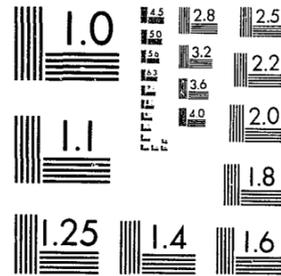


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Research in Brief...

a focus on significant new findings

June 1983

Robbery

Philip J. Cook

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". . . robbery is what most citizens have in mind when they speak of 'crime in the street'—it occurs to a person, not to an unoccupied house; it involves force or the threat of force; and injuries can result, sometimes serious ones. It is mostly fear of robbery that induces many citizens to stay home at night and to avoid the streets, thereby diminishing the sense of community and increasing the freedom with which crimes may be committed on the streets. These psychic and communal costs of robbery, impossible to measure, are, we believe, so great as to make it the most costly of all common crimes."¹

James Q. Wilson and Barbara Boland

Robbery is perhaps the most important component of the urban crime problem. Defined as theft or attempted theft by force or threat of violence, robbery is both a property crime and a violent crime. The violent element, which makes the crime so serious, is particularly fear-inspiring: robberies usually involve unprovoked surprise attacks by strangers on innocent victims.

A useful first step in the search for more effective techniques to control this serious crime is to examine and integrate information on the robbery characteristics, consequences, and trends. That is the aim of this report.

This summary presents highlights of an NIJ-sponsored study conducted by Philip J. Cook, Associate Professor of Public Policy Studies and Economics, Institute of Policy Sciences, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. The full report has been published by NIJ. For information on how to obtain copies, please write: National Institute of Justice/National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Box 6000, Rockville, Maryland 20850.

Robbery Trends

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, which compiles national-level statistics based on local police department tabulations of reported crimes, provides the only readily available data for estimating historical trends in crime. Since a large fraction of crime is never reported to the police, estimated crime rates based on UCR data are substantially lower than "true" rates. However, UCR data may give an accurate picture of the trends in serious crime during the last 20 years. In case of robbery, the trend is one of sustained rapid growth until 1975, when the reported robbery rate was more than three times as high as in 1965, followed by a brief leveling off between 1976 and 1978 and then another surge in 1979 and 1980.

Figure 1 compares the trends in the rates of criminal homicide, burglary, and robbery since 1965. These three crimes follow a remarkably similar pat-

tern over this 16-year period, suggesting that the underlying forces accounting for the long-term growth in robbery rates were not specific to the crime of robbery.

The Geography of Robbery

Robbery is the quintessential urban crime. The six largest cities (with 8 percent of the population) experienced 33 percent of the robberies in 1980; New York City alone had more than 18 percent. Robbery is more highly concentrated in large cities than any of the other major crimes. The 56 cities with populations exceeding 250,000 in 1980 (which contained 19 percent of the U.S. population) reported 60 percent of all robberies, as compared with 46 percent of all criminal homicides and 30 percent of all burglaries.

Among large cities, the characteristic most strongly correlated with robbery rate is population density. Controlling for population density, there is no pro-

Robbery is one of the most personal and random crimes on the streets. It is accomplished through use of force or fear of force. Its effect on victims is profound. As a former police official, I have seen the trauma and helplessness that often engulf victims of this pervasive crime.

City dwellers in particular are vulnerable to robbery, and the fear it spawns contributes significantly to the general anxiety about crime that is so prevalent in many urban neighborhoods.

Improved information sources are aiding in the battle against this violent crime. With more comprehensive data and analyses, research efforts such as the one highlighted in this *Research In Brief* can help clarify understanding about the patterns and consequences of robbery,

and the characteristics of those who commit the crime. This knowledge can help criminal justice agencies as they devise strategies to control robbery and lessen the fear it engenders.

The National Institute of Justice is pleased to summarize these research results in a new format. *Research In Brief* is designed to give busy criminal justice professionals quick access to research findings and information on how to obtain more detailed reports. Through this vehicle we hope to communicate research results to those who can use them and, in this way, enhance the usefulness of criminal justice research.

James K. Stewart
Director

Figure 1

U.S. Crime Rate Trends for Criminal Homicide, Robbery, and Burglary from 1965-1980.

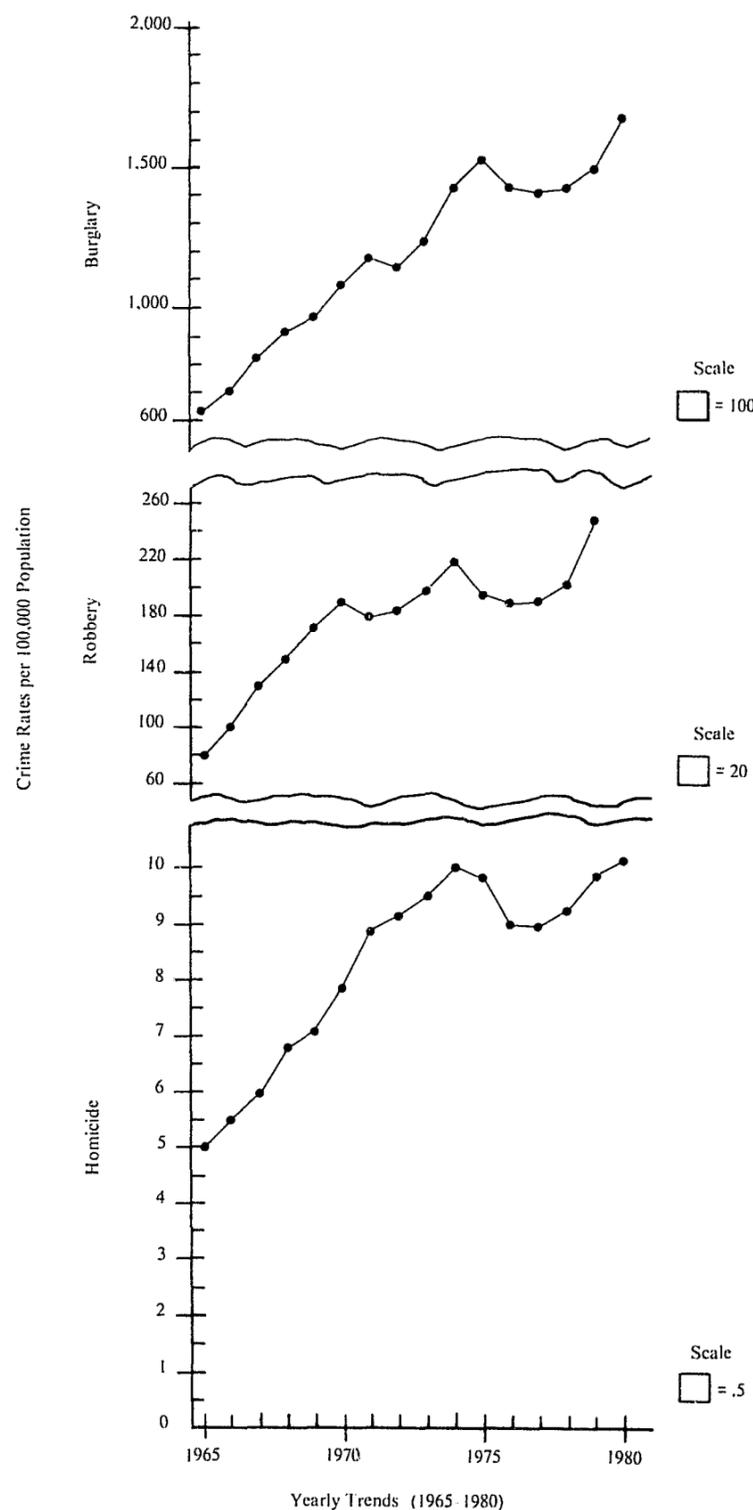


Figure 2

Robbery Rates by Size of City

| Size of City | Number of Robberies 1979 (000) | Rate per Thousand 1979 |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 million and over | 147.1 | 8.32 |
| 500,000 - 1 million | 72.4 | 5.83 |
| 250,000 - 500,000 | 58.8 | 5.08 |
| 100,000 - 250,000 | 44.3 | 2.82 |
| 50,000 - 100,000 | 37.1 | 1.94 |
| 25,000 - 50,000 | 27.8 | 1.34 |
| 10,000 - 25,000 | 18.6 | .78 |
| Less than 10,000 | 10.0 | .47 |
| Rural | 6.3 | .23 |
| Overall | 458.7 | 2.23 |

Source: FBI Crime in the United States, 1979

nounced regional pattern to urban robbery.

There has been concern that robbery has been "moving out to the suburbs" in recent years. Suburban cities do have higher robbery rates than nonsuburban cities of similar size, but there was no discernible trend in this effect between 1975-1980.

Robbery Sites

According to results from the National Crime Survey (NCS), a nationwide survey of crime victims conducted semi-annually by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Justice Statistics, a majority (53 percent) of noncommercial robberies in 1979 occurred in outdoor public places—streets, parks, and school grounds—with most of the remainder distributed about equally among locations inside a residence, near a residence, or in nonresidential buildings.

A large number of robberies are also committed inside school buildings: the Safe Schools Study, sponsored by the National Institute of Education, included a victimization survey of junior and senior high students which estimated that about one million in-school robberies occurred during the school year.² Most of these resulted in the theft of less than one dollar, but because such robberies involve force or threat they must be viewed as serious crimes. There is, however, some question about the accuracy of the Safe Schools Study estimate, since it

approximately 30 times greater than National Crime Survey findings on the number of in-school robberies during the same period.

Among commercial robberies, the fastest growing type is bank robbery. In 1957, there were 278 bank robberies in the U.S.; in 1980, there were 6,515. Between 1970 and 1980, the number increased at a compounded rate of 11 percent per year. Some, but by no means all, of this rapid increase can be accounted for by an increase in "target availability" (due to the growing number of small branch banks whose design and location makes them vulnerable) and by the general increase in commercial robbery rates. Bank robberies are of special concern because the average "take" is about \$7,000—far higher than for other types of robbery.

Weapon Use in Robbery

The type of weapon used in a robbery has an important influence on the likelihood of successful completion of the crime and the likelihood of victim injury or death. In 1980, guns were used in about 40 percent of robberies reported to police. Gun robberies are more likely to be successful and tend to be directed against more lucrative targets than other armed robberies. Gun robberies are five times as likely as other armed robberies to result in the victims' death, but gun robberies are less likely than other armed robberies to result in victim injury. The reason for the relatively low injury rate in gun robberies is that the threat generated by the display of a gun is usually sufficient in itself to gain victim compliance: robbers are much more likely to attack their victims, and victims to resist, in nongun robberies.

The geographic pattern of gun use in robbery suggests that a principal determinant is gun availability. One study found that the proportion of robberies involving guns in a city is closely related to the extent of gun ownership in the city.³ As a result, the proportion of robbery victims killed in a city is also closely related to gun ownership or availability.

Characteristics of Robbers

Most robbers come from a small subset of the population. Of those arrested for robbery in 1980, 66 percent were between the ages of 15 and 24, 58 percent were black, and 93 percent were male. Surveys of robbery victims indicate that these same characteristics also predominate among robbers who are not arrested.

Victim surveys also reveal that half of all robberies in 1979 involve two or more offenders, and half of these (about 25 percent of all robberies) involved three or more. The propensity to commit robbery in groups is to a substantial degree related to age—58 percent of the adult robbers in 1979 worked alone compared to 38 percent of the youthful robbers. This propensity was also related to race: 53 percent of the group robbery offenders were black, compared with 46 percent of the solo robbers.

Recent surveys of prison inmates, conducted by the National Institute of Justice by the Rand Corporation, have provided some detailed data on the pattern of robbery "careers." From these accounts by offenders themselves, it appears that the distribution of robberies among active offenders fits the model that also describes the incidence of other deviant activities: that is, in

any one year, a relatively few very active offenders account for the bulk of the robberies, while most offenders commit robbery only on rare occasions.

Most active robbers do not specialize in robbery. One of the Rand offender interview studies reported that a typical group of 100 adult male California prison inmates convicted of robbery will have committed 490 armed robberies, 310 assaults, 720 burglaries, 70 auto thefts, 100 forgeries, and 3,400 drug sales in the previous year of street time.⁴ Thus, those offenders who commit numerous robberies are usually also active in other types of crime.

There is some evidence that robbers differ with respect to their propensity to employ violence. One study of a large cohort of men arrested for robbery in the District of Columbia in 1973 found that those who were accused of injuring their victims were much more likely than other cohort members to be arrested later for assault and other crimes of violence.⁵ If there is a subgroup of violence-prone robbers, then it is important for criminal justice officials to be able to identify them at time of arrest if such cases are to be subject to special prosecution and sentencing procedures.

The Costly Consequences of Robbery

The consequences of robbery—both direct and indirect—are profound. Each year, the million-plus victims of the crime suffer direct economic losses, and many endure physical and psychological trauma. Society pays, too, in criminal justice costs for dealing with the crime. Beyond the financial toll, however, are the hard-to-measure social costs. The fear engendered by the threat of robbery causes changes in lifestyle that are destructive to social life and the sense of community in urban areas.

Direct financial losses by victims tend to be relatively small when compared to losses from the more prevalent crime of burglary. In 1980, the direct economic loss—including medical expenses, lost wages, and property losses—totaled approximately \$330 million. The indirect financial costs of robbery are much greater. In 1979, 25 percent of the State prison population was made up of robbery convicts (not including offenders convicted of robbery murders). In

Figure 3

Weapon Type and Victim Injuries

| Noncommercial Robbery | Gun | Knife | Other Weapon | Unarmed |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|--------------|---------|
| Victim attacked | 22.1% | 39.4% | 60.4% | 73.5% |
| Victim required medical treatment | 7.2% | 10.9% | 15.5% | 11.1% |
| Victim hospitalized overnight | 2.0% | 2.6% | 2.7% | 1.6% |
| Commercial Robbery | | | | |
| Victim required medical treatment | 4.8% | 10.8% | 17.9% | 5.1% |
| Victim hospitalized overnight | 1.5% | 3.5% | 6.0% | 0.4% |

Source: Philip J. Cook, "Reducing Injury and Death Rates in Robbery," *Police Analysis* 6.1 Winter 1980, p. 33. The statistics are calculated from National Crime Panel victimization surveys in 26 cities.

1980, nearly 7 percent of all adult arrests for major crimes were for robbery. The total cost to taxpayers of arresting, processing, and punishing robbers is several billion dollars per year.

Because robbery is a violent crime, victims also suffer physical injury, psychological trauma, and even death. About one-third of all victims are injured to some degree, and 2 percent receive inpatient hospital care. Obviously, the most serious and frightening possible consequence of the crime is the victim's death. In 1980, the FBI classified 10.8 percent of criminal homicides as resulting from robberies. But the true number may be considerably higher: an additional 6.7 percent of criminal homicides were classified as "suspected felony" and 15.1 percent as "motive unknown." Many of these may have in fact been robbery-related. Since robbery is highly concentrated in large cities, one would expect that robbery murders would also be concentrated in large cities. In New York City, for example, 24 percent of the criminal

homicides in 1980 were classified as robbery-related; amazingly, a majority of slayings of whites in New York City resulted from robberies.

Conclusion

In the ongoing struggle to reduce crime, robbery deserves to be accorded high priority. A variety of measures are available for combatting robbery, ranging from improved street lighting and commercial "target hardening" to intensified efforts to regulate firearms use and distribution and to prosecute and sentence career criminals.

This analysis does not attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of such measures. Rather it describes some important characteristics of the robbery problem. Our ability to develop detailed descriptions of robbery and other serious crimes has been greatly enhanced by the offender and victim surveys conducted by the Federal Government during the last 10 years. It seems reasonable to predict that this new information base will eventually form the basis for

developing more precisely targeted and effective anticrime measures in the future.

Footnotes

1. "Crime" in William Gorham and Nathan Glazer (eds.), *The Urban Predicament*. Washington, D.C., 1976, p. 183.
2. *Violent Schools - Safe Schools. The Safe School Study Report to the Congress, Vol. 1*, Washington, D.C., USGPO, 1978. The interviews were conducted in 1976.
3. Philip J. Cook, "The Effect of Gun Availability on Robbery and Robbery Murder: A Cross-Section Study of Fifty Cities" in R.H. Haveman and B.B. Zellner (eds.), *Policy Studies Review Annual Vol. 3*. Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1979.
4. Joan Petersilia, Peter Greenwood, and Marvin Lavin, *Criminal Careers of Habitual Felons*. Santa Monica, California, Rand Corporation, 1977.
5. Philip J. Cook and Daniel Nagin, *Does the Weapon Matter?* Institute of Law and Social Research, Washington, D.C. 1979.

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