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Author(s):   Richard Wright ; Scott H. Decker

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ROBBERS ON ROBBERY: PREVENTION AND THE OFFENDER[1]

193800

Richard Wright
Scott H. Decker
University of Missouri-St. Louis

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Robbery -- the use or threat of force to take another's property -- is among the nation's most serious crime problems. High rates of robbery plague many inner-city neighborhoods. Robbery is a central component of the fear of crime. Many suburban residents, whose objective risk of victimization is much lower than that of their inner-city counterparts, nevertheless manifest substantial fear of being robbed. This has important consequences for personal freedom; fear of violent victimization can lead people to limit their public activities. As Conklin (1972:4) has observed: "Although the public certainly fears murder and rape, it is probably fear of robbery... which keeps people off the street, makes them avoid strangers, and leads them to lock their doors" (also see Wilson and Boland, 1976).

In 1994, the U.S. robbery rate was 238 per 100,000 population (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1995). Robbery rates are highest in urban areas; cities over 250,000 average 727 robberies per 100,000 residents. In St. Louis,

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[1] This report represents a brief summary of a large-scale field study of active robbers conducted in St. Louis, Missouri in 1994-1995. A full description of that study, focusing specifically on armed robbers, can be found in Wright and Decker (in press).

the city in which our study was conducted, the 1994 robbery rate was 1,543 per 100,000, more than 6 times the national average. Robbery poses a serious risk of injury or death. One in three robbery victims sustains at least minor injuries during the offense (Reaves, 1993), and more than ten percent of all homicides occur in the context of a robbery (Cook, 1991).

Statistical data based on robberies reported to the police suggest that the offense most often occurs between strangers, is a crime committed disproportionately by drug users, is more likely than other violent offenses to involve black offenders, and seldom nets large sums of money. However, the robbery process itself has not been well studied. As a result, we understand little about the ways in which robberies actually are contemplated and committed in real life settings and circumstances.

LEARNING ABOUT THE ROBBER'S PERSPECTIVE

The present study was designed to fill this gap in our knowledge about robbery. In order to formulate effective policy, it is crucial that we understand the perspective of robbers as they go about selecting targets and completing their crimes. Toward that end, we conducted a field-based study of 86 active robbers. This was done by adopting the traditional fieldwork methods of social anthropology -- ethnographic interviewing and (quasi) participant

observation. Subjects were recruited through the efforts of two informants -- a former offender and a currently active armed robber -- who employed a snowball sampling referral strategy. These field recruiters identified active robbers, convinced them to take part in our study, and assisted us in conducting interviews. The process through which the offenders were located is shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The offenders in our sample were deeply involved in robbery. Seventy-one percent of the sample reported that they had committed more than ten lifetime robberies, while 36 percent admitted to doing 50 or more lifetime robberies. Eighty-five percent of our subjects told us that they typically committed street robberies. Just 12 percent said that they usually committed commercial robberies.

The method chosen to study a problem inevitably influences the proposed solutions to that problem. Our study constitutes neither a large representative survey of robbery offenders (it clearly over-represents street robbers), nor a comprehensive statistical portrait of the robbery offense. Rather, it provides a richly detailed picture of the robbery process as seen through the eyes of currently active offenders. How do robbers become motivated to commit their crimes? How do they choose their targets? And how do they actually carry out their offenses?

A field-based study of active robbers can yield significant information about the ways in which the offense fits into the overall lifestyle of street criminals. This has important implications for the development of effective and efficient crime control policies; it can reflect more fully the realities of life on the street that color the perceptions and motivations of robbers. The streets where most robbers live and ply their trade are places that reward action over reflection, bravado over conciliation, and confrontation over stealth. In this context, robbery is the perfect offense; it captures the core values of those who dominate the mean streets of the nation's major urban centers.

OFFENDER DECISIONMAKING AND STREETLIFE CULTURE

Our research sought to illuminate the links between the lifestyles of the offenders and specific instances of lawbreaking. This required us to situate their decisionmaking in the emotional and cultural context of streetlife. Criminal decisionmaking does not take place in vacuum; it is embedded in an "ongoing process of human existence" (Bottoms and Wiles, 1992: 19). To do this, we broke down the robbers' offenses into a series of distinct steps -- motivation, target selection, and confrontation -- that would allow us to explore objective and subjective

aspects of the situation that influenced their decisions before, during, and after their crimes.

Motivation

A robbery cannot occur without a motive. Not surprisingly, the modal motivation for robbery was a pressing need for cash. Most of the robbers in our sample, however, did not commit their crimes to obtain cash for necessities. Forty of the 59 who told us what they did with the proceeds of their crimes said that they used most of the cash to initiate or sustain various forms of illicit street action (e.g., drinking, drug-taking, gambling).

The majority of the offenders we interviewed were chronically poor and lurched from one financial crisis to the next. But most of these crises were of their own making; substance abuse and gambling exhausted their financial resources almost as quickly as they were accumulated. This created a vicious cycle, whereby the self-indulgent habits of our subjects propelled them deeper and deeper into financial desperation. Nearly every subject reported that robberies were ideal crimes because they usually netted cash directly. This was a key element in their decision to commit a robbery instead of some other offense; it is a crime well-tailored to the pressing need for quick cash.

Target Selection

Target selection is another important element in understanding the robbery process. By conducting a field-based study we were able to explore this issue in a real world setting, thereby enhancing our interview data. We achieved this by completing a number of "walkabouts", taking offenders to the sites of recent robberies and asking them to tell us why they chose that particular location in which to offend.

What we discovered hardly matched the rational, well-planned target selection process popularly attributed to robbery offenders. Instead, the robbers in our sample seemed to look for the presence of one or two key situational factors, nearly ignoring many other potentially relevant environmental cues. The availability of good hiding places and getaways was paramount in their selection of targets. Some robbers were undeterred by crowds of people; indeed, a couple of subjects found crowds attractive because they could blend into their surroundings following the commission of an offense. Most, however, preferred a setting that afforded them some cover, be it nighttime or some sort of physical barrier.

The robbers' central goal in target selection was to pick victims who were carrying plenty of cash. For a majority of the offenders, this process typically was simplified by concentrating their efforts on what we call

"criminal victims", individuals who themselves were involved in crime. Drug dealers, the customers of prostitutes, and illicit gamblers were especially attractive targets for robbery; they were likely to have a substantial amount of ready cash on hand. While the risk of targeting criminal victims was high -- many were armed -- it often was deemed to be worthwhile; such victims were unlikely to call the police to report the robbery.

Other robbers in our sample routinely targeted "non-criminal victims", individuals going about their lawful business. They often searched for prey in cash-intensive locations, that is, areas around check cashing places, downtown entertainment districts or automatic teller machines. In choosing a specific victim, the offenders again were drawn first and foremost to people who they perceived to be carrying cash. They typically made this determination by relying on outward signs of wealth (e.g., the wearing of expensive jewelry or the "flashing" of money). Ironically, some of the robbers avoided prosperous-looking individuals in the belief that well-off people seldom carried much currency, preferring instead to use checkbooks or credit cards.

Only a small proportion of the offenders in our sample targeted commercial establishments. Most of these offenders targeted small local businesses such as liquor stores,

taverns, or pawn shops. They claimed that they liked robbing commercial targets because they could count on the ready availability of a reasonable amount of cash -- something that could not be taken for granted with many street robberies. Few of the commercial robbers could be classified as sophisticated, high-level, or "professional" criminals.

Confrontation

The final stage in the robbery process is the confrontation between perpetrator and victim. Typically, it is the briefest part of the robbery, yet the most consequential for both victim and perpetrator. Most of the robbers we interviewed said that they approach their victims from behind and quickly pull their gun so as to get the "ups" on them. By catching their victims off guard, the offenders hope to reduce the chances that they will attempt to flee or fight back. Few robbers expressed a specific interest in hurting their victims. But almost all of them indicated a willingness to do so if they thought it was necessary to induce cooperation.

A variety of strategies are employed to announce the robbery, but they share some common features. The announcements are brief, forceful, and purposive. The aim is to frighten victims into a state of unquestioning compliance by creating a convincing illusion of impending death. We recorded variation in the willingness of robbers to touch their victims in the process of searching them; typically those who worked as part of a group divided the tasks so that one person was responsible for doing this. Of those who worked alone, the majority forced victims to hand over their valuables, while the remainder grabbed them themselves.

The offenders were agreed that cash was the best thing to take during a robbery; it can be spent immediately and carried without fear of self-incrimination. Most of the robbers disdained taking credit cards or checkbooks because using them is too risky. Those who do take these cash alternatives often sell them to others. Jewelry also is a popular item to take from victims; it can be worn for awhile or easily converted to cash on the street.

ROBBERY AND CRIME CONTROL POLICY

A dramatic reduction in robbery rates almost surely cannot be achieved in the absence of fundamental social change. Ideally this change would convince people that it is not seemly to take the possessions of others. But how to bring about such change is open to question. Standard suggestions for doing so include education, particularly of the moral variety, and the redistribution of wealth. The assumption is that the affluent are less inclined to take what other people have, though the existence of corporate and other forms of white-collar crime offers some challenge to this commonsense view. We would not want to dismiss the potential benefits for crime prevention of large-scale social change, but tactics for accomplishing this are beyond the scope of our present study. Rather, we restrict our recommendations for preventing robbery to ideas emerging directly from our field work with practicing robbers.

Job Creation

Our research paints a portrait of offenders who, in the immediate situation of their crimes, perceive themselves as being so desperate for quick cash that they have little choice but to commit a robbery. This suggests that one possible strategy for preventing their offenses might be to keep them from getting into the criminogenic situation in the first place. Such a strategy will be effective only to the extent that it undermines the strong emotional attachment of the offenders to street culture (also see Moran, 1996). Most of their lawbreaking, after all, is motivated directly by a deep-seated desire to participate in and sustain various illicit activities promoted by that culture. Weakening the commitment of the offenders to streetlife, however, is a tall order, with formidable obstacles to success. If we take as a starting point what the offenders told us, job creation would seem to be the most promising method of tempting them away from the streetcorner. Quite a few said that they wanted to work and would slow down or stop offending altogether if someone gave them a good-paying job. Creating such jobs in the face of a declining manufacturing base and fierce competition from cheaper domestic and foreign labor markets is a daunting, long-term task (Wilson, 1996). But even if this were accomplished, it is not clear that the offenders would be

able to take advantage of the new employment opportunities. Not only are the majority of them poorly educated and unskilled, many are unreliable, suffer from drug or alcohol problems, and resist following instructions or taking orders. Moreover, by definition, all of the offenders are of questionable trustworthiness. These are not personal attributes highly sought after in a prospective employee. Nor is it clear that the offenders actually would be willing to work for a living; after a lifetime of hustling, any legitimate job realistically available to them almost certainly would be perceived by many as an unacceptably slow and tedious way to generate cash.

None of this should be taken to suggest that expanded employment opportunities will necessarily be ineffective in reducing robbery rates in general; only that we are dubious about the impact of a job creation program on the offending of those already committed to the criminogenic norms and values of street culture. High concentrations of chronically jobless people undoubtedly help to create the anomic conditions under which street culture thrives by disrupting the ordered existence imposed on individuals by the world of work. As Wilson (1996:73) has observed:

> [W]ork is not simply a way to make a living and support one's family. It also constitutes a framework for daily behavior and patterns of interaction because it imposes disciplines and regularities. Thus, in the absence of regular employment, a person lacks not only a place in which to work and the receipt of regular

income but also a coherent organization of the present -- that is, a system of concrete expectations and goals. Regular employment provides the anchor for the spatial and temporal aspects of daily life. It determines where you are going to be and when you are going to be there. In the absence of regular employment, life, including family life, becomes less coherent.

It follows that successfully breaking the cycle of persistent joblessness that characterizes most high crime, inner-city neighborhoods might eventually lead to a reduction in robbery by starving the local street culture of new recruits. Wilson (1996:228) speculates that one way to accomplish this would be to create public-sector jobs that pay poor, low-skilled workers subminimum wages to "produce goods and provide services that are not available in the private sector." Whatever the potential long-term benefits for crime reduction of such a scheme might be, it remains doubtful that many of the current robbers in our sample would be prepared to subordinate their immediate desires to the demands of any job, let alone one that paid less than the minimum wage.

Deterrence and Incapacitation

Threatened criminal penalties for robbery already are very severe; there is little reason to believe that increasing them will deter the offenders from committing further offenses. As noted, their decisions to offend typically are made in circumstances where they perceive themselves both as under pressure to act quickly and as

having no realistic alternative to robbery. Combine this with the fact that the robbers know from experience that the chance of getting caught for any given offense is extremely small, and it becomes clear why the threat of sanctions, no matter how harsh, is unlikely to dissuade them from doing more crimes in the future. Increased penalties for robbery might serve as successful deterrents only if accompanied by detection rates so dramatically improved as to extinguish offenders' perception of the offense as a realistically available option. It is hard to imagine that an improvement in robbery clearance rates of that magnitude can be achieved within the foreseeable future.

If the offenders cannot easily be deterred, those who are caught still can be incapacitated, that is, imprisoned for a long period of time to prevent them from preying on lawabiding citizens (see, e.g., Fleisher, 1995). This has been the nation's central crime control strategy for more than a decade, and it may in part be responsible for recent reductions in violent and property offense rates across the country. But there is at least one serious drawback to relying exclusively on a strategy of incapacitation to control robbery: it leaves intact the offenders' commitment to the criminogenic norms and values of street culture. Thus, many offenders continue to commit robberies while in prison, often in pursuit of illicit forms of action similar

to those that drove them toward crime on the outside (e.g., drug-taking). While proponents of harsh punishment might be untroubled by this, Shover (1996:181) has warned that our heavy reliance on lengthy prison sentences to the neglect of long-term strategies designed to undermine the socio-cultural conditions that breed criminal motivation could well backfire:

> When persistent [offenders] are incarcerated, the results sometimes are different from those intended by advocates of punishment. Perceptions of its harshness are undermined by experience with imprisonment, particularly reassurance that it can be endured. Persistent [lawbreakers] rationalize crime and believe they can perfect criminal techniques and become successful. It can be argued, of course, that if prison conditions generally were more austere and regimented, surely fewer [offenders] would react to the experience in this way. If confinement does not put sufficient fear into inmates, perhaps it is because the regimen is too easy and an increase in unpleasantness is needed...No one can say confidently what the net result of such a development would be, but it is useful to note that enduring extremely harsh or brutal treatment can reassure some prisoners even as it kindles dangerous emotions. I refer specifically to embitterment, anger, and the desire to wreak revenge. This reaction can crystallize and strengthen a conception of oneself as a person who has been treated unfairly by authorities. Advocates and supporters of America's return to harsh crime-control policies have paid scant attention to the emotional consequences of the programs spun off of them.

Before rushing headlong to embrace the continued or increased use of incapacitation to control robbery, we should pause to consider the future: What will happen when, possessing little more than a prison record and the clothes

on their back, today's convicted robbers return in droves to the mean streets whence they came?'

Reducing Victim Vulnerability

Given that undermining the motivational wellsprings of offender behavior is extremely difficult, it may be more practical, at least in the short term, to concentrate our efforts on reducing the vulnerability of potential victims. Although some people undoubtedly will dismiss such a suggestion as tantamount to victim blaming, it is worth noting that efforts to change victim behavior are not fundamentally different from widely-accepted strategies designed to make inanimate targets (e.g., houses) less attractive to would-be offenders. Besides, robbery victims often are not blameless; more than half of the offenders in our sample typically targeted people who themselves were involved in various sorts of lawbreaking. And while seasoned drug sellers clearly understand that their activities put them at increased risk for being robbed, the same cannot confidently be said about some of their less streetwise middle-class customers. Nor do men seeking the services of a prostitute universally appreciate that this pursuit entails a substantial chance of robbery. It is ironic that the need to educate these men about the importance of condom use to avoid AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases is widely acknowledged, but virtually

no thought is given to informing them about the much greater risk of becoming a crime victim. There is an obvious need for an anti-crime information campaign targeted explicitly on novice and occasional petty lawbreakers, who are not sufficiently familiar with the ways of the street to comprehend fully the considerable risk of criminal victimization. Such lawbreakers might well decide to behave differently if they were made more aware of this risk.

Admittedly, a substantial percentage of the offenders we interviewed usually robbed people who were engaged in perfectly legitimate activities (e.g., shopping, cashing a check, or bar-hopping). But even here there may be scope to reduce the vulnerability of such people by providing them with information about what robbers look for when choosing their victims. Most would-be robbers are attracted to victims by outward signs of wealth. Thus, people should be reminded not to wear expensive jewelry or display large amounts of cash in public. This advice is especially applicable to individuals who frequent places in and around socially-disorganized areas already characterized by high rates of robbery, where there is likely to be a concentration of offenders on the lookout for potentially lucrative targets. It also seems sensible to warn people against the use of automatic teller machines late at night.

What should individuals do if they <u>are</u> confronted by a robber? The results of our study suggest that immediate cooperation represents their best chance of avoiding serious injury or death. Most of the offenders we spoke to said that they typically responded to any indication of victim resistance with severe violence; a few even admitted to involvement in the killing of one or more recalcitrant victims. The problem, from the victims' perspective, is that offenders tend to define cooperation quite narrowly and, given the interactional character of the robbery event, that definition is likely to shift numerous times as the offense unfolds. As a result, it often is difficult for victims to discern precisely how an assailant expects them to behave at any particular point in time. Obviously, we cannot offer a fail-safe strategy for overcoming this difficulty. One thing, however, is clear; the vast majority of robbers do <u>not</u> want victims to look directly at them for fear of being identified. Unless the attacker demands otherwise, we would strongly advise robbery victims to aver their eyes during offenses.

Situational Change

It would be a mistake to expect dramatic results from a robbery prevention publicity campaign seeking to persuade potential victims to change their behavior. Campaigns advising people to take security precautions have proven to

be largely ineffective (for a review, see Riley and Mayhew, 1980). This leads us to consider one last strategy for preventing robbery; altering the situational characteristics that make such offenses possible. The offenders we interviewed had clear ideas about what sorts of physical settings were most conducive to robbery, namely places shielded from public view with good escape routes. Thus, other things being equal, any situational change that serves to increase surveillability (e.g., improved lighting) or to decrease access (e.g., entrance and exit restrictions) should make an area less attractive to robbers. Locations in and around commercial establishments devoted to cash-intensive activities -- areas high on offenders' lists of likely hunting grounds -- are perhaps the most obvious candidates for such changes.

Many cash-intensive businesses, both public and private, already have made costly physical design changes in an attempt to prevent their employees and customers from being robbed. While this may or may not be effective in reducing the crime proneness of a specific location, as a general robbery prevention strategy it is woefully inadequate. Physical design changes have little or no impact on offender motivation; the pool of would-be robbers remains as large as ever. This opens up the strong possibility that robberies prevented in one spot will merely

be committed elsewhere, perhaps on the periphery of the protected site. Potential victims, after all, still must enter and exit that site in order to conduct their business.

There is one situational change with the potential to strike at the heart of offender motivation; the <u>complete</u> elimination of cash in favor of a debit and credit card-based system of electronic monetary transfers. In conducting our research, we were struck time and again by the central role of cash in shaping the robbers' decision-making throughout the offense. Obtaining cash is critically important to most of these offenders because, without it, the pursuit of street action is all but impossible. For obvious reasons, purveyors of illicit drugs, gambling, and streetcorner sex do not accept payment by check or credit card. Thus, these financial instruments presently are valuable to offenders <u>only</u> to the extent that they can be employed to generate cash by either selling them to fellow criminals or using them to purchase legitimate goods for resale on the street. This requires offenders to expend additional time and effort, and exposes them to increased risk. As a result, many robbers already regard the theft of checkbooks and credit cards to be more trouble than it is worth. In a truly cashless society, the vast majority of them almost surely would come to view these instruments as having no practical value whatsoever.

It is unlikely that the criminogenic activities that underpin and promote street culture could continue to flourish in a cashless society. How, for example, would street-level dope dealers make payment for their drug shipments? For that matter, what would their customers use to pay them? Similar questions might be asked about prostitution, illicit gambling, or the illegal sale of firearms -- all of which currently depend on a steady infusion of untraceable cash. Undermining such activities by choking off the cash that fuels them should lead to a dramatic reduction in many forms of predatory crime, including robbery, and perhaps deal a death blow to streetlife itself.

Although the idea of a cashless society may seem far-fetched, there are clear signs that we are heading in this direction. In direct response to the threat of robbery, for instance, many small retail businesses have restricted the amount of cash accessible to employees and have prohibited customers from using large bills to pay for purchases. Likewise, public transportation systems across the country increasingly have moved to "exact fare" payment systems, thereby making it unnecessary for drivers and other personnel to carry cash. From measures such as these, it is but a short step to eliminating cash altogether, and replacing it with debit or credit cards. Already it is

possible to use either one of these cash alternatives to pay for a public telephone call.

Many upper and middle-class people currently operate in an essentially cashless economy, carrying little or no money and relying almost exclusively on checkbooks or credit cards to conduct their day-to-day business. Recall that some of the offenders in our sample were unwilling to rob prosperous-looking individuals for just this reason. But lower-class people often do not have bank accounts or credit cards and continue to pay for goods and services in cash. This makes them attractive robbery targets -- a particularly acute problem for the urban poor, who frequently live in close proximity to would-be offenders.

The vulnerability of the urban poor to robbery is exemplified best by offenders who hang around local check cashing establishments and prey on welfare recipients after they have cashed their government assistance. Observing this, it occurred to us that one promising approach to the prevention of robbery in the inner city would be to replace welfare checks with debit cards (complete with personal identification numbers) that either do not allow cash withdrawals or else restrict them to a few dollars a day. The use of such cards could be limited to approved purchases and payments (e.g., food, rent, utilities), thereby minimizing the misuse of welfare funds. This, in turn,

should help to bleed money out of neighborhood drug markets and may contribute to a reduction in drug-related violence. These would seem to be important secondary benefits of such a scheme given current nation-wide concerns with welfare reform, illicit drug use, and violent crime. The primary value of a debit card-based system of welfare payments, however, lies in its potential for reducing robbery victimization among the people who can least afford it, the nation's urban poor.

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