

CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW

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The CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW is a professional forum for the Criminal Justice System in California designed to provide discussion of varied concepts and issues of crime prevention and useful resources for the practitioner in the field.

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An Educational Aid for the Crime Prevention Officer: Some Social Psychological Strategies for Dealing With the Violent Criminal

William B. Howard

William B. Howard studied social psychology at Claremont Graduate School and the University of California, Davis. He has evaluated preventive patrol programs in the Los Angeles area, conducted research for the California Department of Corrections, and helped lead therapy groups at the California Medical Facility. He has published several articles dealing with crime prevention from the community and social psychological perspective. Currently, he is Director of Treatment Programs at the Nevada Youth Training Center in Elko, Nevada.

In 1969, Harris Poll data indicated that Americans considered crime our most important social problem. Particularly fear-arousing to the average citizen is the prospect of being accosted on the street by unknown person(s), who may use violence as a means to attain money, sexual satisfaction, or other types of gratification. Brooks¹ has documented the debilitory economic, social, and psychological effects of such fear when it becomes generalized among a populace. Businesses must close early, older people feel compelled to take a taxi to work rather than waiting at a bus stop, and people remain locked and barricaded behind their doors at night rather than mixing with their neighbors.

In order to ameliorate these problems, today's crime prevention officer is expected to teach citizens of high risk areas the appropriate strategies for avoiding, or dealing wisely with, criminals on the street. He must give persons who are physically weaker than the normal population, and those who tend to be less cautious than is desirable, sufficient self confidence and street-wiseness to be able to routinely mingle with the world. Obviously, he has a very difficult task, particularly since social scientific research has rarely focused upon the causes and precipitants of real-world violence. How can he know what to tell them?

The purpose of this article is to provide him with a theoretical model derived from social psychology which he can use as a *basis* for instructing high risk individuals on the vagaries of street crime. It will delineate specific advice flowing out of that model, and recommend effective methods for presenting this information at neighborhood and precinct-level meetings. Citizens who attend these meetings will know what situations are likely to

¹ Brooks, J. "The Fear of Crime in the United States." *Crime and Delinquency*, 1975, Vol. 20, 241-243.

generate violent crime, and how to behave non-precipitously when confronted by a criminal.

The applicability of the advice presented herein is limited to situations where the criminal is not emotionally involved with or personally cathected on his victim. However, this does not necessarily mean that members of the victim-criminal dyad are totally unknown to each other. They may have heard of or even seen each other before, but at a physical or social distance. While less than 40% of violent crimes in the United States reflect these circumstances^{2,3} citizens are most concerned about and frightened by "anonymous stranger" crimes because of their seeming unpredictability. Examples include robbery and armed robbery, assault and assault with a deadly weapon, kidnapping, and impersonal murder. Rape is a more complicated case of this crime type, but with similar psychological dynamics. Although rape prevention will not be dealt with specifically in this paper, it is believed that a similar educational model would apply.

Hans von Hentig,⁴ a German sociologist, originated the study of the relationship between the criminal and his victim, called "victimology." He was convinced that the victim draws or induces criminal violence from his assailant. He boldly stated "in a sense, the victim moulds and shapes the criminal." If this is true, then the high risk individual may find it possible to shape and mold his would-be assailant into a gentler mood where he does not attack physically even though he takes the victim's money. An internationally-attended conference on victimology in 1975, and another in 1977, have investigated this possibility. The advice you will read in this article is based on the findings from these conferences, as well as upon research findings from social and environmental psychology. It is directed towards the goal of reducing violence during ongoing crimes, rather than reducing the frequency *per se* of crimes committed. Lives cannot be replaced, but money can.

von Hentig identified several groups that he felt are "at risk" as far as victimization by criminals is concerned. Generally, they include people who are either physically weaker than members of the normal population, or they are less cautious in protecting their personal welfare. His categories of high vulnerability included women, elderly persons, immigrants, lonely or depressed persons, and persons of a habitually bullying nature. These are the people toward whom a crime prevention officer should direct his greatest attention.

THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE MODEL

It is hypothesized that one of five psychological processes must necessarily precede the commission of a violent crime, and that interference with any one of them is sufficient to prevent or mitigate victimization. These five processes lead to the temporary deactivation of the norms regarding fair play which the individual has learned. Like other persons, the criminal

² President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice. *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1967, p. 18.

³ United States Department of Justice. *Crimes and Victims: A Report on the Dayton-San Jose Pilot Survey of Victimization*. Washington: National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service, June 1974.

⁴ von Hentig, H. *The Criminal and His Victim*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948.

needs to retain a positive self-image as essentially fair and decent. Norm deactivation enables him to do this.

The first theoretical premise, developed by Zimbardo⁵ and by Paloutzian⁶ is that the criminal must *deindividuate* himself in order to maintain a positive self-image during the crime. Two types of deindividuation are possible. They are achieved by either momentarily losing sight of the restrictive norms which limit unethical behavior, or by denying personal responsibility for the behavioral infractions which occur. Thus, it is easier for the criminal to deindividuate himself in the first manner when alcohol or some other disinhibitory agent has been consumed, and he can more easily deindividuate himself in the second manner if other persons are concurrently involved in the same prohibited behavior. Both situations facilitate an internal response whereby the criminal does not see himself as a norm-breaker. Rationalizations become plausible which protect the criminal's self-image as a "square dealer." Examples include "I'm blasted out of my head from that speed I took. It makes me do funny things," and "I'm just one of the guys, and all the others are hitting him, too." Schwartz⁷ has validated a personality test which measures the tendency to use these rationalizations.

The second theoretical premise, developed by Zimbardo⁸ and by Opton,⁹ is that the criminal must *dehumanize* his victim in order to experience continued psychological stability while enacting violent behavior. He must deny or efface the human characteristics of his victim. In this way the criminal rationalizes that his behavior harmed no one of consequence, or that the victim fully deserved it. An example might include, "He was only a rich bastard who got his money by cheating, not one of us [real] poor folks." Such rationalizations are facilitated by situations which draw attention to differences between the criminal and his victim, and by situations which cast the victim in an unfavorable light.

The third theoretical premise, developed by Sykes and Matza¹⁰ is that the criminal must deny the impact of his behavior before using physical force to subdue his victim. He must convince himself that the victim will suffer no permanent harm as a consequence of his actions, and that appearances are harsher than the reality of the damage inflicted on the victim. Rationalizations such as "He's rich and can afford to be robbed," or "I'm only playing with her, I don't intend to really hurt her," are common. When the victim is at a distance or cannot communicate with the criminal such, rationalizations are facilitated. A case in point is the sniper, who kills at long range. Another is the foreigner, who cannot plead for mercy in a language that will be understood. Schwartz¹¹ has validated a personality test which measures

⁵ Zimbardo, P.G. "The Human Choice: Individuation, Reason and Order Versus Deindividuation, Impulse, and Chaos." In J. Arnold and D. Levine, (eds.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969.

⁶ Paloutzian, R. "Recent Developments in the Psychology of Individuation and Deindividuation." Paper delivered at American Psychological Association meeting, San Francisco, 1974.

⁷ Schwartz, S. "Moral Decision Making and Behavior." In J. Macauley and L. Berkowitz (eds.), *Altruism and Helping Behavior*. New York: Academic Press, 1970.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Opton, E.M. "It Never Happened and Besides They Deserved It." In N. Sanford and C. Comstock (eds.), *Sanctions for Evil*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1972.

¹⁰ Sykes, G. and Matza, D. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." *American Sociological Review*, 1957, Vol. 22, pp. 664-670.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, 1970.

the tendency to deny harming the victim.

The fourth theoretical premise, developed by Tilker¹² and by Clark and Word¹³ is that *ambiguity* regarding the victim's intentions and regarding the suffering the victim experiences increases the probability of violence. If the criminal is aware that the victim means well towards him, he is less likely to continue his violent attack. The same is true regarding the victim's suffering. Faltering, ambiguous communications between two strangers heighten the probability of antisocial behaviors.

The fifth theoretical premise, developed by Berkowitz¹⁴ and by Schaps¹⁵ is that potential gain motivates the criminal to overcome his inhibitions. Crime is more likely in situations where there is a high probability of gain. Gain is comprised of two factors: the amount of reward expected, and the probable cost. Rewards may be of a financial, material, or expressive nature. Costs include time and energy expended in the criminal activity, the severity of potential retribution (punishment) for the activity, and the perceived likelihood of being identified and apprehended as the perpetrator of the crime. The last cost factor is the most important in preventing the assailant from disinhibiting himself and committing the crime. Situations in which violence is expressed collectively reduce the perceived likelihood of apprehension. This is why persons will often engage in criminal behavior while in a group situation that none would consider if alone.

The model advocated herein leads to two strategies of citizen self-comportment. First, they must be able to identify and avoid situations which are conducive to the occurrence of victimizing behavior and, second, if they are caught in such a situation, they need to know which behaviors will make it psychologically more difficult for the criminal to behave violently.

The most basic assumption underlying the advice presented in this article is that the majority of criminals experienced normal primary group socialization, during which their parents, or parent surrogates, successfully inculcated society's norms. That is, criminals are only rarely sociopathic, and like others are restricted by the norms and ethical principles which determine social behavior. Much criminological literature supports this assertion (e.g., Halleck,¹⁶ Goldstein,¹⁷ and Sykes and Matza,¹⁸).

The reader should understand that strategies based upon the normality assumption can backfire when applied to criminals who were autistic during critical childhood socialization periods. However, in a sample of Israeli homicide offenders, Landau¹⁹ found that only 16% had a history of previous mental disturbances. Further, most of these were not sociopathic. This suggests that the strategies which flow from this model can be appropriately applied in a majority of cases.

¹² Tilker, H. "Socially Responsible Behavior as a Function of Observer Responsibility and Victim Feedback." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1970, Vol. 14, pp. 95-100.

¹³ Clark, R. and Word, L. "Why Don't Bystanders Help? Because of Ambiguity?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1972, Vol. 24, pp. 393-400.

¹⁴ Berkowitz, L. "Reactance and Unwillingness to Help Others." *Psychological Bulletin*, 1973, Vol. 79, pp. 310-317.

¹⁵ Schaps, E. "Costs, Dependency, and Helping." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1972, Vol. 21, pp. 74-78.

¹⁶ Halleck, S. *Psychiatry and the Dilemmas of Crime*. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

¹⁷ Goldstein, J.H. *Aggression and Crimes of Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 84.

¹⁸ Op. cit., 1957.

¹⁹ Landau, S. "Pathologies Among Homicide Offenders: Some Cultural Profiles." *British Journal of Criminology*, 1975, Vol. 15, pp. 157-165.

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING VIOLENCE: WHAT DO HIGH RISK PERSONS NEED TO KNOW?

While it is important that the crime prevention officer is familiar with this general theoretical model of violence, high risk persons have more need for practical, concrete advice. They need to know how to carry themselves during their daily living routine in such a way that potential criminals will be discouraged from confronting them, and so that the likelihood of violence will be minimized when confrontations *do* occur. The theories of violence described above generate many specific recommendations about how the high risk person should behave.

The interaction between the criminal and his victim typically proceeds through five consecutive stages. Sometimes the crime can be totally averted by shrewd behavior during the first stage. At that time, it is still possible for the victim to recognize and avoid a situation which is going to be risky. However, during the second stage, a victim, e.g., a woman, is already embroiled in the situation. All she can do is try to throw the criminal off-balance psychologically, then make a hasty exit. She shouldn't *accept* the victim role until the third stage, when the criminal has revealed his intentions and all avenues of escape have been cut off. In the fourth stage, a violent attack has begun and the victim merely tries to short-circuit the process before she is seriously hurt. In the fifth stage, the victim uses her last resort, violent retaliation. Following are practical tips about how the victim should behave during each step of the interaction. The crime prevention officer might find them useful for presentation during educational sessions. In essence, they are techniques for thwarting the deindividuation, dehumanization, denial of injury, and ambiguity-linked rationalizations.

Stage I: Avoiding Dangerous Situations

Five rules-of-thumb are:

1. Avoid poorly-lit or over-crowded settings where either you or a potential assailant would be hard to see or identify. It is worth your time to take a longer route to your destination through well-lit streets. To the extent that you are recognizable, victimization is less likely.
2. Avoid persons who are drunk, drugged, or appear hyperactive. An altered state of consciousness temporarily makes past moral training seem irrelevant to the criminal.
3. Avoid crowds of potential assailants. Cross the street if necessary. A would-be assailant who faces you alone is less likely to attack.
4. When confronted by a con man or pimp, ignore his hard-luck stories and sales pitches. Showing interest suggests that you are carrying money on your person, and may enable the criminal to stereotype you into a dishonorable, dehumanized category (e.g., "tricks," "marks").
5. Do not provide the criminal with an appealing motive for the crime. If you are carrying a purse, have it under your arm, with the strap extended around the other side of your neck. A free-swinging purse is very seductive.

Stage II: Proper General Comportment

If you are confronted in a preliminary manner by a person you think may be a criminal, there follow six rules regarding the way you should carry yourself into the encounter. As he "feels you out," the criminal is able to detect a great deal about the way you see *yourself* from your general bearing. If you feel defenseless or afraid, he can sense this. Striking an appropriate pose increases your chances of passing through the situation unmolested. The criminal would rather find a weaker, less self-assured person to be his victim.

1. Dress and talk in a manner similar to the neighborhood you are moving in. Avoid the appearance of an outsider. A person appears stronger who is at home in his own territory. Further, similarity to the occupants of a neighborhood increases their empathy and respect for you. Stay out of deserted bus stops and laundromats in an unfamiliar part of town, especially at night.
2. Walk firmly and with a sense of inner direction. Even if your path is physically blocked by the criminal, maintain a posture which suggests continued movement and attention towards your goal. This inhibits dehumanization.
3. Avert eye contact with loungers on the street as you pass close to them, unless the hardness of their gaze suggests that they are trying to intimidate you. In this case, meet their gaze head-on, but continue walking briskly past. Do not hold their gaze unnaturally after you have passed.
4. Avoid falling into a defensive, fighting pose when casually confronted by a stranger. A self-fulfilling prophecy may result when the criminal notices your fear. Keep your arms at your sides, and hold your head high. Stand facing the person with your legs spread, rather than turning sideways to him.
5. Use confident, assertive tones when talking to a potential criminal—whining tones invite dehumanization. However, do *not* go overboard and use derisive or challenging tones. If you *corner* your assailant psychologically, he may attack you rather than lose face.
6. If contact with the criminal seems unavoidable, *you* should initiate the verbal exchange, rather than letting him do it. Begin with an innocuous question which suggests you are acquainted with him, such as "Hey, man, didn't you play football for Grover Cleveland High School?" or "Hey, don't I know you?" or "You used to work at General Motors, didn't you?" Then make a hasty departure after mumbling an excuse such as "Sorry, I thought you were someone else." Seizing the initiative thwarts dehumanization, and throws the criminal off balance.

Stage III: Conversation

If you *are* cornered by the criminal, and he has already demanded your money, the following are seven general rules regarding things you might do and say before yielding. Their object is to gain the criminal's sympathy. Applying them not only lessens the likelihood of a violent attack, but may persuade him not to harm you financially.

1. Watch the criminal's feet. If he turns *sideways* to you, it probably indicates he is drawing out a weapon, or is planning to attack you. Back away a couple feet, and be watchful. But don't run unless probable help is very close by. A study by the Denver Anti-Crime Council²⁰ indicates that running increases the likelihood of your being hurt by more than five times.
2. A very important point is that you, the victim, should expect to experience a surge of adrenalin when the criminal corners you and demands your money. Physical arousal will make you want to do all kinds of dramatic things, such as shouting at, threatening, or attacking the criminal. **RESTRAIN YOURSELF!!!** Such behavior enables him to dehumanize you, and to transfer responsibility for his own violent behavior onto you. Because he himself is bottling up an enormous amount of physical tension, the criminal has a hair-trigger temperament. Research has shown that rape victims who fight with their attacker are five times as likely²¹ to be seriously hurt during the encounter. An international survey of 29 pre-literate societies revealed that in 51% of all recorded murders, the *victim* had initiated the sequence of violence.²² If you must resist, do so verbally and calmly.
3. To relax the criminal and to humanize yourself, tell him your name, substituting a false last name. Maintain eye-contact only briefly.
4. Tell the criminal about times you've been unemployed or desperate. Emphasize your similarity to him. Acknowledge the difficulties in his life (even though you may disagree completely).
5. Tell the criminal that you are poor, working long hours, and struggling to support a family. Ask if you can keep a part of your money. Strike a good-humored, bargaining pose, not a quarrelsome one.
6. Special cases:
 - a. A woman of childbearing age should tell the criminal not to hurt her, that she's pregnant.
 - b. An elderly person should tell the criminal not to hurt him, that he has a bad heart.
 - c. An elderly person should tell the criminal to leave him some money, that he won't get another social security check until the next month.
7. If you are cornered by the criminal, and have already been turned down in these requests for leniency, do *not* maintain eye contact any longer. It may be interpreted as defiance. Lower your gaze to indicate submission. Cooperate, and he may leave without harming you.

Stage IV: Short-Circuiting a Violent Attack

Due to his extreme fear and impatience to get away, the criminal may experience the above requests as resistance and become angry or hyperactive. *All* of the money or other objects desired should immediately be offered

²⁰ Giacinti, T.A. and Tjaden, I. *The Crime of Rape in Denver*. Denver: High Impact Anti-Crime Program, 1976.

²¹ Agopian, M., Chappell, D., and Geis, G. "Interracial Forceful Rape in a North American City." In I. Drapkin and E. Viano (eds.) *Victimology*. Toronto: Lexington Books, 1974.

²² Palmer, S. Characteristics of Homicide and Suicide Victims in Forty Non-Literate Societies." Drapkin and Viano, *Ibid.*, Vol. 5.

to him. If he still does not calm down, and begins hurting you, the following are five strategies for decreasing the ferocity of his attack:

1. *Show* pain rather than hiding it. If you are bleeding or otherwise wounded, point this out to the criminal, for example: "I'm bleeding," or "My arm is broken." It may even be desirable to exaggerate these injuries. This tactic reverses both the denial of harm rationalization, and the deleterious effects of ambiguity.
2. An elderly person should feign a heart attack. Gasp for breath, squeeze a hand over the left side of your chest, and say "Oh, Oh... my God... I can't breathe!" Then slowly collapse onto the sidewalk at the criminal's feet, saying "my heart!" This tactic induces fear in the criminal that he will be charged with murder. Even if he takes your money while you are on the ground, he is unlikely to continue beating you.
3. A woman should feign hysteria. Scream, throw yourself on the ground, flail with your arms, kick and bite. This differs from fighting back against the criminal in that your activity is not directed against him, but is generalized and uncontrolled. This tactic is likely to bewilder the criminal. Again, he may take your pocketbook, but he is unlikely to continue beating you. Thinking you are crazy, he will experience a fear of the unknown.
4. If there are bystanders, pick *one* person from amongst them, and address requests for help specifically to him. If that person moves away, choose a second person and repeat the tactic. Say "Hey, you with the red hair, help me!" instead of just "Help me." It may even be desirable to tell the bystander what to do. These tactics will thwart the denial of responsibility rationalization.
5. If there are bystanders, label *what* is occurring for them. Crimes have an ambiguous appearance to the distinterested bystander, making it easy for him to invent a "rational" explanation which does not require his intervention. "It's just an argument between friends," and "It's probably a lover's quarrel!" are typical examples. You should shout "Help, I'm being robbed," or "Help, I'm being raped! I don't even know this guy." Merely shouting "Help!" conveys little information.

Stage V: Fighting Back

If the foregoing strategies have not deterred the criminal's onslaught, there is no recourse left to you but to retaliate with violence. Prepare for this eventuality by always carrying one of the unobtrusive objects discussed below. (The danger of carrying a knife, gun, or mace can be that it will enrage the criminal, and perhaps increase violence, even though you may not have the *will* to use it.) If a possible criminal approaches, have one of the recommended objects in hand, as its presence will not antagonize him. Only use it if the procedures described above have already failed you, and you are going to be seriously hurt.

1. The key to fighting back successfully is having thought about what you are going to do long *before* it happens. The idea of becoming involved in violence is repulsive to most of us, but a psychological state of preparedness is our best protection against attack. Think about and practice

what you should do.

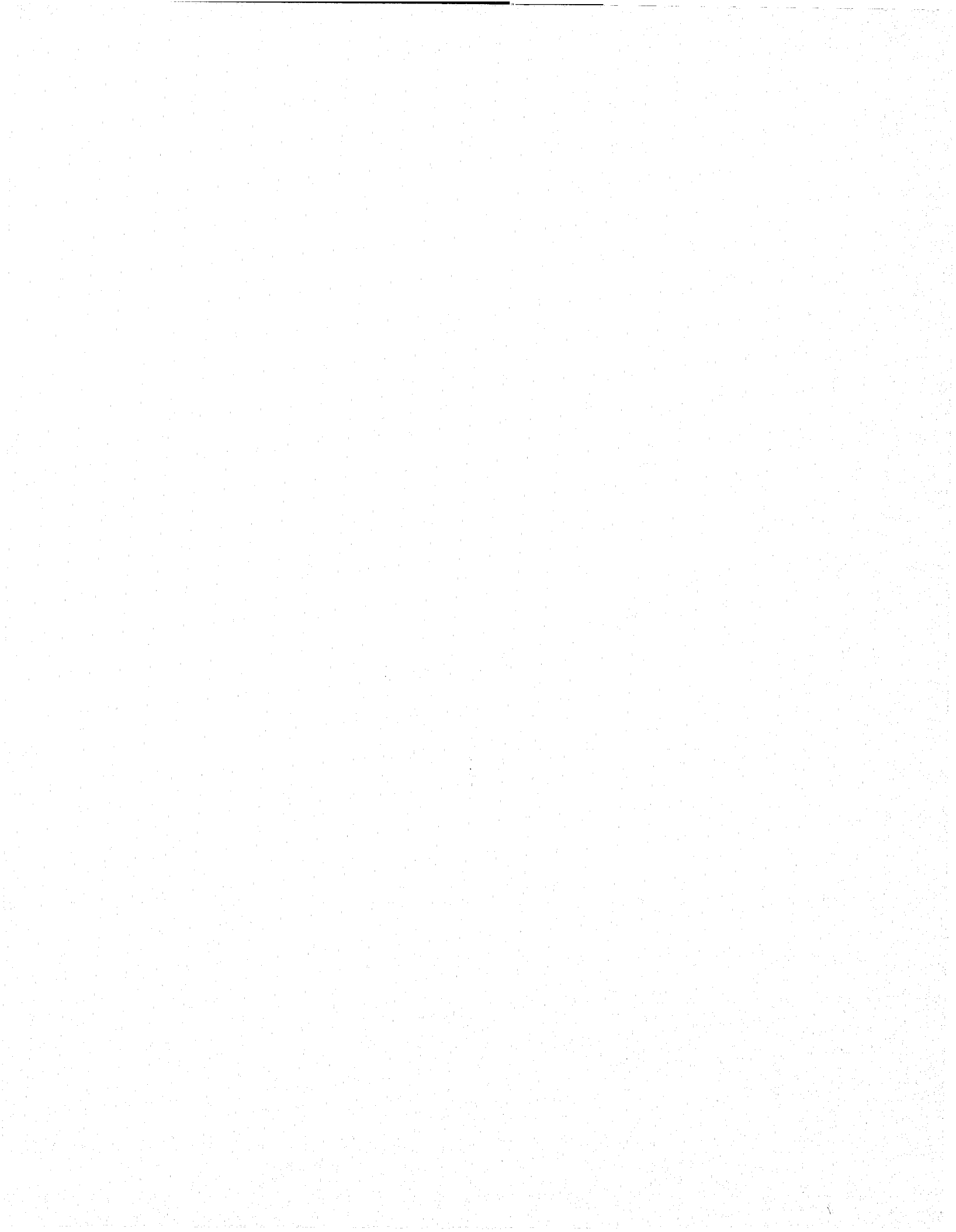
2. A choke hold is very easy to break so long as you are on your feet. Simply link your hands together in an inverted "V" and shoot them upwards between your assailant's arms, or else raise either arm above your head and turn your whole body to the side away from that arm.
3. Much ado is made about hitting an assailant's nerve and pressure points, so that he is temporarily disabled. Unless you are a doctor or extremely well-versed in the martial arts, you are unlikely to do this effectively. If you must hit your assailant, the groin is easily and reliably located. Strike there. Hitting the criminal in the face with a fist is not likely to disable him long enough for you to escape.
4. If you are attacked in a parking lot, simply hold your car keys in your fist, with the pointed ends sticking out from between your fingers. The criminal will not perceive this as a weapon. When he is very close, rake his throat with a sharp upward motion of your arm. Be sure to go for his throat, not his face. Then back off to a safe distance and run away as quickly as possible. Use your left arm as a shield during the confrontation, holding it in against your chest. A variant of the same strategy is to carry a pencil or fountain pen in the palm of your hand, with the pointed end protruding from between the fingers of your closed fist. When the criminal is very close, shoot your arm straight upwards, with the pencil entering his throat underneath his chin. Again, back off to a safe distance and run after jabbing him.

I would like to point out that these strategies for fighting back should only be used *after all else has failed*. The philosophy of this article is that it is better for the victim to surrender her money, than for her to risk either her own life or that of the criminal. When a victim does fight back, the goal should be escape, not victory. A cornered criminal is dangerous indeed. In a sustained fight, the criminal's endurance and experience with violence would probably enable him to dominate. The victim should simply do what is necessary to achieve a momentary disengagement, then run as though life depends on it.

PRESENTING THESE STRATEGIES

Audio-visual aids, if possible, should be developed to supplement the crime prevention officer's presentation. They should provide a realistic portrayal of the circumstances leading up to violence, and particularly of the potential victim's role in the sequence . . . "What does this guy want . . . Is that a knife . . . He's not as big as I am . . . Hey! This guy is crazy!" Further, a former criminal could be enlisted to describe on film the thoughts and feelings immediately prior to and during instances of violence participated in. The film could be shown at the beginning of crime prevention classes held at local precinct houses in order to stimulate discussion. Later, the viewers could split up into small groups to share their reactions to the situations depicted on the screen, with a policeman playing the role of facilitator in each group. All five stages of the interaction might be discussed during a single day-long workshop.

Alternatively, classes could be held on six successive evenings, each one concentrating on a specific stage of the interaction, as described in this article. During each evening session, citizens would be given literature to read about the following stage in preparation for the next evening's class. At each stage, participants would be required to take turns role-playing or simulating a confrontation with the criminal, making sure to apply the strategies described herein. The crime prevention officer would be available to critique their presentations. Finally, during the sixth session, there could be a summarization of the information covered by the course, a question-and-answer segment, and issuance to each participant a certificate. The goal of such a program would be to give potential victims realistic expectations about the social and psychological undercurrents that would be in play if they were caught up in a violent crime situation. With this information, they might be able to direct the course of the interaction away from violence.



END