

STREETLIFE AND THE REWARDS OF AUTO THEFT

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An offender's decision-making process includes the assessments of pains and pleasures of crime within the context of their lives. This article analyzes the perceptions of auto thieves within the context of street-life culture. The rewards and risks for committing this type of crime are explored in order to understand the role that street-life culture plays in shaping the motivations for auto theft.

Understanding the process by which offenders choose crime is critical as it has important implications for both theory and policy. The bulk of research on criminal decision-making is grounded in rational choice theory and assumes that offenders rationally measure the potential penalties of crime against its anticipated rewards (Becker 1968; Cornish and Clarke 1986). Individuals are thought to pursue goals reflecting their self-interest and purposively choose to commit crime if the expected benefits of illegal behavior exceed the benefits of engaging in legitimate activity. Conversely, the decision to forgo criminal behavior may be based on the individual's perception that the benefits have diminished or the risk of detection and subsequent cost is too great. In other words, individuals explore their options and choose the alternative that provides the highest expected gain.

Numerous qualitative studies have elaborated on the indulgent lifestyles that many offenders live (e.g., Fleisher 1995; Hagan and McCarthy 1992, 1997; Jacobs

and Wright 1999; Shover 1996). What can be synthesized from this literature is that persistent offenders emphasize the "enjoyment of good times" (Shover 1996:94) at the expense of all else. They live in a social world that emphasizes "partying" and fast living where they are frequently "caught up in a cycle of expensive, self-indulgent habits" (Jacobs and Wright 1999:163). Offenders quickly erode any legitimate resources for obtaining money to support their lifestyle, making criminal behavior appear more rewarding.

Participation in street culture constrains individuals' subjective assessments of the risks and rewards of crime. The paltry financial rewards of most street crimes would not encourage most members of the middle class to pursue this life. Yet, these rewards when coupled with other intrinsic rewards of crime, such as status, autonomy, and action, are enough to turn the heads of many toward street crime. Researchers have explored the role of streetlife on decision-making for a variety of crimes, including burglary, robbery,

carjacking, and drug dealing (Jacobs 1999; Jacobs et al. 2003; Shover 1996; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). Absent from this list is an in-depth exploration of the relationship between streetlife and motor vehicle theft.

There has been relatively little research on auto theft (Clarke and Harris 1992a), especially using qualitative methods (notable exceptions include, Fleming 2003 and Spencer 1992). This is surprising considering the symbolic importance of automobiles to Americans and the prevalence and cost of auto theft to the public (Freund and Martin 1993). According to current data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI 2002), approximately 1.2 million cars were illegally taken from their owners in 2001. It is not surprising that the result of motor vehicle theft causes an enormous financial loss. In 2001 alone, the loss due to motor vehicle theft was estimated to be over \$8.2 billion, averaging \$6,646 per vehicle (FBI 2002). This is much larger than the estimated loss from burglary (\$3.3 billion).

Because of the prevalence and high cost of motor vehicle theft and its neglect by researchers, there is a need to understand the criminal decision-making of auto thieves. The current study examines offenders' perceptions of the rewards of auto theft within the sociocultural context of streetlife. It relies on semi-structured interviews with auto thieves to determine how participation in streetlife facilitates offenders' decisions to engage in motor vehicle theft by providing the motivations for their behaviors. The results of this endeavor will increase our understanding of motor vehicle theft and will add to our understanding of criminal decision-making in general.

METHODS

Criminal decision-making by street offenders has been the focus of substantial research over the past two decades. What distinguishes this research from other methodological approaches to crime is the emphasis on using interviews and other ethnographic techniques to explore the perspectives, social organization, and behavior of offenders. Use of qualitative research methods has demonstrated value for permitting investigators to get close to their subject matter. Personal interviews with offenders can inform researchers and policy makers about the motives and rationalizations that facilitate and impede crime. If we are to substantially increase and improve our understanding of auto theft, clearly there is both rationale and precedent for using qualitative methods.

Data for this study are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 45 individuals on community supervision

in one metropolitan area in Tennessee. All respondents were under probation or parole following convictions for various property crimes and had committed at least one motor vehicle theft. The Tennessee Board of Probation and Parole granted access to parolees' and probationers' files, which included enough information to locate and contact offenders. Pre-sentence investigation reports (PSIs) were used as the primary source of data for finding and contacting suitable persons to interview. The PSIs contained addresses and phone numbers, if available, of offenders who met the requirements for inclusion in the study. The PSIs also contain official lists of previous arrests, an unofficial list of previous arrests as well as an unofficial list of prior arrests as stated by the offender. If respondents had a motor vehicle theft in their prior record, official or unofficial, it was included in the study sample. Offenders who fit the criteria were solicited for participation by a letter and by phone. To provide additional encouragement for participation, those who appeared for the interview were paid \$10.

Interviews for this study focused on a range of decision-making topics, including offenders' motivations to commit motor vehicle theft, their target selection process, the perceived risks and rewards of participating in motor vehicle theft, and the techniques and skills used to accomplish their tasks. To determine self-defined motives or rewards for auto theft, offenders were asked why they stole cars and what they saw as the major rewards of auto theft. Typically, offenders described the motives for their most recent thefts. After offenders gave their initial responses they were then asked about other possible motivations for this and any other auto theft. The participants also were asked about whether their motives changed as they became more experienced. Additionally, respondents were asked about their educational backgrounds, families, occupations, criminal histories, drug use, and other aspects of their lives. It was during this phase that characteristics of offenders' lifestyles were explored. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. They were then analyzed with a software package designed to code and organize textual data.

Investigations of street crime using samples of known offenders have produced detailed, accurate, and useful data on a variety of topics (e.g., Athens 1997; Hochstetler 2001; Maruna 2000; Nee and Taylor 2000; Rengert and Wasilchick 2000; Shover 1996). There is little reason to believe that the results of these studies contradict or are inconsistent with what has been learned from studies using active offenders. Despite misgivings about using offenders known to criminal

justice agencies, there is little hard evidence that these offenders think, act, or report information differently than active offenders contacted independent of criminal justice sources. In fact, a recent study examining target selection of burglars found a “striking similarity” between studies using free-ranging and prison-based samples (Nee and Taylor 2000:45). This combined with its cost-effectiveness warrants the use of a sample of auto thieves under state supervision.

STREETLIFE AND MOTIVATIONS FOR AUTO THEFT

Previous studies have described the indulgent lifestyles that many offenders live and have shown how this lifestyle impacts offenders’ decisions to engage in crime (e.g., Fleisher 1995; Hagan and McCarthy 1992, 1997; Jacobs and Wright 1999; Shover 1996; Shover and Honaker 1992; Wright and Decker 1997). These studies suggest that the defining characteristic of streetlife is the quest to lead “a life of desperate partying” (Wright and Decker 1997:35). As Shover (1996) states, “The hallmark of life as party is enjoyment of ‘good times’ with minimal concerns for obligations and commitments external to the person’s immediate social setting” (p. 93). It is a lifestyle that encourages the hedonistic pursuit of sensory stimulation, lack of future orientation, and neglect of responsibility (Fleisher 1995). Continuing the good times takes precedent over all else. This emphasis on partying is illustrated in the writings of Jackson (1969):

[The life] is mostly a party. I don’t think people understand that it’s quite like that, but it is. In other words, you don’t work. . . . When you get your money, you usually get it real fast and you have a lot of time to spend it. You can sleep all day if you want to and you can go out and get drunk, get high—you don’t have to get up the next morning to go to work (pp. 146–7).

In this context crime can emerge without warning to continue the good times or to forestall circumstances that are perceived to be unpleasant.

Making Money

This lifestyle of “ostentatious consumption” (Shover 1996:94) entails major expenses. The material excess that is promoted in this lifestyle, especially when it comes to drug use and personal style, dictated that the proceeds from crime be spent quickly. Offenders in the criminal lifestyle spend the spoils of their criminal

ventures with seeming abandon, in part because money acquired illegally holds less intrinsic value than income earned through hard work. As one auto thief said, “I don’t treasure the money I make. I don’t even try to save it. All down in the end I know I won’t be able to save it anyway.” The income from the minimum-wage jobs that characterize the employment possibilities of people in their social position are woefully inadequate to support this fast lifestyle. Even those with employable skills are left with empty pockets. As one unusually skilled offender explained:

Well, it’s hard to go to work and work 12 hours a day when you got a two hundred dollar drug habit a day. You only make two hundred dollars a day at best, you know. That’s at 16 or 17 dollars an hour, when I went to industrial carpentry. You still can’t support a drug habit and a family.

Auto theft affords offenders the luxury of living their chosen lifestyle by providing a viable source of income. Seventeen offenders said they stole cars to profit financially from the sale of stolen vehicles. Auto theft can be a profitable business if one has the proper skills and connections. Auto thieves can earn anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000 per car, depending on their position in the chop shop hierarchy and the type of vehicles stolen. Many are aware that they can potentially make a great deal of money by selling stolen cars. In fact, the perceived ease at making fast money persuaded one offender to quit the “drug game” and begin a career in stealing cars. In his words:

I was selling drugs and got tired of selling drugs. A friend of mine, he told me I could make more money and it would be because I’m a good mechanic. There ain’t nothing I can’t do to a car . . . I come from maybe, I wouldn’t say a big time drug dealer but maybe a second class drug dealer making maybe two thousand to three thousand dollars a day. It was just so hectic so I stopped selling drugs to steal cars because it was easier. The money come quicker.

While knowledge of chop shops secured higher payoffs, offenders without these connections could still profit from auto theft by stripping cars and selling the parts in a loosely structured network of friends and acquaintances (Fleming 2003). Six offenders stripped stolen cars to sell individual parts. As one offender said:

Sometimes [we] sold the parts, sometimes [we] just put it on our car. But most time we’ll strip the car all

the way down to the engine and sell the engine, you know what I'm saying. When we didn't know about going to sell the cars [to chop shops], that's what we were doing. We were selling body parts . . . We'd sell parts all day.

Even for those who do possess the necessary skills to obtain economically satisfying employment, streetlife makes it nearly impossible to keep the job for any extended amount of time. The resentment of authority and disdain for conventional employment all but prohibits these offenders from maintaining stable employment. Thus, most persistent offenders choose not to work, preferring instead to lead a more autonomous life—a life where they are free from the constraints of the working stiff's nine-to-five world (Akerstrom 1985, 2003). Mac Isaac (1968:69), an ex-thief, illustrates this belief, "I was always quite candid in admitting that I participated in their parties by providing the necessary financial resources and by allowing them to travel when the desire arises." When asked if he worked before his arrest one offender replied, "What I need a job for? I make my money with them cars. I got everything I need right here."

Looking Good and Being Seen

Offenders living "life in the fast lane" (Gibbs and Shelley 1982) spend and exorbitant amount of money buying clothes and other items in an attempt to "keep up appearances" (Wright and Decker 1997:40; see also McCall 1994; Shover and Honaker 1992). By spending money conspicuously offenders can "create a look of cool transcendence" and show others that they are "members of the aristocracy of the streets" (Wright and Decker 1997:40). As one offender explained when asked what he did with the money, "Parlay, you know, go buy a new fix [drugs] and shit. Take care of a bill or something like that. Mostly, just to dress with." Another offender replied, "I like lavish clothes. I like to go out to clubs. I had a lot of girlfriends—when you living that lifestyle you going to spend the money, you know." Offenders spend without thinking in order to create an "impression of affluence" (Wright and Decker 1994). On the streets, the image projected is critical and those in "the game" must visually play the role. This includes dressing well and driving the right car.

Offenders often value nice cars and hope to garner the respect of others in their community by "flossing,"¹ and a large proportion of auto thieves steal cars

to cruise around in or joyride. Typically, they only keep the car for a short time, usually under three days, but they try to make the most of their time. When asked why he stole cars, one young auto thief replied, "I never wanted anything out of the cars, man. I was only interested in the car. I loved riding. Always did, always will. I liked riding." These auto thieves use the stolen vehicle to continue the good times by visiting friends, picking up girls, or just being seen.

For a significant number of offenders who were intent on cruising around in a stolen car, stealing a suitable one was a prerequisite. They searched for vehicles that fit the style and image they wished to project. For instance, one auto thief said:

I was very choicy. I used to go and look at them. Let me give you an example. If I had a choice between this car and that car. This one here looks more sporty because the windows are dark. I would get that car. [I went for] sportier cars. The girls will go for that one more than the other one because that one there is too plain. This one there is really nice. I had to have something real beautiful sporty because of my taste. I had good taste.

Some avoided stealing cars that were wrecked or too old. Some would not break the windows of the car because they saw no point in cruising in a car that did not look good or that was obviously stolen. As one offender stated, "I would try not to break no window getting in. Who wants to ride around in a car with a broken window?"

Auto thieves want to look good by driving the right car but some recognize that trying to sport a stolen car as their own is too risky. To overcome this risk, they use the spoils of auto theft, by stripping stolen cars and keeping the desirable parts for themselves, or by stealing the exact vehicle they wanted and keeping it intact. As one offender explains, "I took a car and demolished it to build up my car, you know what I'm saying. I never did steal a car to sell or anything. It was always for my use." Another explained:

I got a Pontiac and I see you got a Pontiac, and my fenders are bent up. I'll take your car and take the fenders off and put it on my car. Do the paint up real quick and go ditch yours. Nothing might be wrong with yours. Yours might be brand new. Mine is second hand. But I'd jack your car to take the body parts to put on mine. Make my shit look good. And just ditch yours off.

¹Flossing is a slang term meaning "to show off." It is frequently used in the context of driving a nice vehicle.

Stereos rank high on the list of sought-after accessories. When the beats (stereos) are loud they draw the attention of others, thus, offenders are not only heard they are seen. One car thief stated that his primary motive for the car thief was to take out the stereo. "Sometimes we would jack them just for the music. Sometimes we'd jack a car, take the music out [and] hook our car up with the music." As one joyrider stated, "Every now and then I might take a little radio or some music out of them. Keep a little music or whatever."

Despite the high number of offenders who sold cars to chop shops, it was rare for auto thieves to steal cars to permanently keep for themselves. In fact, only two offenders stated they did so. One offender stole a car for his brother to keep:

[My brother's] car broke down and couldn't be fixed. It was through. We didn't have no more money . . . We saw a car that looked just like my brother's. So we waited until everybody went into the store, got in the car and took off . . . He's still got it. It's legal now.

The other offender stole a motorcycle to keep for himself. He claimed he had always wanted a motorcycle and when the opportunity to steal one presented itself, he took it. In his words, "I took a motorcycle—a little blue Honda motorcycle. It had 'for sale' on it. God knows I didn't have the money to buy no machine like that."

Auto theft provides offenders with the opportunity to cruise in stylish cars. However, if one wants to truly stand out he or she must be "seen" in their car. One technique for being seen is to develop a distinctive driving style. Evidence that stylistic driving is a means to gain status is illustrated in the following description: "I wouldn't just sit up and drive, because after I had learned how to drive real well from stealing so many vehicles, I used to like to lean." This style of driving is frequently called a "gangsta lean" by those in the street.

Going Places

I had went to a club. I was living with [my girl]. I got dropped off at the house and I didn't have the key. Or she wasn't there, or she kicked me out or something. I don't remember. But I was stuck way over here. It was like two in the morning. So, I'm drunk and I walk outside and I'm like damn. I didn't know no better. I wasn't even planning on stealing a car. All I knew I was stuck.

The previous quote perhaps best illustrates how some offenders find themselves in situations where they "desperately" need a ride. A hallmark of streetlife

is the desire to be up for anything, at any time, especially a party. This desire to party often leaves them stranded far from home with no means of getting back. Fourteen offenders stated they had stolen a car for the purpose of short-term transportation. Several auto thieves wanted to go to a party but had no ride there; others went to a party and were left by their friends. In his words, one auto thief explained:

I remember one time I was stuck at these apartments. I just came from these girls' house and it was like ten or eleven o'clock and I had no ride to go across town. . . . I jumped into an old Toyota, and I took off with it.

Some just needed a ride after their domestic partners kicked them out of the house or took their car keys. One auto thief explained, "[I stole a car] because my girlfriend took my keys and I wanted to go out. I had to be from one point to another, like a 30-minute drive. And I seen [a car]. It was a spur of the moment thing I guess." One young man went out of town for a drug deal. When the deal went bad he was forced to abandon his car. He later stole a car just to get home:

I was up there, and they had a dope deal went bad. I was about 16. So, the dope deal went bad, and we had to run. By the time [everything was over], I couldn't find [my car], you know. So, I had some money, but it wasn't enough money, you know what I'm saying. So, I saw a Lincoln on like a store lot. I just went over there. The door was open . . . So when I popped [the ignition], I turned the music on and I came straight home.

All of these offenders were faced with situational pressures that were the products of the party lifestyle. The desire to maintain or extend the party created a need to get out of town or to another part of town quickly. Thus, in a moment of self-defined desperation, they stole a car to get where they needed to go, so that they could continue their search for good times.

Living for the Moment

While impulsiveness is often portrayed as a psychological short-coming in the criminology literature (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), a measure of it and other indicators of a "devil may care" attitude are respectable in street-offenders' surroundings. Offenders, especially younger ones, are expected by peers to embrace and enjoy adventures ranging from street-fights, to heavy drug use binges, to commission of acquisitive felonies. Dozens of studies document the presence of what might be termed the cult of adventure

and toughness among males in the lower tiers of the working class (Anderson 1999; Gibbs and Shelley 1982; Jacobs and Wright 1999; MacLeod 1987; Miller 1958). It is spontaneity and action, not reserve, that brings about “good times” for those immersed in this lifestyle. Thus, offenders seek out risky situations (Katz 1988). Many design their crimes with the intent of maximizing the risks so they can boost the level of excitement that crime creates. For instance, one car thief said, “Man, I done stole a fucking car with people right there in their window. I mean a big ole picture window and shit.” The added risk was a source of pride and accomplishment for this offender as it was evidence of his ability to “face and overcome dangerous situations” (Jacobs et al. 2003).

Offenders can prove their willingness to engage in thrilling and exciting behavior by engaging in auto theft. This is evident by the choice of adjectives used to describe crimes. Words such as “fun,” “thrilling,” or a “high” are frequently used to explain the overriding emotions that auto theft elicits. One young auto thief said, “Well, a lot of people just do it to make money. I take them for the thrill, the adrenaline rushes.” Similarly, another young car thief said, “It was fun because I was doing it so long it was just like I would get a little adrenaline rush off of it. It was just a thrill. Like a thrill.” The experience associated with engaging in auto theft is often compared to the physical sensation of drug use. As one offender recalls, “Yeah, I mean it’s like just about as good of a rush as snorting a foot-long line of cocaine.” The thrill of auto theft is in offenders’ abilities to “dance with danger” (Jacobs et al. 2003). This can be achieved by putting their physical safety and freedom on the line by driving dangerously, by being chased by police, or by simply doing things that most people do not have the nerve or cannot stomach.

Auto thieves’ thirst for excitement is evidenced by their desire to stolen to race, test drive, tear up, or engage in dangerous car stunts. In other words, to “just raise hell.” As one offender stated, “We actually played quite a dangerous game of bumper cars if we got two or more in one night.”

Another stated, “When I was younger, [we stole them] for joyrides, demolition derbies. Steal a car and tear it up.” Just how much wear some put on these cars is best illustrated by one young car thief:

There was a Porsche [we stole] that had the front wheel ripped off it completely. In some of the [cars], the radiator would be busted and before we knew it there would be steam coming out and we had to ditch it because the block was about to crack.

Driving chaotically not only threatens offenders’ physical safety but it also increases their chances of coming into contact with agents of the law. Few activities can generate the excitement and the ability to prove one’s reckless abandon like fleeing from police in a stolen car. Four offenders claimed they stole cars with the deliberate intention of getting chased by police. When asked what motivated him to steal cars, one auto thief stated:

It wasn’t the thrill of stealing the vehicle itself—it was the thrill of being in a stolen vehicle and cops behind you. I don’t too much do drugs. It’s pretty high. It’s pretty awesome. You getting behind a vehicle, behind the wheel of a stolen vehicle, and you run this truck that you have no idea what it’s capable of doing. You don’t know if you’ll be able to escape from them, how fast it can go, how slow it will go, you know. So, you just shaking. [Your] nerves are wrecked.

This same belief was reflected in the words of another offender:

The fun part about it is. . . . If the police get after us we going to get in a police chase. That was the excitement you know . . . That was the fun part.

A major component of the motivation to commit auto theft and part of its inherent thrill is the pleasurable feelings that come with doing the act and being successful, or “getting away with it” (Frazier and Meisenhelder 1985). To many offenders, being successful at crime provides a sense of accomplishment (Gibbins 1958). By getting away with crime they are able to accomplish things most people could not. This is illustrated by the following offenders:

But, man really though, it was like, it was more of like, a thrilling thing to me. To be able to get away with it. I mean, it would just give me goose pimples. Man I mean, it was like I pulled this off and I made this, you know. How I mean I would manage to keep from getting caught.

For offenders who stole high-end cars equipped with alarms and other security devices, a feeling of accomplishment was especially prevalent. One experienced car thief said:

I just liked to steal the cars, you know. I used to pride myself on which car I could steal. You know, the harder and more mysterious it was, the more I wanted to get it. So, it’s harder to steal the Porsches. All right, I’m going to

go get one . . . I take the pride in the knowledge of how to beat the system. It's just like them hackers. Sometimes I just amaze myself.

Getting Even

Justice on the streets seldom involves the criminal justice system. The "code of the street" demands that problems be taken care of informally, thus making street justice a common practice (Anderson 1999). Often offenders steal the property of others as a form of social control; so what may seem as an unprovoked theft is really a response to the perceived misconduct of the victim (Black 1998, 1983; see Jacobs 2000; Jacobs et al. 2003). Offenders exact revenge or retribution on those who, in their opinions, deserve it. For example, over one-third of the burglaries in New York resulting in arrest involve grievances between the burglar and victim (Vera Institute 1977). Seven auto thieves said that they had stolen cars because of spite or revenge. For these men, car theft is a way to express their dislike for another person. Auto theft is chosen as a method of revenge because these offenders possess the necessary skills to do so. Those auto thieves motivated by revenge were experienced car thieves, some stealing as many 200 cars in their lifetimes. These skills as car thieves translated into a natural means of exacting revenge or retribution on "deserving" others.

Car thieves who steal for revenge give several reasons for their "moralistic concerns" (Jacobs 2000:33). Being disrespected or unfairly treated by the victim was the primary reason for "punishing" them. But even these insults must be interpreted within the context of streetlife. The "sins" of the victims are often minor transgressions but are interpreted as threats to the offenders' identity as being a legitimate player of the streets. One man described a situation where he was publically humiliated and decided to get back at the instigator. When asked why he stole the particular car in question he responded, "This dude was drinking and kept on putting me down." Another offender was upset with a drug dealer because the dealer refused to provide him with drugs at no cost.

I always wanted to get some dope from this one dude. All my other little partners he would front them dope and stuff like this. But, we damn near stayed at the same house, but every time I come to get drugs I had to buy it from him. So, I was like fuck him I'm get me something else. I just took his car.

Sometimes car thieves had long-standing feuds with the people whose car they stole. One offender

resorted to auto theft in an attempt to get back at the person who shot at him. "The last one, I stole it because the nigger had tried to shoot at me."

Some of the victims highly coveted their cars, often more than any other possession, making it the most obvious way for the offender to exact revenge. One offender believed that his victim "flossed" too much so he took it upon himself to put the braggart in his place.

[What happened was] one day me and one of my friends—you know we used to be friends back in the day—we got into it. We used to fight about girls and stuff. Well he had a nice car. He used to always come in my neighborhood late at night playing his music loud, loud, loud. Boom, boom, boom! He had like four 18-inch punchers in the back. Nice amps, speakers all over. Bumping. He thought he was bigger than everybody else, you know. Nobody had more sound than him. We used to always fight. I said I'm going to fix him. I'm going to show him. He had nice rims. Nice, nice rims. . . . I showed him a thing or two.

For some offenders retribution is a secondary motive for the auto theft. These offenders were determined to steal a car for any number of reasons. It was when they began searching for a suitable target that they decided to steal from those people whom they saw as deserving. One younger offender wanted to show his friends that he was "man enough" to steal a car. He described why he chose this particular car:

I stole [this lady's] Lincoln. This lady, she used to come ride around. She was mean. That lady was mean. One time I asked her to go cut her grass, she ain't never looked at me. She never answered me, just rolled her eyes. So, [I thought] I'm going to fix you. I was going to do something to her dogs. Throw them a pill in a burger or something and give it to them. But I never did it. Then one night I wanted to go riding. I was like I wonder if I can [steal a car.] I know I can do it. I bet you I can show them I can [steal a car], you know.

Staying Low

Individuals embedded in street culture engaged in a wide range of illicit behaviors. The desire to avoid being identified when committing other crimes leads them to steal cars to use as get away vehicles. Since most cannot find people willing to loan a car to them, some offenders turn to auto theft to ensure their anonymity. By stealing a car, offenders fulfill the practical need to moving around town while simultaneously

concealing their identities. When asked if he ever stole a car to commit another crime, one offender stated:

A few. Maybe like for a drive-by, or something like that. We did that a few times, you know. If it was like some situation like that. Don't let the mother fucker know what I got. If it's something like that in the "hood." See like if I'm in my neighborhood and some mother fucker be done got down bad, and I know he know what I'm driving. [Then] I might go get something from somewhere else and handle up on our business. Because I know if I come by in my shit they know what I'm riding in, so. Like a few times, see like [we stole a] pick-up truck and put a few mother fuckers in the back. They don't know who it is passing through. And we handle our business and we gone, shit. Keep shit down cool like that.

This is perhaps the rarest form of motor vehicle theft (McCaghy et al. 1977). Only four offenders stated they stole cars for the purpose of concealing their identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Before concluding, a caveat is in order about auto theft typologies. Others have developed motivational typologies of auto theft (e.g., Challinger 1987; Clarke and Harris 1992a; McCaghy et al. 1977). They have even used these typologies to explain the type and frequency of cars stolen (Clarke and Harris 1992b; Tremblay et al. 1994). It is possible to use the data presented to construct a motivational typology, however, doing so may be inappropriate. Typologies imply exclusivity and stability; they are based on the idea that offenders in one group are qualitatively different from the offenders in the other group. Based on the current data, this portrayal does not accurately represent auto thieves because the motivational categories are not mutually exclusive. It is common for car thieves to have multiple motivations over their careers and for a single theft. This progression is illustrated in the words of one offender:

Just getting somewhere, trying to move, you know. Just being seen mainly. To get different places. You know if you got a car and shit you ride around, you can get with the girls and shit, you know. I mean that's basically what it's about then, you know. It wasn't about no money and shit then, back that early. As time went on and shit, I went to stealing them for like the rims, the tires, or the sound system and shit like that out of them. And me

dealing with body shops, I might get it for a different body part that might cost a whole lot, you know. Like one shop I was working with we used to take the cars, say you got a car that is wrecked on the front, we'll go steal another one like it and cut in half and weld that shit back together. They would make like ten or fifteen G [thousand]—Depends on how much damage the insurance company paid for, you know. So I mean, it got to be to a different level as time progressed.

The fluid nature of offender's motivations suggests that typologies may obscure auto theft more than they illuminate it.

The motivations to engage in auto theft are a product of the hedonistic culture of the street. This is a lifestyle that encourages the enjoyment of good times and the dismissal of all that is restrictive. Those embedded in streetlife paint themselves as autonomous, action-adventurers who cannot be held back by the rigid life of the "working stiff" (Akerstrom 1985). They "relish the independence and autonomy to structure time and daily routines as they wish" (Shover 1996:95). But enjoyment of this life often comes at a major expense, financially and socially, and participants often find themselves "strapped for cash." Faced with eroding legitimate resources, the high cost of the lifestyle makes criminal behavior all the more enticing. Offender's accounts of their crimes reveal that money is typically the primary motive for their crimes (Feeney 1986; Tunnell 1992). This desire for money instigates many auto thefts. The sale of stolen cars goes a long way in filling the pockets of offenders. If auto thieves have the necessary skills and proper connections, they can easily bankroll their lifestyle.

Offenders are motivated by other things besides money. Auto theft is uniquely suited to support streetlife in ways other than financially. First, it gives offenders the ability to make their parties mobile. If their current location becomes boring or is uncomfortable they can "hot wire" a car and travel to more thrilling locations. The automobile allows them to move the party off the stoop and travel of places where they imagine real hustlers, party-goers, and girl-getters to be. No other crime affords offenders with this degree of geographic mobility. Second, in the world of the street, appearance is everything. One's style should be reflected in everything they do, including the type of car they drive. Auto theft provides a direct means of acquiring high-end car accessories like stereos and rims. If an offender wants drugs they can rob drug dealers or pharmacies (Jacobs 2000). If they want cash, they can engage in armed robbery or check forgery (Lemert 1985; Wright and Decker 1997). If

they want to travel in stylish vehicles, they can steal cars. Third, auto theft fuels the desire for action more than most other crimes. Interviews with robbers shows that they often experience thrills and rushes while they are committing the robbery. But the actual act of robbery lasts a short time, usually under a minute or two. The excitement of auto theft can last for hours and even days, depending on how long offenders want to push their luck and drive in a “hot car.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, auto theft carries with it symbolic importance. Driving the right car can do more to tell others about themselves than any other activity or personal item. Automobiles project a sense of power, prestige, and status, especially in many urban subcultures (Bright 1998). Displaying material items shows that they are “someone who has overcome—if only temporarily—the financial difficulties faced by others on the street corner.” (Wright and Decker 1997:40). Thus, the ability to drive around, or “floss,” in a car is important for many male youths because it allows them to literally cruise past the poverty and despair of the street.

Recent efforts to understand the criminal calculus using qualitative methods has provided much insight into the process by which offenders weigh the costs and benefits of crime, however, there is still more to learn. If decision-making research is to progress, investigators must explore how gender, age, criminal experience, and other characteristics of offenders shape their assessments of the costs and benefits of crime within their given lifestyle. Doing so would allow for a better understanding of criminal behavior and, consequently, lead to more efficient crime control policies.

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