Stick-Up, Street Culture, and Offender Motivation

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In this article, Jacobs and Wright describe interviews conducted with 86 active armed robbers. Rather than looking at the usual background characteristics (age, race, SES, etc.) of the robbers, they looked at the foreground conditions, that is, what robbers were thinking before they committed their crimes. Jacobs and Wright focus on the motivating factors and decision-making processes of the robbers. They find that most robbers decide to commit their crimes impulsively with very little rational thought. Robbers’ participation in street culture leads them to be blind to legitimate opportunities, to the point where many seem to believe that they have little choice but to rob. In other words, armed robbers appear to be so overwhelmed by their emotional, financial, and drug problems that they perceive robbery as their only alternative to make money.

In this article we attend to exploring the decision-making processes of active armed robbers in real-life settings and circumstances. Our aim is to understand how and why these offenders move from an unmotivated state to one in which they are determined to commit robbery. We argue that while the decision to commit robbery stems most directly from a perceived need for fast cash, this decision is activated, mediated, and channeled by participation in street culture. Street culture, and its constituent conduct norms, represents an essential intervening variable linking criminal motivation to background risk factors and subjective foreground conditions.

Methods: Money, Motivation, and Street Culture

The study is based on in-depth interviews with a sample of 86 currently active robbers recruited from the streets of St. Louis, Missouri. Respondents ranged in age from 16 to 51. All but 3 were African-American; 14 were female. All respondents had taken part in armed robberies, but many also had committed strong-arm attacks. Respondents did not offend at equal rates, but all (1) had committed a robbery within the recent past (typically within the past month), (2) defined themselves as currently active, and (3) were regarded as active by other offenders.

Sixty-one of the offenders admitted to having committed 10 or more lifetime robberies. Included in this group were 31 offenders who estimated having done at least 50 robberies. Seventy-three of the offenders said that they typically robbed individuals on the street or in other public settings, 10 reported that they usually targeted commercial establishments, and 3 claimed that they committed street and commercial robberies in roughly equal proportions.

Fast Cash

With few exceptions, the decision to commit a robbery arises in the face of what offenders perceive to be a pressing need for fast cash. Eighty of