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CORRECTIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
RECHERCHE ET DÉVELOPPEMENT CORRECTIONNELS

Research Brief

A Profile of Robbery Offenders in Canada

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A Profile of Robbery Offenders in Canada

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A Profile of Robbery Offenders in Canada

Research Division
Correctional Research and Development
Correctional Service of Canada

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1995

While sophisticated explanations for robbery crimes focus on such things as mental health or social problems, offenders themselves point to the obvious -- money, thrills, drugs and peer influences are the main reasons for taking or attempting to take something of value from a person by force or threat of force.[1]

Some Basic Statistics...

Like many other crimes, robbery (also commonly referred to as a stick-up, hold-up, mugging, or purse snatching) is almost exclusively an offence of the young male. In Canada, just 5% of persons accused of robbery are female, about two-thirds of those accused are younger than twenty-five and virtually no accused is older than 50. Approximately, 16% of those accused of robbery are young offenders.[2]

Although robberies account for only about 10% of all violent crimes, it is among the crimes most feared by Canadians because of its potential physical harm to victims Robbery involves a high probability of physical harm from a stanger, and it can happen to anyone, almost anywhere, at anytime.

Robbery offenders are also more likely to use weapons than other offenders. In fact, about one-quarter of robberies involve the use of a firearm, another one-quarter involve the use of offensive weapons (such as clubs or knives), and about one-half involve the use or threat of physical force. More important, however, one-quarter of robbery victims received at least a minor physical injury, with 4% requiring medical attention at the scene or transportation to a medical facility.[3]

Further evidence of the seriousness of robbery is that more than 80% of those convicted or robbery in Canada are sentenced to incarceration, while just 23% of all offenders convicted in provincial courts are sent to prison. Further, between 1986 and 1991, 20% of admissions to federal custody (persons serving sentences of two years or longer) were for robbery offenses. Finally, a December 31, 1994 snapshot of the federal offender population identified almost one-third as robbery offenders.[4]

Initial Research...

Some researchers and criminologists argue that robbery (like homicide, rape and assault) develops within a subculture of violence and should be classified as a violent crime. Others contend that robbery offenders are generally non-violent and are associated with a subculture of theft rather than violence.[5]

If robbery does originate from a violent subculture, the backgrounds of robbery offenders should support this. We would expect to find their criminal records and social history to be filled with violent acts. However, several studies have found no excessive period criminal violence in the backgrounds of robbery offenders (compared with the general criminal population). Further, the majority of robbery victims do not sustain physical injuries. However, research does suggest that robbery offenders who have relied on violence in the past are more likely to do so in the future, whether in a robbery or in other crimes. It would appear, therefore, that robbery should be

considered both a property and violent crime. In fact, some have suggested that robbery is more accurately classified as a violent property crime.

In 1987, a University of Montreal task force on armed robbery developed a typology of armed robbers by breaking down a sample or robbery offenders (from the Canadian correctional system) into four groups: chronic, professional, intensive and occasional. Although the sample size was modest, the diversity of motivations and behavioral patterns among armed robbery offenders was striking.[6]

Most of the armed robbers interviewed by the task force were younger than 30, had only a secondary school education, had spent less than one year on any job and left their jobs due to dissatisfaction with salary, work conditions or interest in the type of work.

An equal number of the armed robbers interviewed were married and single, the majority had no children, and all tended to change residences frequently.

The age of onset of criminality for chronic armed robbery offenders was, on average, 12, while occasional armed robbery offenders didn't tend to begin their criminal career until age 15. Offenders who began at a very early age (around 10) tended to gradually escalate from simple thefts to things such as bicycle thefts, to auto thefts and then burglary. Finally, in late adolescence or adulthood, they moved on to robberies.

Association with criminal friends (both during adolescence and adulthood) had created temptations or pressures to commit armed robberies.

During adolescence, about half of the offenders drank alcohol regularly and used drugs, particularly marijuana and hashish. In their youth, armed robbers were more likely to use the money acquired through their crimes for recreational purposes (such as parties). As adults, daily expenses, debts and savings were more important.

The principal characteristics of each type of armed robbery offender as described by the task force are provided below.

The Chronic Armed Robber.

The average age of the offenders at first offense is 12, first arrest is 14 and first armed robbery is 17.5. The duration of an armed robbery career averages seven to eight years. During this time, these offenders average 20 to 25 armed robberies and commit many other offenses (such as burglary, drugs and auto theft). All have some periods of inactivity, but these generally last just a few weeks or months. Although a disguise is often used, the planning of the armed robbery is usually poor and occurs just a few minutes, hours or days before the crime is committed. Chronic armed robbers regularly carry firearms (which are always loaded) and use them in one out of five robberies. These offenders generally earn from $500 to $5,000 per robbery and the money is spent on drugs and alcohol, going to clubs, taking trips or buying automobiles.

The Professional Armed Robber.

The average age of these offenders at first offense is 13, first arrest is 16 and first armed robbery is 17. The duration of their armed robbery career averages 11 to 12 years. During this time, these offenders average 20 to 50 armed robberies and commit many other offenses (such as burglary, drugs, auto theft and safe-cracking). While some have no periods of inactivity, most professional armed robbers will have inactive periods lasting a few months or years. The planning of these armed robberies is usually comprehensive and usually occurs several weeks or months in advance. While professional armed robbers tend to be well armed (sometimes with automatic weapons), they fire their weapons less often than chronic armed robbers (one out of ten robberies) and sometimes take hostages. These offenders generally earn from $1,000 to $5,000 per robbery (with a few very lucrative heists), and the money is spent on debts, daily expenses, automobiles, furniture and bank deposits.

The Intensive Armed Robber.

The average age of these offenders at first offense is 18, first arrest is 18 and first armed robbery is 25. Their armed robbery career tends to be short, lasting just several weeks or months. During this time, intensive armed robbers average from 5 to 10 armed robberies and commit very few, if any, other offenses. While they are criminally inactive most of the time, the planning of their armed robberies is usually poor or moderate and takes place just a few hours or days before the crime. Intensive armed robbers sometimes carry firearms (which are always loaded) and rarely use them.

These armed robbers earn from $150 to $1,400 per robbery and spend the money on daily expenses and going to clubs.

The Occasional Armed Robber.

The average age of these offenders at first offense is 13, first arrest is 15.5 and first armed robbery is 20.5. Their armed robbery career tends to last from several months to two years. During this time, these offenders average from 1 to 6 armed robberies and commit many other offenses (often specializing in an area such as burglary, fraud, drugs, or auto theft. While they are consistently active in crime, occasional armed robbers generally prepare poorly for their armed robberies and are often not disguised and insufficiently armed. These armed robbers earn from $100 to $1,000 per robbery and the money is spent on clubs, drugs and trips.

Other Features...

In 1988, the Correctional Service of Canada commissioned a national survey to assess the prevalence, nature and severity of mental health problems among the male federal offender population in federal custody. Contrasting the lifetime prevalence rates of mental disorders across major offense groupings (homicide, manslaughter, robbery, sex, drugs), the likelihood of having met the criteria for Antisocial Personality Disorder was greatest among robbery offenders (almost nine out of ten).[7]

The essential features of Antisocial Personality Disorder are a history of continuous and antisocial behavior through which the rights of others are violated, persistence into adult life of a pattern of antisocial behavior begun before the age of 15, and failure to sustain good job performance over a period of several years.

Lying, stealing, fighting, truancy and resisting authority are typical early childhood signs of Antisocial personality Disorder. In adolescence, the disorder tends to display itself through unusually early aggressive sexual behavior, excessive drinking and use of illicit drugs.

This type of behavior continues into adulthood, and is joined by an inability to sustain consistent work performance or function as a responsible parent, and failure to accept social norms with respect to lawful behavior.

However, the more flagrant aspects of Antisocial Personality Disorder may diminish after age 30, particularly sexual promiscuity, fighting, criminality, and vagrancy. This is encouraging given that robbery offenders, as a group under federal supervision, appear to be aging. On December 31, 1994 the average age of robbery offenders at admission was about 31 years old.[8]

According to the mental health survey conducted in 1988, robbery offenders, as a group, were also characterized by the relatively high lifetime prevalence of substance (more than two-thirds) and alcohol (about three-quarters) disorders among them. More recent data gathered on federal admissions has

found that one-third of robbery offenders reported that they were under the influence of alcohol, drugs or both on the day they committed the offense(s).

Conclusion...

There are three key features of robbery offenders. First, robbery offenders possess attitudes, values and beliefs favorable towards violating the law. Second, robbery offenders often have and maintain supports for crime through friends and acquaintances. Thirdly, alcohol and/or drug abuse is a common characteristic of robbery offenders.

For robbery offenders, changing prociminal attitudes, reducing criminal associations and removing chemical dependencies are promising targets in prevention and rehabilitation.[9]

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