JDiBrief – Crime

Street Robbery: SUMMARY (1 of 5)

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Street robbery is a crime which is a major source of fear among the public. It is defined here as the use or threat of force to steal property from a person in public space. Street robbery concentrates at specific times, in particular places, and happens to certain types of people. The *routine activities* of both offenders and victims, and the timing of these, can assist us in interpreting these patterns in robbery.

OFFENDERS: International research has determined that most offenders for street robbery are young (under 30 years) and male. In some places there appears to be a greater representation of persons from ethnic minorities and deprived backgrounds, but this is not universal and may be interrelated. From an offender's perspective, street robbery is favoured for being quick and profitable – it nets cash as well as goods and drugs. Through interviews with offenders it has been found that they largely make rational decisions in the crime event, based on cost-benefit reasoning.

VICTIMS: An attractive victim for street robbery is one who presents a low risk and a reasonable reward. Offenders prefer victims they can intimidate, subdue or overpower, and in most cases look for a victim who is likely to be compliant. Overall, robbery victims tend to be classed as young (under 30 years). In the UK there has been an increase in the proportion of victims who are school age since the beginning of the new millennium. There are also particular goods which are most frequently stolen (known for their specific qualities as CRAVED items). These are cash and purses/wallets, small electronic goods (mobile phones, cameras, mp3 players, and laptops), jewellery and drugs.

PLACES: Street robbery is more spatially concentrated than other property crime; the areas where robbery concentrates are small and well distinguished. Specific types of land use and facilities attract motivated offenders and suitable victims. Businesses which stay open late and make mostly cash transactions (e.g. betting shops, laundrettes, convenience stores, bars, fast food restaurants), or which provide cover or opportunities to loiter for potential offenders (e.g. bus stops, train stations, ATMs) can increase the risk of robbery occurring. Robbery has also been found to concentrate around drugs markets and red light districts.

IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES: Good quality analysis should guide crime prevention and detection efforts. Tactics and strategies that respond to a street robbery problem should be selected with the context in mind:

- Some evidence exists that high visibility patrols can reduce street robbery incidents as a short-term tactic.
- Protecting potential victims at specific places and times through awareness campaigns may reduce the risk of victimisation.
- Highly targeted responses that look to disrupt the situational mechanisms causing a problem can be effective.
- Market reduction approaches to reducing robbery are believed to offer good prospects for reducing offences, but little has been documented about the effectiveness of these tactics.
- Evaluating whether a response has worked in the way it was intended is an important way of generating knowledge about 'what works'.

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DEFINITION: Street robbery is defined in this brief as the use or threat of force to steal property from a person in public space. Street robbery is also known as mugging, which usually encompasses the crime of snatch theft as well. Snatch theft differs from street robbery in that it is the taking of property from a victim without the use or threat or intimidation. It is recorded separately by police in England and Wales.

UK TRENDS: Following a peak in 2002/03, substantial decreases in street robbery volumes were seen across England and Wales. Recent figures however indicate an upward trend, with increases of 5 per cent seen in the twelve months to September 2011 (to 70,078 personal robberies). This increase was primarily driven by personal robberies in two Police forces: the Metropolitan Police Service and West Midlands Police. Over the same period robbery was seen to rise by 2 per cent in Scotland. It should be noted however that the 2009/10 British Crime Survey estimates that only 45 per cent of robberies are reported to police.

HARMS: Street robbery is a major source of fear among the public because it can involve extreme violence, a loss of control and an invasion of personal space. The public setting of robbery also makes it impactive. It is therefore harmful for its communicative properties as well as the actual damage that is caused by a street robbery event. In the UK fear of robbery is believed to be a major driver of overall fear of crime in urban areas.

THEORY: Street robbery concentrates at specific times, in particular places, and happens to certain types of people. There are a number of theories that help to explain why street robbery is patterned in these ways. At a general level, crime events (such as robbery) can be understood in terms of factors which have caused the offender and victim to intersect in time and space under the right conditions (i.e. without a guardian present). The *routine activities* of both offenders and victims - and the timing of these - can assist us in interpreting patterns in robbery that relate to space, time and who becomes a victim.

Robbery is especially patterned in time; most often occurring in the late afternoon and evening hours (although this only describes the patterns in the broadest terms). Reasons proposed for this include the relationship evening hours have with recreational activities, which can bring people who have consumed alcohol and illegal substances into contact with one another. The afternoon peak in the week is often attributed to the end of the school day. Hours of darkness may encourage more robberies.

There are also theories that look to predict where robbery is likely to happen. As certain types of businesses or facilities draw in certain types of people, land use has been a focus of theorising. It has been hypothesised that some land uses will provide good conditions for robbery to flourish (e.g. they are open late, predominantly handle cash transactions, and provide a reason for people to 'hang around' nearby).

Good quality analysis can test these theories to ascertain whether they explain patterns at the local level. The knowledge generated from such analyses will help to design effective crime prevention and detection initiatives.

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Street Robbery: ANALYSIS (3 of 5)

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Research and analysis of street robbery in a number of countries has found the following general trends:

OFFENDER: From arrest records it has been determined that most offenders are young (mid-teens to late-20's) and male. In some places there appears to be a greater representation of persons from ethnic minorities, but this is not universal, and likely reflects the composition of the particular areas which the data are taken from. Offenders often (but not always) come from deprived backgrounds.

Interviews with offenders have revealed that robberies are often opportunistic rather than planned. Street robbery is favoured for being quick and profitable – it nets cash as well as goods and drugs. Aside from economic reasons, motivation to commit robbery ranges from anger, entertainment power and status enhancement, peer influence, thrill-seeking, revenge and collecting debts. Offenders make rational decisions during the robbery event based on cost-benefit reasoning.

TARGET/VICTIM: An attractive victim is one who presents a low risk and a reasonable reward. Offenders prefer victims they can intimidate, subdue or overpower, and in most cases look for a victim who is likely to be compliant. People who are distracted or not 'tuned in' to their surroundings (e.g. talking on their phone, who look lost or who are impaired in some way) are more likely to be compliant victims.

On the whole, robbery victims tend to be classed as young (under 30 years old), however older persons can also be vulnerable to victimisation. Since the turn of the millennium there has been an increase in the number of UK victims that are school age. It has been suggested that this increase is related to electronic goods ownership.

There are also particular goods which are most frequently stolen. These are cash and purses/wallets, small electronic goods (mobile phones, cameras, mp3 players, and laptops), jewellery and drugs. Such 'hot products' can be characterised by the acronym CRAVED; they are concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable and disposable.

PLACE: Street robbery is more spatially concentrated than other property crime; the areas where robbery concentrates are small and well distinguished. Places with compelling robbery opportunities form hotspots as multiple offenders operate within them.

Specific types of land use and facilities attract motivated offenders and suitable victims. Businesses which stay open late and make mostly cash transactions (e.g. betting shops, laundrettes, convenience stores, bars, fast food restaurants), or which provide cover or opportunities to loiter for potential offenders (e.g. bus stops, train stations, ATMs) can increase the risk of robbery occurring. Drug markets and red light districts attract people looking to make cash purchases, and such people may be distracted and reluctant to report crime to the police, thus making good targets. Poorly lit roads, alleyways, subways and other areas not easily visible to guardians can be vulnerable to robbery. Pedestrian density may be related to robbery levels. Some research has found that a medium level of pedestrian density is a factor related to a greater risk of victimisation, but other research findings contradict this assertion.

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Street Robbery: IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES (4 of 5)

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The situations that give rise to street robbery hotspots are complex and vary across places and times. Tactics and strategies that respond to a street robbery problem should be selected with the circumstances in mind. Responses should therefore be intelligently matched to the context of the crime problem. Good quality analysis should be able to reveal the contextual details of your local robbery problem so that you may disrupt it.

Robbery is a mobile crime which is frequently over in minutes. It is challenging for police agencies to investigate and detect such crimes. Some types of robbery might be more detectable than others - it is these offences where enforcement activities should be specifically targeted. Some evidence exists that high visibility patrols reduce street robbery incidents, although such tactics are costly and are not sustainable long-term. Helping victims to report robbery swiftly increases the chance of apprehending the offender.

Alternatives to enforcement also need to be considered. Protecting potential victims at specific places and times through awareness campaigns may reduce the risk of victimisation. Done sensitively, such campaigns can also send a reassurance message. Protecting victims is best achieved when it is complemented by tactics which also target the offenders or places – a 'multi-pronged' approach is said to work well (although can be difficult to evaluate once finished).

Highly targeted responses that look to disrupt the situational mechanisms causing a problem can be effective in reducing street robbery. For example, painting personal (defensible) space around ATMs in yellow paint has shown promise in reducing robberies at cashpoints.

Themes that result from analysis might be youth on youth robberies, or robberies associated with the night-time economy, or robberies associated with specific land uses (e.g. transportation). Specific responses to tackle these themed problems work best when the police align their efforts with key partner agencies (e.g. schools, leisure complexes, housing). Any activities should also be done in conjunction with local policing teams as these often have the best understanding of the local context.

A key issue for offenders is the ability to dispose of the property they steal locally and swiftly if they are to optimise the rewards of their crime. Similarly, any offender looking to convert their stolen goods into drugs will need to be close to their drug dealer. For these two reasons it is commonly believed that the locations where robbery happens are proximal to stolen goods markets and drugs markets. Market reduction approaches to reducing robbery are therefore believed to offer genuine potential in reducing offences. Little has been documented about the effectiveness of this particular suite of tactics however.

Evaluating whether a response has worked in the way it was intended is an important way of generating knowledge about 'what works'.

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Street Robbery: RESOURCES (5 of 5)

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- Tompson, L. & Townsley, M. (2010). (Looking) Back to the Future: using space–time patterns to better predict the location of street crime. *International Journal of Police Science and Management*. Vol 12, pp. 23-40.

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