in the exposure to criminal opportunities arising from access. The recurring patterns of religious life create a sense of community and predictability. The same rhythm may provide information about attendance, open doors, staff presence, the availability of valuables and the distribution of attention. The predictability of routines shapes the temporal structure of exposure. The task of prevention is not to disrupt routines arbitrarily, but to identify the associated gaps in guardianship and critical transitions. A place derives its symbolic significance from its cultural, religious, historical and identity-forming meanings (Nagem et al., 2026; Zellman & Malji, 2023). A sacred space may consequently become a target through which a message is conveyed: an attack may seek to intimidate or exclude the community, beyond

causing physical damage. Symbolic significance does not increase the likelihood of every type of incident; it may primarily influence target salience and the harm caused to the community.

Layered guardianship is the component of the framework that represents protective capacity. Its hypothesised effectiveness depends on four interdependent capabilities: detection, reporting, decision-making and proportionate intervention. This requires actors who can recognise deviations, know the reporting pathway, and possess the appropriate authority and capabilities. The presence of large numbers of people does not in itself constitute effective guardianship: where roles are unclear, detection may not lead to reporting, and reporting may not lead to a decision. The continuity of this process must be assessed separately for each relevant micro-place and micro-time window. The ordinary presence of community members may provide a form of control that imposes little burden; the involvement of designated volunteers or employees may increase consistency; the place manager's decision-making authority may provide the basis for an organisational response; and links with the police and local government may provide external support for major events or in response to threats. In the proposed collaboration, the police act as a professional partner and, when necessary, intervene in a formal capacity, rather than providing permanent guardianship. These relationships are configurational: the physical, social and organisational environment influences how all the components operate, while layered guardianship is hypothesised to reduce the likelihood that exposure to criminal opportunities will result in an incident, or to mitigate an incident's consequences, through detection, reporting, decision-making, proportionate intervention and learning. The following four propositions (P1–P4) articulate relationships for subsequent empirical investigation that have not yet been substantiated.

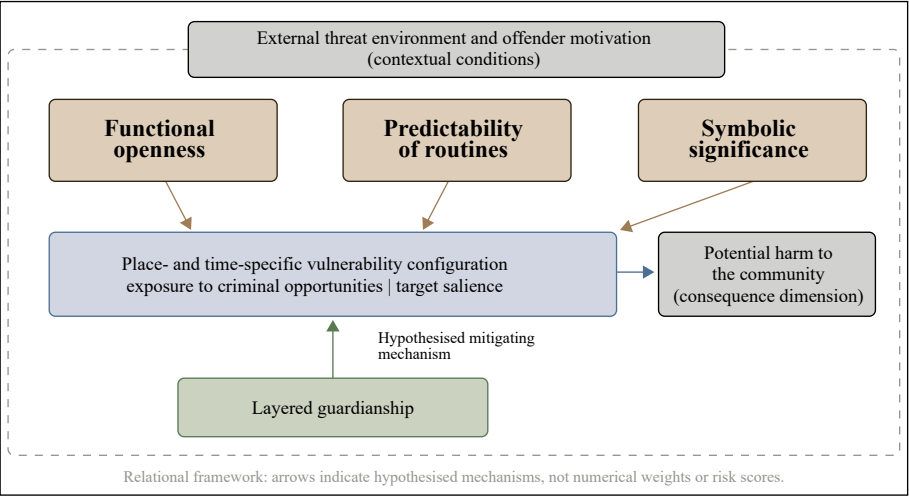
- P1.** Under equivalent guardianship and environmental conditions, greater functional openness and greater predictability of routines are expected to be associated with higher exposure to criminal opportunities. This relationship can be assessed by examining the proportions of active entrances, uncontrolled routes and time windows with limited guardianship.
- P2.** At equivalent levels of exposure to criminal opportunities, the exposure-adjusted incident rate is expected to be lower where the process of detection, reporting, decision-making and intervention is continuous. This continuity may be a more informative indicator of protective capacity than the number of guardians.
- P3.** Indicators of symbolic significance are expected to be more strongly associated with target selection motivated by prejudice or intended to convey

a message, and with harm to the community, than with the exposure-adjusted rate of opportunistic property incidents.

- P4.** Given comparable security outcomes, measures directed at a specific micro-place, micro-time window or event are expected to impose fewer burdens on access, participation and staff than continuous control measures covering the entire site.

Figure 1 summarises the logic of these relationships, while Table 1 outlines the theoretical roles and potential indicators.

Figure 1
The four-component conceptual framework of place-based vulnerability



Note. Author’s own work.

Table 1
Theoretical roles and potential indicators of the four-component framework

Component	Theoretical role	Main mechanism	Potential indicators
Functional openness	Exposure to criminal opportunities arising from access	Opportunities for entry and presence	Active entrances, opening hours, transitional zones, uncontrolled routes
Predictability of routines	Temporal exposure to criminal opportunities	Recurring patterns of foot-fall and guardianship	Peak periods, periods at the margins of regular activity, waves of arrivals and departures, time windows with limited guardianship
Symbolic significance	Target salience; a potential condition for the amplification of consequences	Heightened significance of the target as a means of conveying a message	Religious and historical prominence, identity-forming role, media and public visibility, major religious festivals
Layered guardianship	Hypothesised protective capacity	Detection, reporting, decision-making and proportionate intervention	Role coverage, reporting chain, decision-making authority, response time, external links

Note. Author's own work.

Practical application

Site-level diagnosis and intervention

Practical application translates the four-component theoretical framework into a structured framework for site-level diagnosis. The two levels do not correspond mechanically: the theoretical framework explains why vulnerability may arise, whereas diagnosis identifies where, when and within which organisational processes vulnerability manifests itself at a particular site. Until a standardised data collection protocol has been established and reliability assessed, this approach constitutes a diagnostic framework proposed for testing, rather than a validated audit. The diagnostic approach proposed on the basis of the synthesis covers six areas of assessment: access and functional openness; the visibility of micro-places; routines and micro-time windows; symbolic significance and the external threat environment; the functioning of layered guardianship; and organisational capacity and learning. This structure is intended to link each theoretical component to questions that can be answered through site assessment and to actionable outputs.

Table 2 summarises the relationship between the components and the areas of assessment.

Table 2*Mapping the four-component framework onto six areas of site-level diagnostic assessment*

Area of assessment	Related component / contextual condition	Core diagnostic question	Proposed output
Access and functional openness	Functional openness	Where, when, via which routes and under what conditions can people enter?	Access map and opening-hours profile
Micro-places and visibility	Functional openness, layered guardianship	In which transitional zones does the detection process break down?	Inventory of blind spots within micro-places and of transitional zones
Routines and micro-time windows	Predictability of routines	When do visitor flows, access to valuables and supervision change?	Temporal exposure profile
Symbolic significance and the threat environment	Symbolic significance, external threat environment	Which symbolic features and events increase target salience, and what external threat indicators can be identified?	Event and threat profile
Layered guardianship	Layered guardianship	Who detects, who reports, who decides and who intervenes? Where does the process break down?	Chain of responsibility, reporting and response
Organisational capacity and learning	Layered guardianship, organisational resilience	Which measures can be sustained lawfully, proportionately and in a manner that can be verified?	Implementation and review plan

Note. Author's own work.

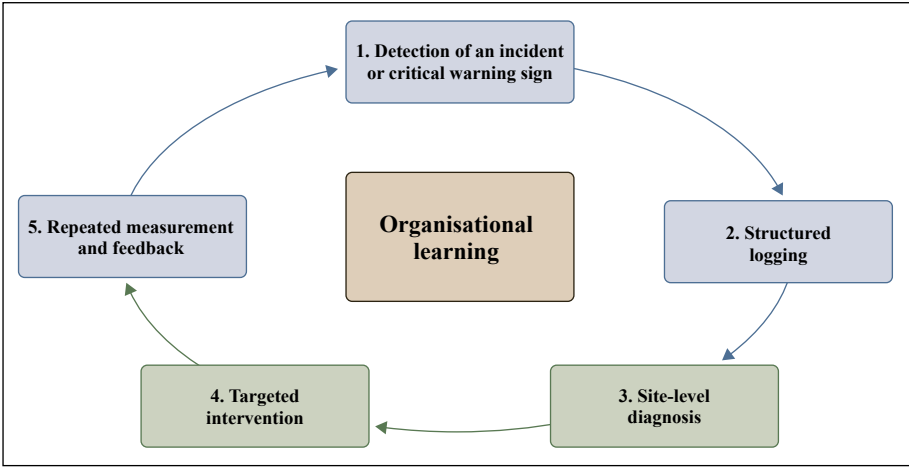
Site-level diagnosis can inform three levels of intervention of increasing intensity. The basic protection level imposes little burden on the site's functions: it includes improving visibility, providing clear information, maintaining an orderly environment, ensuring community presence, clarifying roles and practising reporting procedures. The targeted reinforcement level focuses on an identified zone, time window or asset. The event-based level involves temporarily heightened preparedness, warranted by a major religious festival, a well-attended event or credible threat information. A higher level of protection may be recommended where justified by a documented pattern at a particular micro-place or within a micro-time window, a major event or a specific threat, and where measures imposing a lower burden prove insufficient. Every enhanced measure must have a designated person responsible, a predefined duration, a review date and a condition for stepping down. The assessment of proportionality must consider not only the anticipated security benefits but also potential restrictions on access, data protection risks and the burden on religious and community functions.

Incident-based organisational learning

The five elements of incident-based learning presented here adapt the United Nations cycle of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery to organisational learning (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2022). Experience gained through prevention becomes organisational knowledge when detection is followed by recording, recording by analysis, and analysis by verifiable change. An incident log may record threats, irregularities and critical events that cause no harm (near misses), as well as criminal offences. Its purpose is to identify patterns associated with particular places and times, rather than to encourage generalised suspicion. The cycle comprises detecting an event or warning signal, structured logging, site-level diagnosis, targeted intervention and repeated measurement. Security indicators may include incident and escalation rates per opening hour, visitor-hour or event; the time elapsed between detection and reporting; adherence to protocols; and the proportion of measures implemented. Indicators of function preservation may include participation, accessibility, perceived safety and programme continuity. An initial increase in the number of reports may also reflect improvements in detection and recording.

Figure 2 illustrates the feedback process.

Figure 2
The incident-based organisational learning cycle: detection, logging, diagnosis, intervention and repeated measurement



Note. Author’s own work.

Discussion and limitations

The framework extends the account of exposure to criminal opportunities offered by routine activity theory and place-based criminology by distinguishing between the symbolic salience of the target, potential harm to the community and organisational protective capacity. In doing so, it adds nuance to research that examines the victimisation of religious organisations primarily through access and organisational activity (Corcoran et al., 2020; Ulmer & Scheitle, 2020), and is consistent with findings on the organisational context of security measures (Scheitle & Halligan, 2018). The study does not propose a new causal model; its contribution lies in organising distinct mechanisms within a framework of interpretation that is specific to place and time. The framework does not assume that all incidents arise from the same mechanism. Access and gaps in supervision may be more prominent in opportunistic theft; periods at the margins of regular activity and visibility in vandalism; symbolic salience and timing in bias-motivated incidents; and external threats, the presence of crowds and the nature of the event in targeted violence. High attendance has a dual effect: it may increase exposure, but, where roles are clearly allocated, it may also strengthen naturally occurring guardianship. In practical terms, security consists of coordinated organisational practice rather than the sum of technical devices. The number of guardians or cameras cannot, on its own, substitute for clear procedures for detection, reporting, decision-making and intervention. In the proposed model of cooperation, the police are primarily responsible for liaison, assessing threat information, jointly preparing for major events and supporting post-incident feedback. Day-to-day guardianship, however, is the responsibility of the local community and the organisation operating the site. The ethical limits of application are clear: detection must not become discriminatory profiling; unfamiliar visitors must not automatically be considered suspicious; and technological surveillance must satisfy the requirements of necessity and proportionality. When publishing diagnostic findings, care must be taken to avoid disclosing specific weaknesses, access procedures and response capabilities in such detail that disclosure itself could increase vulnerability.

The purposive selection of sources may introduce coverage and confirmation bias; the documents vary in evidential weight, and coding was undertaken by a single author, preventing assessment of the reproducibility of the categories. In the absence of new site-level or incident data, neither the direction of the relationships between the components nor the hypothesised mitigating role of layered guardianship can be established. Future incident studies must also address under-reporting, differences in reporting propensity and the possibility of

reverse causality, since previous incidents may prompt stronger protection. The predominance of North American scholarship and of policy documents covering multiple religious communities and focusing on counter-terrorism limits the framework's applicability in Hungary and the wider Central European region. The Christian focus is justified by the study's intended application in Hungary and Europe, together with related earlier empirical research (Szabó & Krenner, 2026). The framework's transferability to other religious traditions requires separate investigation. The first phase of an empirical research programme should assess content validity through expert review and examine inter-observer reliability. This could be followed by prospective, multi-site construct validation and then comparative impact evaluation. Alongside security outcomes, measurement should encompass participation, accessibility, perceived safety, staff workload, programme continuity, recovery time and the implementation of corrective measures. The research must address ethical and data protection requirements in advance, as well as the conditions for publishing findings in a manner that takes security into account.

Conclusions

The synthesis answers the first research question at the level of mechanisms: functional openness may shape exposure to criminal opportunities through opportunities for entry and presence, while the predictability of routines may do so through recurring spatial and temporal patterns of visitor flows and supervision. Symbolic significance may increase target salience and amplify potential harm to the community through the site's communicative and identity-forming value. The theoretical answer to the second research question is that layered guardianship may reduce vulnerability when the process of detection, reporting, decision-making and intervention operates without interruption at every relevant micro-place and within every relevant micro-time window, with clearly defined roles. The six diagnostic areas, three levels of intervention and incident-based learning cycle together provide a practical answer to the third research question. The four-component framework offers a basis for interpretation and decision support for proportionate protection tailored to place and time, but it is neither a validated risk assessment instrument nor a predictive tool. Its reliability, transferability and practical effects require empirical verification. The study's central normative proposition is that security is not opposed to the openness of sacred spaces: when appropriately designed, it is one of the conditions that sustain such openness. The aim is not to create a 'fortress church', but to develop

a resilient sacred space that remains open without being defenceless, and welcoming while retaining the capacity to recognise and address threats and deal with the consequences of incidents.

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