

2 Deciding to Commit an Armed Robbery

Official statistics tell us that arrested armed robbers are disproportionately young, poor, black, and male. It is tempting to read into such characteristics the mechanisms that drive offenders to commit stickups. After all, blacks who are young and poor have limited social and economic opportunities compared to older, more affluent whites. And it is part of our accepted wisdom that males are more violent and aggressive than females. But demography is not destiny. Many young, poor blacks never resort to any type of crime, let alone armed robbery. Conversely, some females regularly engage in predatory criminal violence. Demographic characteristics may identify a segment of the population as more likely than others to commit stickups, but such characteristics are not, and cannot be, causal agents. At most, they play an indirect role in facilitating such crimes by shaping the interactional environment within which potential offenders assess their current circumstances and prospects.

The direct cause of armed robbery is a perceptual process through which the offense comes to be seen as a means of meeting an immediate need, that is, through which a motive for the crime is formed. As Katz (1988:4) observes, demography notwithstanding, “something causally essential happens in the very moments in which a crime is committed. The assailant must sense, there and then, a distinctive constraint or seductive appeal that [was not sensed] a little while before in a substantially similar place.” What are the causally essential constraints or appeals that underpin the decision to commit an armed robbery? That is the question to which the present chapter is devoted. Our goal is to understand the process whereby would-be armed robbers move from an unmotivated state to one in which they are determined to carry out a stickup.

With few exceptions, the decision to commit an armed robbery arises in the face of what offenders perceive to be a pressing need for cash (Conklin 1972; Gabor et al. 1987). Eighty of the eighty-one offenders in our sample who spoke directly to the issue of motivation said that they did stickups primarily because they needed money.

Being broke [gets me to thinking about doing an armed robbery] . . . cause being broke, man, you don't feel good. You ain't got nothing in your pocket, so you want to take something out of someone else's pocket. (Bill Williams—No. 78)

These offenders were not attempting to accumulate the capital necessary to achieve a long-range goal. They regarded money as the means to satisfy an immediate need. Armed robbery for them was a matter of day-to-day survival.

[The idea of committing an armed robbery] comes into your mind when your pockets are low; it speaks very loudly when you need things and you are not able to get what you need. It's not a want, it's things that you need, basic things that if you don't have the money, you have the artillery to go and get it. That's the first thing on my mind; concentrate on how I can get some more money. (Black—No. 79)

[Armed robbery] was a big joke more or less when I was younger. It ain't no joke now. It's survival. That's how I look at it now. (James Minor—No. 14)

Many of the offenders lurched from one financial crisis to the next. The frequency with which they committed armed robberies was governed largely by the amount of money in their pockets. Most appeared to give little thought to offending until they found themselves unable to meet current expenses.

[I commit an armed robbery] about every few months. There's no set pattern, but I guess it's really based on the need. If there is a period of time where there is no need of money . . . then it's not necessary to go out and rob. It's not like I do [stickups] for fun. (Slick Going—No. 04)

I can be sitting there, [not thinking about doing an armed robbery], and I might want to go somewhere and I might be broke. I only work part-time; so when I get paid and I give my people some money for staying with them, I'm [soon] broke again. So I might be sitting there and the thought might occur, "Well, if you gonna [commit a stickup], you'll have something [to spend] for a few days." So sometimes I might be idle and broke, might need some cigarettes or just need money in my pocket or one of my kids might call and need some money so I'll resort to my old way of getting [some]. (Bob Jones—No. 09)

Some offenders occasionally committed an armed robbery even though they had enough money to meet their immediate needs. By and large, the robberies that fell into this category were not for the purpose of improving the offenders' cash flow situation, but rather were the result of opportunities that seemed too good to pass up.

If I had five thousand dollars, I wouldn't do [an armed robbery] like tomorrow. But if I got five thousand dollars today and I seen you walking down the street and you look like you got some money in your pocket, I'm gonna take a chance and see. It's just natural. . . . If you see an opportunity, you take that opportunity. . . . It doesn't matter if I have five thousand dollars in my pocket, if I see you walking and no one else around and it look like you done went in the store and bought something and pulled some money out of your pocket and me or one of my partners has peeped this, we gonna approach you. That's just the way it goes. (John Brown—No. 47)

Among those who did not rob because of pressing financial need were several of the more successful commercial robbers, who tried never to let their cash reserves get too low; they feared that the resulting financial desperation could cause them to take foolish risks. As one put it: "You've got to try to stay ahead. You don't want to have to do something and the time's not right." Staying ahead, however, was easier said than done because these offenders, like many others in our sample, were strongly committed to a hedonistic lifestyle that always threatened to exhaust their money supply. Typically, the armed robbers we spoke to did not save the cash derived through armed robbery; they used most or all of it to perpetuate a life of what we call "desperate partying."

DESPERATE PARTYING

A majority of the offenders in our sample spent much of the money they obtained through armed robbery to pursue what was for them an open-ended quest for excitement and sensory stimulation. Forty of the fifty-nine offenders who told us what they did with the proceeds of their stickups said they used most of the cash to initiate or sustain various forms of illicit action, including gambling, drug use, and heavy drinking.

I [have] a gambling problem and I . . . lose so much so I [have] to do something to [get the cash to] win my money back. So I go out and rob somebody. That be the main reason I rob someone. (Beano—No. 66)

I like to mix and I like to get high. You can't get high broke. You really can't get high just standing there, you got to move. And in order to move, you got to have some money. . . . Got to have some money, want to get high. (No. 14)

While the offenders often referred to such activities as partying, there is a danger in accepting this definition of the situation uncritically; the activities were pursued with an intensity and grim determination that suggest that something far more serious was at stake. For those in our sample, participation in illicit street action was no party, at least not in the conventional sense of the term. They appeared to find it anything but relaxing and showed little or no inclination to exercise the personal restraint that characterizes suburban cocktail parties. Rather, they gambled, used drugs, and drank alcohol heedless of any consequences. In the process, many of them began to contemplate their next stickup.

Katz (1988:198) argues that the successful integration of diverse illicit activities into a distinctive lifestyle plays a direct role in motivating persistent armed robbers to commit their offenses: “It is specifically the connection among the various forms of illicit action—the possibility of constructing a transcendent way of life around action—that sustains the motivation to do stick-ups.” He interprets armed robbery as being viewed by offenders as little more than a game, just another way of “getting over” or “beating the odds.” The offenders we interviewed, however, implied that the connection between armed robbery and other sorts of illicit action often was more subtle. Their motivation to commit a stickup emerged during a period of intense self-indulgence and from a growing sense of frustration and anger because they felt themselves to be locked into a cycle of events that was leading nowhere.

I’m walking around, sometimes if I have any money in my pocket I go get high, buy a bag of [marijuana], a forty-ounce [malt liquor] or something. Get high and then I ain’t got no more money and then the highness makes you start thinking until you go out and do [a robbery]. It just makes me upset, angry, mad, jealous . . . cause I ain’t got the stuff that [others] got. (Looney—No. 25)

[I think about armed robbery when] I need some money. I like money in my pocket, I like going out and getting drunk. When I get drunk, I get to tripping off shit that been happening with me, shit that been going through my life and shit [that] ain’t right. And [doing stickups] is just how I get my satisfaction, I guess. Just go out and just do it. (Tony Brown—No. 81)

In such an emotional state, some of the offenders—especially the younger ones—are prone to interpret any display of wealth by others in their neighborhood as a personal affront that should not go unpunished. Often the punishment of choice is an armed robbery.

[What makes me suddenly decide to do a stickup is] being broke, thinking that you don’t have no money . . . and then seeing all these other niggers driving a Lexus or something like that. They won’t give you nothing. . . . There ain’t no other way but to get ‘em. (Big Prod—No. 46)

I do the people that drive they fancy cars and they be on they phones, they be high-cattin’, you know, like they got all this . . . them the ones I get. (Ne-Ne—No. 31)

None of this should be taken to suggest that the offenders are hapless victims of circumstance. Many of them voluntarily enter into the illicit activities that drive them toward lawbreaking. But their activities have a marked tendency to encapsulate them and isolate them from the influence of conventional others, so that they come to perceive themselves as having little choice but to continue robbing.

Why do the offenders find the open-ended pursuit of illicit action so seductive in the first place? The answer lies in their strong attachment to street culture. Street culture revolves around “the enjoyment of ‘good times’ with minimal concern for obligations and commitments that are external to the . . . immediate social setting” (Shover and Honaker 1992:283). To be

seen as hip on the street, one must demonstrate an ability to make something happen now. There is no reputational mileage to be gained through deferred gratification. The offenders are easily seduced by street culture at least in part because they view their future prospects as bleak and see little point in long-range planning. Asked about his future plans, for example, one offender replied that there was no use thinking about such matters:

I really don't dwell on things like that. One day I might not wake up. I don't even think about what's important to me. What's important to me is getting mine [now]. (Kid Kutt—No. 59)

Participation in street culture represented an achievable source of personal identity that had the side benefit of helping to mask the offenders' "abiding sense of failure" (Kornhauser 1978:131). Few alternative sources of social support realistically were available to them, and many spent more time on the street corner than anywhere else. As one put it: "Basically, my whole life revolves around the street." During our interviews, we asked thirty-two of the offenders to tell us about their living arrangements; twenty-two said that they seldom slept at the same address for more than a few nights in a row, preferring to move from place to place as the mood struck them.

[I don't always stay at the same place.] I got a couple of little girlfriends and I'm just in and out, in and out. [I sleep at one address for] about two or three nights. Just got to move around. I don't like staying in one place all the time. (Carlos Reed—No. 64)

[I move around]; sometimes I stay on [a local street address], my brother and I have a home together out there. I have an ex-wife and kids on [another local street] and I stay there sometimes with them. . . . Then I have a room in my parents' house too. (W. Joe Murphy—No. 70)

I guess I'm just a street person, a roamer. I like to be out in the street. . . . Now I'm staying with a cousin. . . . That's where I live, but I'm very rarely there. I'm usually in the street. If somebody say they got something up . . . I go and we do whatever. I might spend the night at their house or I got a couple of girls I know [and] I might spend the night at their house. I'm home about two weeks out of a month. (Larry Pate—No. 71)

In effect, these offenders live as "urban nomads," ranging across the streets and alleys that connect the high-crime inner-city neighborhoods of Saint Louis (Stein and McCall 1994). These areas are the stamping grounds of the alienated, places dominated by dangerous and volatile losers for whom the code of the streets has replaced the conventional moral order (Anderson 1994). Lofland (1969) observes that the more time people spend in a deviant social setting, the more likely it is that they will embrace a deviant identity. Is it therefore any wonder that the offenders come to see their fate as inextricably linked to their ability to fulfill the imperatives of street culture?

Fulfilling the imperatives of life on the street is an expensive proposition. The relentless pursuit of action, whether in the form of heavy drinking, drug use, or high-stakes gambling, requires a great deal of money. The offenders in our sample seldom had enough cash in their pockets to sustain such activities for long. One seasoned armed robber explained to us that he had learned through experience never to embark on a session of illicit drug use without sufficient funds on hand; to do otherwise risked triggering a series of impulsive crimes, each designed to extend the session for a little bit longer.

[I commit armed robberies] mostly when I really *need* money or when I *want* some money. There is a difference between need and want . . . I might *want* some money to buy me some drugs, then I might *need* some money to buy me some drugs

when I'm really desperate. . . . I might go get eighty dollars [on a stickup]. Well, eighty dollars ain't gonna be no drugs. I know this cause I done been through this situation [before] and that's when I'm gonna [end up coming] back outside again and do the same thing. That starts a pattern. (Fred Harris—No. 74)

Even when the offenders had a substantial sum of money, their disdain for long-range planning coupled with their desire to live for the present often encouraged them to spend it with reckless abandon. The result was that they were under almost constant pressure to generate additional funds. That pressure, in turn, often led them to decide to commit an armed robbery. To the extent that the offense ameliorated their distress, it nurtured a tendency for them to view armed robbery as a reliable method of dealing with similar pressures in the future. In this way, the groundwork was laid for the continuation of their present street culture lifestyle. The self-indulgent activities of that culture inevitably precipitated new pressures. Thus a vicious cycle developed in which the offenders became increasingly desperate as they were drawn deeper and deeper into a way of life from which they saw little chance of escape.

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

Of the fifty-nine offenders who identified their use of the money derived from armed robberies, fifteen reported that they purchased “status enhancing” items. Foremost among these was clothing; all fifteen said that, among other things, they always bought some clothes with the proceeds of their crimes. These offenders were not buying clothes simply to protect themselves from the elements, but rather to project a desired image; they sought to create a look of cool transcendence that suggested that they were members of the aristocracy of the streets.

You ever notice that some people want to be like other people? . . . They might want to dress like this person, like dope dealers and stuff like that. They go out there [on the street corner] in diamond jewelry and stuff. “Man, I wish I was like him!” You got to make some kind of money [to look like that], so you want to make a quick hustle. (Robert Lee Davis—No. 12)

Wearing the right clothes is an important part of fitting into any social setting. This is no less true for street culture, which has its own dress code. That code calls for the bold display of the latest status symbol clothing and accessories, a look that loudly proclaims the wearer to be someone who has overcome—if only temporarily—the financial difficulties faced by others on the street corner (Katz 1988).

Indeed, one female offender reported that she sometimes robbed people not for money but simply because she wanted their jewelry so she could flaunt it in front of others.

[Sometimes we commit armed robberies] just to get the jewelry and sport it around for a while. Sport it off for a while and, when [we] low on cash, pawn it in. (Janet Outlaw—No. 58)

In doing so, this offender was showing off in much the same manner that provoked some of the robbers to commit their stickups in the first place. As we have seen, it was not uncommon for offenders to tell us that they regarded people who engaged in such displays as deserving to be robbed. And a number of them acted on that perception. The irony is that often they then used the proceeds to behave in a similar fashion themselves.

I be out on the street, I be walkin' and I ain't got no money . . . and I see a nigger on my set that I don't know with a cool-ass car . . . I feel I got to get his ass for his money and his mother-fucking car. [Get his gold] chain or something on my neck, a cool ass-car, and be sporting around in [it] and shit. [But I] don't keep that motherfucker too long. (No. 31)

Shover and Honaker (1992:283) have argued that the intense concern of offenders with outward appearances, as with their notorious “partying,” grows out of a strong attachment to the values of street culture, values that place great emphasis on the “ostentatious enjoyment and display of luxury items.” A prominent part of being seen as “cool” on the street involves demonstrating that one has “made it” by flaunting the material trappings of success. Given the desperation that dominates the lives of the offenders in our sample, it is easy to appreciate why those who have made a lucrative score are anxious to show off their newly acquired possessions. But there is an obvious element of one-upmanship in doing so, and these offenders risk exposing themselves to the wrath of others who have not been so lucky (Anderson 1994). Processes such as this may help to explain the isomorphic relationship between offending and victimization (Lauritsen et al. 1991). Of the thirty offenders we asked about criminal victimization, twenty-four reported that they had been robbed at least once.

It would be misleading to suggest that the offenders differed markedly from their law-abiding neighbors in wanting to wear flashy clothes or drive a fancy car. Nor were all of their purchases ostentatious. For example, it was not unusual for them to use a portion of the proceeds of their stickups for a haircut or a manicure. What set the offenders apart from other people was their willingness to spend large amounts of cash on luxury items to the detriment of more pressing financial concerns. Katz (1988) has argued that for those who are committed to street culture, the reckless spending of money on expensive goods is an end in itself, demonstrating their disdain for the ordinary citizen's pursuit of financial security. Underlying such disdain is a self-centered and strongly predatory orientation to life. Why should one worry about money when more of it can be obtained so easily? One offender likened armed robbery to taking candy from a baby, adding “that's why we call it stick candy, cause it's sweet, you know . . . the more you do it, the easier it gets.” But the free spending of the offenders further jeopardized their fiscal stability and left them with few alternatives except to continue committing crimes; keeping things together became a never-ending challenge.

KEEPING THINGS TOGETHER

While most of the offenders spent much of the money they acquired through armed robbery on illicit drugs and fashionable outfits, a substantial number also used some of it to cover daily living expenses. Nineteen of the fifty-nine offenders who specified a particular use for the proceeds of their crimes claimed that they needed the cash for necessities such as food, shelter, and child care products.

I don't think there is any one factor that precipitates the commission of a crime. . . . I think it's just the conditions. I think the primary factor is being without. Rent is coming up. A few months ago, the landlord was gonna put us out, rent due, you know. Can't get no money no way else. Ask family and friends, you might try a few other ways of getting the money, and as a last resort, I know I can go get some money [by committing an armed robbery]. (Tony Wright—No. 08)

Such claims conjure up an image of reluctant criminals doing the best they can to survive in

circumstances not of their own making. In one sense, this image is not so far off the mark; certainly the offenders did not choose the socioeconomic arrangements into which they were born. In another sense, however, the contention that they are driven to crime by conditions entirely beyond their control strains credulity. All but a few of them routinely spent the majority of their funds on alcohol or drugs and used whatever happened to be left over to meet necessary expenses.

Many of the offenders complained bitterly about the constant pressure of bills; ten of them said that they paid bills with the cash generated by their stickups. Often, however, these bills were badly delinquent because the offenders disregarded them for as long as possible, even when they had the money, in favor of buying drugs. Typically, it was only when the threat of serious repercussions (e.g., being evicted, having the electricity or gas supply cut off) created unbearable pressure for the offenders that they relented and settled their accounts.

By me being involved with drugs, I keep a financial strain on myself. Unfortunate, but I do. . . . [I spend] the majority of [my money on drugs], unfortunately. Take care of the household as best I can, stay late in bills, but I manage to keep the light and gas on, rent paid, food; stay late, stay behind, and it's all because of drugs, basically. If it wasn't for drugs, I would be just doing what a normal person would do. I would probably be doing extremely well. (No. 70)

You are sitting there alone and you feeling light in your pocket, your rent is due, light and gas bill, you got these bill collectors sending you letters all the time, and you say, "I wish I had some money. I need some money." Those are the haints. [You haint got this and you haint got that.] Your mind starts tripping cause you ain't got no money and the wolves are at the door. Can't be throwing no bread. . . . [After my last stickup] I gave my landlord some money and sent a little money off to the electric company, a little bit off to the gas company. I still had like twenty or thirty dollars in my pocket. I got me some beer, some cigarettes, and [spent] some on a stone [of crack cocaine]; enjoy myself for a minute. I let the people know I'm trying to pay you and they ain't gonna be knocking on my door. Now I can do me legitimate hustles until the crunch comes again. (Ray Holmes—No. 76)

Since spontaneity is an enduring feature of street culture, it is not surprising that the armed robbers often displayed a strong determination to live for the moment. Indeed, Katz (1988) suggests that, through careless spending, persistent criminals seek to establish the conditions that will drive them back to crime. Whether offenders spend money in a deliberate attempt to create such conditions is open to question; the subjects in our sample gave no indication of doing so, appearing simply to be financially irresponsible. Whatever the explanation, the important point is that, consciously or not, the offenders were largely the authors of their own destinies. This is not to say that they freely chose to engage in armed robbery through a process of careful calculation. Rather, their behavior had a nasty way of placing them under the gun to obtain cash as quickly as possible. One offender, for instance, told us that he had committed ten armed robberies in the past month because he needed to pay his private attorney; he was awaiting trial on an aggravated assault charge and did not want to take his chances with a public defender. Another offender reported that he was doing stickups to "reestablish" himself after serving a lengthy prison sentence for armed robbery.

The overall picture that emerges is one of people caught up in a cycle of expensive, self-indulgent habits that feed on themselves and constantly call for more of the same (Lemert 1953). It would be a mistake to conclude that the offenders are being driven to crime by genuine financial hardship; few of them are doing stickups to buy the proverbial loaf of bread to feed their children. At the same time, though, most of their crimes are economically motivated. The offenders perceive themselves as needing money and their offenses typically

are a response to that perception.

WHY ROBBERY?

The decision to commit an armed robbery, then, usually is motivated by a perceived need for cash. But why does this need express itself as armed robbery? Presumably the offenders have other means of obtaining money. Why do they choose armed robbery over legitimate work? Why do they decide to commit a stickup instead of borrowing the money from a friend or relative? And why do they select armed robbery rather than some other crime?

That the decision to commit an armed robbery typically emerges in the course of illicit street action suggests that legitimate employment does not represent a realistic solution for most of the offenders in our sample; the immediacy of their need for cash effectively rules out work as a viable moneymaking strategy. In any case, the jobs available to these offenders—almost all of them unskilled and poorly educated—pay wages that fall far short of being able to support their cash-intensive activities.

Education-wise, I fell late on the education. I just think it's too late for that. They say it's never too late, but I'm too far gone for that. . . . I've thought about [getting a job], but I'm too far gone, I guess . . . I done seen more money come out of [doing stickups] than I see working. (Wyman Danger—No. 02)

Minimum wage is four dollars and twenty-five cents. You work forty hours. By the time they take out taxes and then most places you have to wait two weeks to see two-hundred dollars, and then you got to wait two more weeks. I'm not saying that it's right for me to do what I'm doing, but I'm so used to the easy way [of getting money]. (No. 09)

Beyond this, a small number of the offenders rejected the idea of legitimate employment altogether, claiming that a job would cramp their lifestyle.

I'm a firm believer, man, God didn't put me down on this earth to suffer for no reason. I'm just a firm believer in that. I believe I can have a good time every day, each and every day of my life, and that's what I'm trying to do. I never held a job. The longest job I ever had was about nine months . . . at Saint Louis Car; that's probably the longest job I ever had, outside of working in the joint. But I mean on the streets, man, I just don't believe in [work]. There is enough shit on this earth right here for everybody, nobody should have to be suffering. You shouldn't have to suffer and work like no dog for it, I'm just a firm believer in that. I'll go out there and try to take what I believe I got coming [because] ain't nobody gonna walk up . . . and give it to me. [I commit stickups] because I'm broke and need money; it's just what I'm gonna do. I'm not going to work! That's out! I'm through [with work]. I done had twenty-five or thirty jobs in my little lifetime [and] that's out. I can't do it! I'm not going to! (No. 14)

I can't work. I don't want to work. I don't have time to wait on nothing coming to me every week or every two weeks. (Wallie Cleaver—No. 48)

One offender pointed out that armed robbery was much easier than working for a living.

[Armed robbery is] not boring, it gets good. The money, as far as paying bills and stuff like that, [robbery is] much easier [compared to] working. It's just like you been living the hustler type of life . . . and that's just the kind of life we make, that's just it, [we want easy money]. (John Lee—No. 13)

And another added that, having spent many years in prison, he no longer had the time to earn his way to the top through legitimate employment; his only realistic chance of achieving financial security was to pull off a string of lucrative crimes.

After a certain age, you know, you may get a few [legitimate] jobs, this and that, but if you been in jail and this and that, you

really want something quicker. You don't want to just lay around and work now, you just want to make some quick money and get some stuff together, get you some cars, get you a house. You want to do this as quick as possible. You don't want to lay around and try to work no twenty years. And you gonna be up in age as it is, so . . . (No. 12)

The “conspicuous display of independence” is a bedrock value on which male street corner culture rests (Shover and Honaker 1992:284); to be seen as cool one must always do as he pleases. This cultural ethos often brings members into conflict with the demands of legitimate employment because employees are expected to do as they are told by the boss. Certainly crime appealed to some of the offenders in our sample precisely because it allowed them to flaunt their independence from the routine imposed by the world of work.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the offenders who said they were unwilling to work for a living were experienced armed robbers with long criminal records; they recognized that the only jobs available to them were menial with little or no chance for advancement. Crime, on the other hand, possessed an entrepreneurial edge that allowed them to gain “a measure of respect, if not from others, at least from [themselves]” (Shover and Honaker 1992:288).

I don't like working, really, just mainly for myself because, really, this isn't a racist thing, it's just kind of a personal thing with people telling me what to do. . . . I spent so much time in the penitentiary, and being on a [legitimate] job seems like it's a problem [for me]. (Cedric Rhone—No. 05)

From their perspective, then, why should these offenders subordinate their immediate desires to the requirements of a job that they see both as demeaning and as holding no promise for the future?

Nevertheless, many of the offenders reported that they wanted lawful employment; twenty-five of the seventy-five unemployed subjects who said that they did stickups mostly for the money claimed they would stop committing offenses if someone gave them a “good” job.

My desire is to be gainfully employed in the right kind of job. . . . If I had a union job making sixteen or seventeen dollars [an hour], something that I could really take care of my family with, I think that I could become cool with that. Years ago I worked at one of the [local] car factories; I really wanted to be in there. It was the kind of job I'd been looking for. Unfortunately, as soon as I got in there they had a big layoff. (Robert Gibson—No. 69)

I would take a job paying six dollars an hour, something like that. I'll work, it's cool. Ain't nothing wrong with working for real. If I get a little bitty job . . . I wouldn't have to be out in these streets robbing people. I'm cool. Get a little [house], find a little girl to settle down. I don't want to be rich. Buy a little thirty-thousand dollar house, something like that. (Andrew—No. 44)

And a few others admitted that, while a job probably would not eliminate their offending altogether, it might well slow them down.

[If a job were to stop me from committing stickups], it would have to be a straight-up good-paying job. I ain't talking about no six dollars an hour. . . . I'm talking like ten to eleven dollars an hour, something like that. But as far as five or six dollars an hour, no! I would have to get like ten or eleven dollars an hour, full-time. Now, something like that, I would probably quit doing [stickups]. I would be working, making money, I don't think I would do it no more. I wouldn't actually quit; I don't know [that] I would quit altogether. It would probably slow down and then eventually I'll stop. I think [my offending] would slow down. (No. 58)

While such claims may or may not be sincere, it is unlikely that they ever will be challenged. Attractive employment opportunities are limited for all inner-city residents, and the vast majority of the offenders are not well placed to compete for the few good jobs

available. Most of them realized this and, with varying degrees of bitterness, were resigned to being out of work.

I fill out [job] applications daily. Somebody [always] says, "This is bad that you got tattoos all over looking for a job." In a way, that's discrimination. How do they know I can't do the job? I could probably do your job just as well as you, but I got [these jailhouse] tattoos on me. That's discriminating. Am I right? That's why most people rob and steal because, say another black male came in like me [for a job], same haircut, same everything. I'm dressed like this, tennis shoes, shorts, and tank top. He has on [a] Stacy Adams pair of slacks and a button-up shirt with a tie. He will get the job before I will. That's being racist in a way. I can do the job just as well as he can. He just dresses a little bit better than me. (Antwon Wright—No. 56)

Even if the offenders were to land a high-paying job, it is doubtful that they would keep it for long. As Shover and Honaker (1992) have pointed out, the relentless pursuit of street action has a powerful tendency to undermine any commitment to conventional activities. In particular, the heavy use of psychoactive substances promoted by street corner culture often ensnares participants so that they begin to neglect the demands of legitimate employment in favor of enjoying the moment. As a result, they quickly find themselves out of work and desperate to locate other sources of income to maintain their increasing dependence on drugs and alcohol. Davis (1995) has called attention to the powerful part played by addictive drugs in blocking job opportunities for the inner-city poor; for those caught up in street life, he warns, "drug use is the padlock on the exit door."

In theory, the offenders perhaps could have borrowed some cash from a friend or relative rather than resorting to crime. In practice, however, this was not a feasible option. Most of them long ago had exhausted the patience and goodwill of others; not even their closest friends or family members were willing to loan them more money.

I can't borrow the money. Who gonna loan me some money? Ain't nobody gonna loan me no money. Shit, [I use] drugs and they know [that] and I rob and everything else. Ain't nobody gonna loan me no money. If they give you some money, they just give it to you; they know you ain't giving it back. (No. 02)

Besides, some of the male offenders were reluctant to keep asking for loans because they believed that men should be self-sufficient.

I don't like always asking my girl for nothing because I want to let her keep her own money. . . . I'm gonna go out here and get some money. (Treason Taylor—No. 77)

In any case, borrowing money offers only a short-term solution to financial difficulties. The expectation that loans will be repaid in itself can trigger an armed robbery. As one offender told us, "I have people that will loan me money, [but] they will loan me money because of the work that I do; they know they gonna get their money [back] one way or another." Putting it bluntly, offenders who are unemployed and caught up in heavy gambling, drinking, or drug use are not going to solve their money troubles by borrowing additional cash, and they know it.

When confronted with an immediate need for money, then, the offenders in our sample perceive themselves as having little hope of getting cash quickly and legally. As Lofland (1969) has observed, many of the most efficient solutions to financial problems are against the law. But this does not explain why the subjects decided to carry out an armed robbery instead of some other crime. Most of them had committed a wide range of offenses in the past, and some continued to do so. Why do they choose armed robbery?

For many of the offenders, this question was irrelevant; armed robbery was their “main line,” and alternative crimes were not considered when the need for money arose.

[W]hen I was coming up, the people that I used to be around, [armed robbery] was all they used to do. I guess I learned how to do it the way they showed me, and that’s really the only thing I know how to do. (Lisa Wood—No. 83)

I have never been able to steal, even when I was little and they would tell me just to be the watch-out man. . . . Shit, I watch out, everybody gets busted. I can’t steal, but give me a pistol and I’ll go get some money. . . . [Armed robbery is] just something I just got attached to. (No. 13)

When these offenders did commit another kind of crime, it typically was prompted by the chance discovery of an especially vulnerable target.

I do [commit other sorts of offenses], but that ain’t—I might do a burglary, but I’m jumping out of my field. See, I’m scared when I do a burglary [or] something like that. I feel comfortable robbing . . . but I see something they call “real sweet,” like a burglary where the door is open and ain’t nobody there or something like that, well . . . (No. 02)

Most of the offenders who expressed a strong preference for armed robbery had come to the offense through burglary, drug selling, or both. They claimed that doing stickups had several advantages over these other crimes. A number of them pointed out that armed robbery took much less time than breaking into buildings or dealing drugs; not only could the offense be committed more quickly, but it also typically netted cash rather than goods and thus avoided the delays inherent in disposing of hot merchandise.

I tried the drug [selling] thing for a minute, but the money wasn’t coming right; it was too slow. I don’t know, I give this man one-hundred dollars for a gram [and] I get back two-hundred dollars. But that’s two-hundred dollars in like two days, where I [can] go look for somebody and rob them and get a grand in a day, in an hour. So the dope [dealing] thing ain’t nothing. With robbery, it’s just fast. (No. 31)

Robbery is the quickest money. Robbery is the most money you gonna get fast. . . . Burglary, you gonna have to sell the merchandise and get the money. Drugs, you gonna have to deal with too many people, [a] bunch of people. You gonna sell a fifty-dollar or hundred dollar bag to him, a fifty-dollar or hundred-dollar bag to him, it takes too long. But if you find where the cash money is and just go take it, you get it all in one wad. No problem. I’ve tried burglary, I’ve tried drug selling . . . the money is too slow. (No. 70)

Some of the offenders who favored armed robbery over other crimes maintained that the offense also was safer than burglary or dope dealing.

I feel more safer doing a robbery because doing a burglary, I got a fear of breaking into somebody’s house not knowing who might be up in there. I got that fear about house burglary. . . . On robbery I can select my victims, I can select my place of business. I can watch and see who all work in there or I can rob a person and pull them around in the alley or push them up in a doorway and rob them. You don’t got [that] fear of who . . . in that bedroom or somewhere in another part of the house. (Melvin Walker—No. or)

Burglary, there is always that element of surprise. You can crawl through somebody’s window and they be waiting on you and send you right back out. You never know what’s in that house waiting on you. Robbery, it’s just you and that individual out in the open. (No. 09)

If I’m out there selling dope, somebody gonna come—and I’m not the only one out there robbing, you know—so somebody like me, they’ll come and rob me. . . . I’m robbing cause the dope dealers is the ones getting robbed and killed, you know. (No. 48)

And quite a few of them said that armed robbery was less of a threat to their freedom as well.

If you sell drugs, it's easy to get locked up selling drugs; plus, you can get killed selling drugs. You get killed more faster doing that. (Vincent Ray—No. 16)

Robbery you got a better chance of surviving and getting away than doing other crimes. . . . You go break in a house, [the police] get the fingerprints, you might lose a shoe, you know how they got all that technology stuff. So I don't break in houses. . . . I leave that to some other guy. (No. 59)

My style is, like, [I] don't have to be up in nobody's house in case they come in; they might have a pistol in the house or something. It's easier to get caught [too because you can] leave fingerprints or anything in that type of business. But when you robbing somebody that's selling drugs, that's different. They ain't going to the police. (No. 66)

Several offenders told us that increased law enforcement activities aimed at curbing street corner drug sales in Saint Louis had caused them to switch from dope dealing to armed robbery.

Why not sell drugs? Because the people you sell drugs to might be undercover police. We've slowed down drugs a little and started robbing people. . . . My friend that I been robbing people with, he sold drugs to a detective; a dude he trusted set him up. So we stopped selling drugs and we going into robbery. (Thugg—No. 42)

Finally, a couple of the armed robbers reported that they had learned to steer clear of dope selling because their strong craving for drugs made it too difficult for them to resist their own merchandise.

It's not good for me to be around [drugs]. I'm not a strong-willed person where I can handle something that I used to love and [still] profit from it. I would become my best customer. (No. 09)

I think robbery is more easier. . . . A dope fiend can't be selling dope because he be his best customer. I couldn't sell dope [nowadays]. I could sell a little weed or something cause I don't smoke too much of it. But selling rock [cocaine] or heroin, I couldn't do that cause I mess around and smoke it myself. [I would] smoke it all up! (No. 78)

Without a doubt, some of the offenders in our sample were prepared to commit crimes other than armed robbery; they wanted money quickly and could not afford to be choosy about how they got it. More often than not, however, these offenders elected to do a stickup because this appeared to be the “most proximate and performable” (Lofland (1969:61) offense available to them. The universe of moneymaking crimes from which they realistically could pick was fairly limited. By and large, they did not hold jobs that would allow them to violate even a low-level position of financial trust. Nor did they possess the technical know-how to commit lucrative commercial break-ins or the interpersonal skills needed to perpetrate successful frauds. Even street corner dope dealing was unavailable to many of them; they lacked the financial wherewithal to get started. Indeed, several interviewees reported that they sometimes did stickups as a means of generating the cash necessary to finance their drug selling. ‘

Sometimes we fall off when we sell dope; sometimes we lose our dope. Sometimes the police take our dope and don't lock us up. In our neighborhood, we got this policeman and he'll take our dope and our money and just send us on our way. He'll keep the money and the dope; [the police are] crooked like that. So we have to do another [armed robbery] or something to get back on our feet. (Taz—No. 52)

Thus, in times of financial desperation, the offenders had only a few viable alternatives to armed robbery, crimes such as theft (typically shoplifting), car stealing, or residential burglary. And they knew through experience that, other things being equal, doing a stickup represented the most efficient solution to their current troubles. This is the insight that separates persistent

armed robbers from their street corner peers; for those who can stomach the violence, doing stickups seems so much easier than other types of hustling that it becomes increasingly more difficult to contemplate alternative crimes.

[Robbery] is just easy. I ain't got to sell no dope or nothing, I can just take the money. Just take it, I don't need to sell no dope or work. . . . I don't want to sell dope, I don't want to work. I don't feel like I need to work for nothing. If I want something, I'm gonna get it and take it. I'm gonna take what I want. . . . If I don't have money, I like to go and get it. I ain't got time [for other offenses]; the way I get mine is by the gun. I don't have time to be waiting on people to come up to me buying dope all day. . . . I don't have time for that, so I just go and get my money. (No. 48)

The bottom line is that the offenders, when faced with a pressing need for cash, tend to resort to armed robbery because they know that no other course of action, legal or otherwise, offers as quick and easy a way out of their financial difficulties. Lofland (1969:50) has observed that most people, when under pressure, have a tendency to become fixated on removing the perceived cause of that pressure “as quickly as possible.” Those in our sample were no exception to this rule. In a desperate state, they were not predisposed to consider unfamiliar, complicated, or long-term solutions (see Lofland 1969:50–54) and instead turned to armed robbery, which they knew well. This often seemed to happen almost automatically, the stickup emerging out of a more general path of illicit action (e.g., partying) with minimal calculation. The cold-blooded rationality popularly attributed to armed robbers was a scarce commodity among the offenders we interviewed.

THE SEDUCTIONS OF ARMED ROBBERY

Katz (1991:300) has argued that persistent armed robbers are motivated less by the need for money than by a desire to transcend “the omnipresent threat of chaos in contemporary, urban, street criminal life.” In committing stickups, Katz asserts, offenders are seeking to exploit their potential for violence as a means of exerting ruthless control over their surroundings. We found little evidence in our research to support Katz's contention that the primary motivation for armed robbery is psychic rather than financial. Only one offender we talked to—a woman—said that for her the emotional benefits of the offense typically had more causal force than the potential monetary reward; each of this person's four previous stickups was motivated by a desire to get even with someone who had wronged her.

Though only one offender reported becoming motivated primarily by the psychic rewards of armed robbery, a number of them viewed such rewards as an important secondary benefit of the crime. Several of those who did stickups mostly to raise cash added that they enjoyed dominating their victims and got a great kick out of frightening them.

The money is the point [of robbery], that's all. [But] pulling the gun, watching they face, how scared they get and all that . . . that's fun too. (K-Money #2—No. 60)

This might sound stupid, but I [also] like to see a person get scared, be scared of the pistol. . . . You got power. I come in here with a big old pistol and I ain't playing. . . . You gonna do [what I say]. I like [robbery] cause you got the power and, like I said, it's a quick way of getting money. (Rudy—No. 1.o)

Others who committed armed robberies chiefly for monetary reasons said that such offenses also gave them an opportunity to take charge of their daily lives.

I make it happen [through robbery]. There is only three types of people in this world: those that wonder what happen; those that know what happen; and then people like me that make shit happen. I make happen whatever I want to happen. (Frank Nitti #z—No. 63)

[On one of my armed robberies] me and a friend of mine . . . was standing up over [the victims] with these big old guns and these people were saying, “Take the money! Take the money! Just don’t shoot us!” I didn’t have any intentions of shooting anybody anyway. But I’m just saying that when a person is telling me that, you [are] in control. You can either take their life like that or you can just let them live. That’s what it is, a control thing . . . you succeeded in having the authority to control people. You think about it and you say, “I had this much control in my hands.” Really, it’s an unexplainable thing. (Bennie Simmons—No. 07)

These offenders came closest to the armed robbers described by Katz in that, beyond cash, they got a sense of control out of their stickups as well. Remember that, by any conventional measure of success, virtually all of the offenders we interviewed were miserable failures, and they were well aware of this. Among the moneymaking crimes available to them, therefore, armed robbery was especially appealing because the successful completion of such a potentially dangerous offense represented “a thrilling demonstration of personal competence” (Katz 1988:9).

Beyond competence and control, some of the offenders who were motivated predominately by financial pressures said that they liked the violence inherent in the crime.

I been brought up around violence all my life. I done went to a psychiatrist when I was like seventeen, my mother was wondering why I was so violent. . . . I’m just violent. I just love to fight. . . . You say what makes [robbery] different [from other crimes]? A burglary, I feel like a burglary is nonviolent; you don’t want to hurt anyone. It’s like creeping in the dark. But I’m gonna do what I got to do to make ends meet. I don’t want to try to tiptoe in and steal something. I’ll just take it away from them. (No. 63)

One subject reported that he found armed robbery particularly seductive because the offense allowed him to beat money out of his victims. As he put it: “It just be fun when we do the robbery cause we’ll beat the person’s ass bad, make ’em suffer. It just be so fun.” Herein may lie an important difference between persistent armed robbers and other street corner hustlers. The armed robbers we spoke with typically displayed far more anger and hostility than the active residential burglars who took part in our earlier study (Wright and Decker 1994). Even in casual conversations, their strong propensity for sudden violence seemed to lurk just below the surface (see also Katz 1991).

We try not to kill [our victims]. If we can avoid killing them, then we try not to. But if they force your hand, then you have to kill them. It’s just that simple. (No. 81)

In addition, a number of the offenders who usually resorted to armed robbery out of financial desperation occasionally committed the offense to get even with someone for a real or imagined wrong, for “revenge.” One offender told us that he had robbed a group of drug dealers the day before because they had sold him “bad drugs.” He claimed that he had not been especially short of cash at the time, but that he wanted to punish the dealers for mistreating him.

They shouldn’t do their customers like that. I feel like I’m out there taking a chance, risking my life to get the money [to buy drugs]. They should show me some respect. I’m making them rich; they shouldn’t be so disrespectful. (No. 01)

Other offenders also described stickups perpetrated in the name of a rough and ready form

of street justice (see Black 1983). The purest example of such a robbery was provided by a parolee who, because he denied being a currently active offender, was not included in our sample. Nevertheless, we spoke to him at some length. He recently had been released from prison, where he had served several years for robbing someone to collect on a bad debt. He explained that he had not intended to rob the person but had acted impulsively because he was sick and tired of being taken for a sucker.

I've only done one robbery, and to me it wasn't a robbery, but that's how [the authorities] rated it. I had loaned a guy some money and I was kinda down on my luck or whatever. I used to ask this guy for my money, and he would always tell me that he didn't have it. But he was working every day! This particular day here, I seen him with some money. In fact, he'd just cashed his check or whatever and I asked for my money and he said that he didn't have any money. So really, I just took what he owed me, and that was about sixty dollars. I took that from him. I did not take all the money he had, I just took the sixty dollars that he owed me and gave him back the rest of his money. Well, I throwed it on the ground and I know he got it back. But he told the police that he was robbed and I went to prison for it. Well, basically it was a robbery because he didn't consent for me to have the money; he didn't say willingly that I could have it. I told him that if he didn't give me the money I was gonna kill him. But in my way of thinking that's how I deal with it. I was just fed up.

Armed robbery, as noted in [chapter 1](#), often is an interracial event in which a white victim is confronted by a black assailant. This raises a question as to whether such crimes are racially motivated. To be sure, a majority of the black offenders in our sample routinely robbed whites; some even expressed a strong preference for white victims. But none of these offenders indicated that they were motivated to rob whites specifically by racial hatred. In fact, only two of the interviewees admitted to disliking whites, and neither of them had ever robbed one. That said, the offenders, especially the males, frequently used vicious racial epithets during stickups, though their black victims were every bit as likely as their white ones to be subjected to such abuse. Armed robbers are not politically correct; racial putdowns are part and parcel of their everyday speech and, as we shall see in [chapter 4](#), find ready expression during robberies.

SUMMARY

The offenders in our study typically decide to commit their armed robberies while under what they perceive to be intense financial pressure to sustain various forms of illicit action (e.g., gambling, drug use, and heavy drinking). Studies based on incarcerated armed robbers also have concluded that most stickups are motivated by a perceived need for money. What those studies have missed, however, is that the offenders' financial desperation is linked inextricably to their intense involvement in the self-indulgent activities promoted by street culture. Farrington (1993) suggests that offenders' claims that they were driven to crime by a lack of money could be tested simply by giving them cash and observing whether or not their offending decreased. Our hypothesis, on the basis of street-based research, would be quite the opposite; we would predict that giving money to the armed robbers would set off a round of drinking and drug taking that would plunge them deeper into financial desperation and thereby *increase* their lawbreaking.

That the armed robbers, at the time of actually contemplating their stickups, typically perceive themselves to be in a situation of immediate need has at least two important

implications for real-world offender decision making. First, it suggests a mind-set in which they are seeking less to maximize their gains than to deal with a present crisis. Second, it indicates an element of desperation that probably weakens the influence of threatened sanctions and neutralizes any misgivings about the morality of taking someone else's possessions by force. This might help to explain why, even though the vast majority of incarcerated criminals report that armed robbery is not worth the risk (Figgie International 1988), many of them return to offending after release. Prison inmates are removed from the temptations and pressures of life on the street and therefore may calculate the risks and rewards of crime quite differently than they do on the outside. It is only through studying active offenders that we can gain a realistic understanding of the emotional and cultural forces that motivate their criminality.