THE PREVENTION OF STREET ROBBERY

MARY BARKER
JANE GERAGHTY
BARRY WEBB
TOM KEY

PolicE RESEARCH GROUP
CRIME PREVENTION UNIT SERIES PAPER NO. 44
LONDON: HOME OFFICE POLICE DEPARTMENT

Editor: Gloria Laycock
Home Office Police Research Group
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT
Crime Prevention Unit Papers

The Home Office Police Research Group (PRG) was formed in 1992 to carry out and manage research relevant to the work of the police service and Home Office Policy Divisions. One of the major Police Department divisions which acts as customer for the PRG is the Home Office Crime Prevention Unit which was formed in 1983 to promote preventive action against crime. It has a particular responsibility to disseminate information on crime prevention topics.

The object of the present series of occasional papers is to present research material in a way which should help and inform practitioners, whose work can help reduce crime.
Foreword

Street robbery, or mugging causes anxiety not just to its victims, but also to potential victims. Although its incidence is relatively low, and indeed is falling in London, the fear and anxiety associated with this offence suggest that the police and other agencies need to be constantly alert to means of prevention.

The report begins by describing some early work on the pattern of street crime in London. Although the data is now rather old, it provides a detailed and as yet unpublished account of street robbery in the Metropolitan Police area where over half of all nationally recorded street crimes occur. Within the Metropolitan Police, certain areas are particularly prone to this type of offence – notably the inner city areas. The early data also provides the starting point for a series of interviews with convicted robbers and some of their victims. These interviews contribute to our knowledge of the motivations and methods of street robbers. Both the robbers and their victims discussed the circumstances associated with the offence and possible means of its prevention.

The report recommends a strategic approach to preventing street robbery by the police and discusses the potential of improved policing, education, social programmes and opportunity reduction.

I M BURNS
Deputy Under Secretary of State
Home Office,
Police Department
May 1993
Acknowledgements

At certain stages in this research project, we relied very heavily on the help of a number of individuals and organisations. In particular, we would like to thank the staff of the Prison Index, probation and other staff of the various prisons we pestered, the offenders we spoke to and the victims, of whom we asked a great deal.

Barrymore Cooper was very important at the project’s inception. Sarah Holdsworth was instrumental in the design of the research and in organising the fieldwork. Gloria Laycock kept us on course with regular, sound advice. Rosemary Jupp provided vital support in the final stages of the production of this report. Neither the research nor this report would have been possible without their generous help.

The Authors

Mary Barker
Jane Geraghty
Barry Webb
Tom Key
May 1992
Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>(iii)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>(iv)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>(vi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>(vi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Patterns of street robbery in London</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The nature of street crime in London</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The offence</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The victim</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The property</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interviews with street robbers and street robbery victims</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling procedure</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interviews</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of offender sample</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of victim sample</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of offences</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Issues raised by the interview data</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The prevention of street robbery: a strategic approach</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The policing of street robbery</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventive social programmes</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational initiatives</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime prevention publicity and the potential for opportunity reduction</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime Prevention Unit Papers</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure No.</th>
<th>Caption</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Medium and high incidence divisions of the Metropolitan Police district, for street robbery offences in 1987</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Highest incidence divisions for street robbery offences in the Metropolitan Police district, 1986 and 1987</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Offence distribution over a 24 hour period</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Factors influencing choice of victim</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table No.</th>
<th>Caption</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Offences recorded in the Metropolitan Police District as a percentage of those recorded in England and Wales in 1987</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Street Robbery in the Metropolitan Police district as a percentage of all recorded in England and Wales, 1987-1990</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Offences by type</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Number and percentage of offences by location</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Number and percentage of victims traveling by various means at the time of the offence</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Age and sex of victims</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Occupations of victims</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Numbers of each category of offence</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(vi)
1. Introduction

Street robbery, or mugging as it is known colloquially, is the subject of considerable fear, affecting the quality of life of many. Averaged over all ages and both sexes, over 20% of people reported being “very worried” about the possibility of being “mugged or robbed” (Hough and Mayhew, 1985). Thirty percent of women reported being “very worried”. The 1984 British Crime Survey estimated that for ‘mugging’, defined as robbery and snatch theft, the rate of victimisation in the highest risk areas is less than 4% i.e. less than once every twenty five years for an average adult. For all other areas, the risk of being a victim of street robbery is estimated to be much lower and less than 1%. Despite the generally low risk of being a victim, street robbery under the name ‘mugging’ has a disproportionately high media profile:

“Streets where one in a hundred runs the risk of a mugging” (Daily Telegraph, June 90);

“Street crime nearly out of control” (Daily Telegraph, May 1991).

Sensational headlines that refer to particular incidents are commonplace, for example:


Though the amount of media attention focused on street robbery appears to fluctuate (Hall et.al., 1978), it is clearly a matter of considerable public concern and as such merits careful study.

In addition to generating fear, street robbery seems to encapsulate many of the problems associated with the inner city. It has an oft-mentioned racial dimension, and raises questions about how to employ a rising generation of young people, for whom there is little by way of satisfying work, but who have expectations of material wealth (Burney, 1990).

The term ‘mugging’ has sensationalist overtones and as such is replaced in official usage by ‘street robbery’. Street robbery is not recorded as one of fence category in Home Office statistics. The term is used to refer to the combined of fence categories of thefts from the person and robberies of personal property. Though the category causes some problems by its confusion of violent with ostensibly non-violent offences (see Burney (1990) for a discussion), its usage is consistent with popular understandings of ‘mugging’. This report uses the term ‘street robbery’ as a shorthand for its constituent theft and robbery categories.

The first section of the report describes the geographical patterns of recorded street crime nationally and in London, particularly as they were in 1987. Street robbery in London was rising prior to 1987, and the Metropolitan Police recognised the need to address the problem. It was this concern which prompted a number of initiatives on
the streets, and also the analysis described in detail in the second section of the report. This drew on 5,615 crime sheets which were examined for consistencies and patterns in features of the offences and their victims. These offences constituted all allegations of street crime recorded in twelve Metropolitan Police Divisions between 1st March and 31st August 1987.

The report contributes to our knowledge of the motivations and methods of street robbers through interviews with forty-five street robbers and thirty-three victims. This information supplements the analysis of the 5,615 crime sheets and is presented in the third section of the report, as it hears on issues and questions current in crime prevention.

The majority of crime prevention measures are based on assumptions about what offenders do and how they think. Accurate information from offenders themselves can therefore inform, and provide a sound rationale for crime prevention initiatives. Similarly, to interview their victims is to provide some means of validating what offenders say. This study of street robbery aims to do all these things, with a view to informing national and local policy on the prevention of this offence.

The final section of the report discusses the benefits of a strategic approach to the prevention of street robbery, focusing on four areas of intervention: policing, education, social programmes and opportunity reduction.
2. Patterns of Street Robbery

Between 1976 and 1986, offences of street robbery of personal property and thefts from the person increased by about 6% per annum. Roughly half the offences were theft from the person and about half were robberies. Robbery offences are those that involve some threat or use of force or violence. The offence category of ‘theft person’ includes the ‘snatch’ offences in which the degree of force will vary from lightly and speedily whisking away a handbag, to a severe wrench which might result in injury to the victim through falling. Also included in the legal category of ‘theft person’ offences are the ‘dips’, which describe pickpocketing and articles taken from bags but not the bag itself. Except where indicated, these ‘dip’ offences are excluded from the description of street robbery in this report, since they lack the characteristics common to the popular conception of ‘mugging’.

By 1987, street robbery offences represented 1.7% of recorded notifiable offences in England and Wales and 5% of the Metropolitan Police total.

A breakdown of figures by police force shows that the Metropolitan Police area accounted for 55.3% of all robbery and theft person offences recorded in England and Wales. Compared to the proportions of other types of crimes recorded by the Metropolitan Police, this is a dramatic figure (see Table 1).

Table 1: Offences recorded in the Metropolitan Police district as a percentage of those recorded in England and Wales in 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence</th>
<th>England &amp; Wales (includes Met)</th>
<th>Met. Police only</th>
<th>% Met. Police represents of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robbery and Theft from person</td>
<td>66,168</td>
<td>36,613</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>900,104</td>
<td>149,886</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual offences</td>
<td>25,154</td>
<td>3,811</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Damage</td>
<td>588,961</td>
<td>117,373</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against the person</td>
<td>141,043</td>
<td>22,626</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is clear that a disproportionate amount of England and Wales’ street robbery happened within the Metropolitan Police district, though since 1987, the exact proportion of the national street robbery figures accounted for by the Metropolitan area has fallen slightly (see Table 2). The figures here cover all street robbery including ‘dips’.
Table 2: Street robbery in the Metropolitan Police district as a percentage of all recorded in England and Wales, 1987-1990.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>England &amp; Wales (includes Met.)</th>
<th>Met. Police only</th>
<th>% Met. Police represents of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>66,168</td>
<td>36,613</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>62,230</td>
<td>34,901</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>62,597</td>
<td>33,594</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>66,321</td>
<td>34,095</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Metropolitan Police Commissioner’s report of 1988 describes an 8% reduction in snatch thefts and robberies of personal property. This was followed by further reductions of 9% and 3% in 1989 and 1990 respectively. This fall was coincident with the Metropolitan Police initiative described in the last section of this report.

Despite this welcome fall in the number of offences recorded, street robbery remains a problem. This is partly because some areas of London suffer disproportionately high numbers of attacks, and partly because of the periodic surges in public anxiety described in the introduction to this report.

Figures for 1987 showed that seventeen out of the seventy-five Metropolitan Police Divisions accounted for 59% of all street robbery reported in the district. Another fifteen divisions accounted for a further 20% of reported street robbery. Therefore, in total, nearly 80% of London’s street robbery offences were concentrated within thirty-two divisions.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of reported street robbery in the London area, based on 1987 figures. This map suggests that street robbery is a problem of the inner city, though it has to be recognised that this may in part be a reflection of the larger populations of the inner city areas rather than some intrinsically criminogenic feature of such areas. Figures 1 and 2 are based on reported offence data unadjusted to per capita rates.
Figure 1: Medium and high incidence divisions of the Metropolitan Police district for street robbery offences in 1987

Key: Metropolitan Police Divisions circa 1987

AD Cannon Row
AH Hyde Park
BC Chelsea
BD Kensington
BH Notting Hill
DD Paddington
DM Marblehead
DR Harrow Road
DS St John's Wood
ED Albany Street
EH Hampstead
EK Kentish Town
EO Holborn
EW West Hampstead
FF Fulham
FS Shepherds Bush
GA Dalston
GD City Road
GH Hackney
GN Stoke Newington
HB Bethnal Green
HD Leman Street
HH Limehouse
ID Heathrow Airport
JD Waltham Abbey
JE Barking
c IF Chingford
IG Ilford
IH Leyton
JS Leytonstone
JW Walthamstow
KG Barkingside
KH Forest Gate
KL Kensington
MK Hammersmith
ML Hounslow
MN Ealing
MO Southwark
MV East Dulwich
MW Peckham
NC New Cross
ND Kings Cross Road
NE Holloway
NF Islington
NG Kingston
NH Walthamstow
NI Newbury Vale
NJ Highbury
NJ Peckham
NO Southwark
NP Deptford
NQ Woolwich
NR Westminster
NS Southwark
NT New Cross
NU Peckham
NW Westminster
NX New Cross
NY Southwark
NZ Southwark
OA Battersea
OB Putney
OC Teddington
OD Earlsfield
OE Lavender Hill
OF Putney
OG Wandsworth
OH Acton
OK Ealing
OL Ruislip
OM Southall
ON Hayes
OR St Ann's
OS Wood Green
OT Edmonton
OU Enfield
OV Muswell Hill
OW Hornsey
OX Southgate
OY Tottenham
PAS Battersea
PF Lee Road
PL Lewisham
PM Orpington
PN Deptford
PO Bromley
PP Sydenham
QQ Beckenham
QR Harlesden
QS Kilburn
QT Willesden Green
RU Ealing
RW Woolwich
SX Greenwich
SY Lewisham
TJ Hounslow
TM Richmond
TN Twickenham
TV Streatham
TW Streatham
TW East Dulwich
WW Walthamstow
WW West Hampstead
WW Southwark
WW Southwark
WW Southwark
WW Southwark
WW Southwark
WW Southwark
Figure 2 shows the seventeen Metropolitan Police divisions that reported the highest numbers of offences in 1987. The variation shown, even amongst these worst hit divisions, demonstrates how a few areas in the inner city suffered exceptionally high levels of street robbery.

The average clear-up rate in the Metropolitan Police area in 1987 was 8.5%, but it varied from around 5% in some divisions to 14% in others. This compares unfavourably with a national clear-up rate of between 11-12% for theft from the person. (National clear-up rates for street robbery are not possible to isolate from robbery figures which contain commercial robberies.)
3. The Nature of Street Crime in London

In 1988, recognising that the London area had a special problem with street robbery, the Metropolitan Police undertook an analysis of 5,615 crime sheets relating to allegations of robbery of personal property and theft person (snatch) in twelve divisions over the six month period between 1st March and 31st August 1987. To ensure a geographical spread, the divisions included at least one from each of the eight areas that constitute the Metropolitan Police District.

The analysis concerned 5,709 victims and was intended to inform police strategic operations against street robbery and to reveal characteristics of offences. Thirty-five items of information were collected about each incident. Victims’ descriptions of their attackers were felt to be too unreliable to justify including the analysis of offender information in the current report. However, information from the crime sheets about the locations, the victims and the property taken is presented below.

**The Offence**

Just under half the offences referred to in the 5,615 crime sheets were classified as robberies or attempted robberies. The rest were thefts from the person, or attempts, and incidents that were later ‘no crimed’. The breakdown of offence types is shown in Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Offence</th>
<th>No. of Offences</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>2,402</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Robbery</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft Person</td>
<td>2,227</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Theft Person</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Crime</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,615</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table shows, there were roughly equal numbers of robberies and theft person offences reported. Of offences ‘no crimed’, at least 190 of the 474 were classified as such because the victim could not be contacted.

**Times of offences**

Figure 3 shows the number of offences committed within each hour throughout the twenty-four hour period. It is not inconceivable that the peak (23.00-24.00hrs) is linked to pub closing time and/or, to the times of the last underground trains.
No significant monthly variations in numbers of offences reported were found over the six month period for which data were collected.

Features of the offence venue
The 5,615 offences were recorded as taking place in the locations shown in Table 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>4221</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a Bus</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Path/Alleyway</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car Park</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous/Not known</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5615</td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of offences took place on the street, rather than in the lonely parks or alleyways often associated in the public mind with such offences.
In some cases, information about the victim’s journey to and from the offence venue was recorded on the crime sheet. The only result of significance to emerge from analysis was that 714 (12.7%) of the victims were either coming from or going to a public transport location: 9% coming from a bus stop, 2.5% from an underground station and 1.2% from a British Rail station.

Table 5: Number and percentage of victims travelling by various means at the time of the offence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means of Transport</th>
<th>Number of Individuals</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>4,934</td>
<td>88.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Vehicle</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cab</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedal or Motorcycle</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,615</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The vast majority of victims were travelling on foot at the time of the offence. Table 5 shows the number of victims attacked whilst on foot as compared with the numbers travelling by other means. Victims were most frequently on their own at the time of the attack, with only 3% accompanied. Those accompanied tended to be with only one other person.

The method of attack and use of violence

From the crime sheet information, 2,467 (44%) of the incidents appeared to involve violence against the victim. Of these victims, 1,547 (28%) were injured, 173 (3%) seriously enough to sustain a charge of grievous bodily harm. The figure for those injured does not, of course, include the much larger number who suffered shock as a result of their experience. The main types of injuries sustained were cuts and bruises to the face and legs, in particular the knees, where the victim was pushed or pulled to the ground. There was also a very small number of incidents where the victim was stabbed with a knife or hit over the head.

Some of the injuries reported were sustained during snatch thefts, when it might be imagined the victim was less likely to suffer injury. Given that approximately a quarter of victims of street robbery suffer injury of some sort, it is not surprising that there is so much fear associated with the crime, despite the low level of risk.

Individual victims’ experiences of street robbery differ. In the incidence of robbery of personal property, the victims were either threatened with violence or actually
subjected to violence before the attackers removed the property. In 1,218 incidents (21.5% of all the cases analysed), a weapon was used - usually a knife. Fifty-four incidents involved handguns, and the rest bottles and miscellaneous implements.

Two methods were employed during the snatch thefts; either the victim was approached from behind, frequently being pushed in the back, and their bag or jewellery snatched, the attacker then running away, or the victim was asked the time or some other innocuous question by the attacker, who then snatched the property having put the victim off guard. The ‘theft person’ offences tended to involve individual offenders whereas more than one offender was often involved in cases of robbery. The classification of an offence as a robbery rather than a theft is based on the use of violence by the offender, though local practice will mean that the grounds for this distinction are most consistent.

The Victim

Age and sex of the victim

Information was available in 5,123 of the 5,615 cases on the age and sex of the victim (Table 6). The table illustrates the over-representation of younger victims. Seventeen to thirty-five year olds accounted for over 55% of the total victim sample, contrary to the media view that the elderly are frequent victims of ‘mugging’. In contrast with findings that young men are most at risk of ‘personal crimes’ including street robbery (Walmsley, 1986; Gottfredson, 1984), there were slightly fewer men than women amongst this victim sample. In the small group of victims over sixty, there were three times as many women as men.

Table 6: Age and sex of victims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Male No.</th>
<th>% of total victim sample</th>
<th>Male No.</th>
<th>% of total victim sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-16</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>11-16</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-25</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>17-25</td>
<td>988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-50</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>36-50</td>
<td>572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-100</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>61-100</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>2203</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>2920</td>
<td>56.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10
It is important not to place too much weight on these figures as an accurate reflection of the victim population. This sample was self-selected in that they were the individuals who chose to report the offence to the police, rather than one randomly selected. The greater numbers of elderly women than elderly men reporting offences may simply reflect their greater frequency in the population. On this basis, it is not possible to challenge the more authoritative victim surveys which consistently find men to be more at risk of violence than women (Gottfredson, op.cit.).

**Victim’s occupation**

Table 7 below shows the occupations of the 4,819 victims on whom data were available. The largest occupational groups amongst the victims were the white collar workers, professional the shop assistants and those who worked in service industries. Though only the most tentative conclusions can be drawn from raw frequencies, it is possible to speculate that these individuals suffer a combination of being both more exposed to the risk of victimisation by being out and about at the times offences are most likely to take place, and of being more attractive to offenders, by being smartly dressed. This possibility is discussed in the light of comments from offenders in the next section of the report.

**Table 7: Occupations of victims**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Nos. of Victims</th>
<th>% age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White collar and Professional</td>
<td>1288</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop assts and service industry workers</td>
<td>1198</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housepersons</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual workers</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourists</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4819</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The victim’s home address relative to the offence location*

For 70% of the victims, it was possible to identify the location of the offence in relation to their home address. This showed that 2,740 victims (68%) were attacked close to their homes, that is, the offence venue and the victim’s home were within the same police division. In 1,392 cases (35%), the victim’s home and the offence venue were on the same police beat. The large majority of the rest of the victims lived within the metropolitan area.
The Property

Property taken in these offences was either bags, including briefcases and shopping bags, jewellery (mainly gold chains), and wallets, including cheque books and credit cards. Nearly 29% of the 5,520 victims in this sample, had their bags taken. 20% of them lost jewellery. In many cases, victims had more than one type of property taken.

The main source of immediate gain for the offender was cash. The average value of the property taken, as estimated by the victim, was surprisingly high at £165. This does not include the potentially lucrative spin-offs of using the cheques and credit cards fraudulently, or selling to those who will use them (Levi, 1991). As this kind of property was taken in 43% of the incidents analysed, there is clearly high potential income from street robbery. It does help to explain why street robbers and thieves consider it worth taking the risks inherent in this kind of confrontational offence.

In nearly 67% of cases, the property taken was visible to the offender before the offence. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the offence, nearly every theft from the person offence involved taking visible property, whilst in only half the robberies was it visible. Handbags seem to be a particular source of vulnerability; 26% of all the victims were women who had had their handbags taken.

The other major item on display to the offender was jewellery, which figured prominently amongst the types of property stolen, and was taken from 19.7% of the victims. Over 80% of this was gold chains. Again, this property has obvious attractions for the street robber or thief and is clearly a case where traditional sorts of crime prevention advice would have no impact; jewellery is bought to be displayed.
4. Interviews with Street Robbers and Street Robbery Victims

This section describes the results of interviews with street robbers and victims, and discusses what they had to say about some of the issues surrounding the offence.

Sampling Procedure

For a variety of reasons, including the likely quality of the information obtained, it was felt necessary to interview offenders following conviction. This delayed the process considerably and caused problems in locating the individuals. In all, forty five offenders and thirty three victims were interviewed in the course of the study. The offenders were traced from a list of all individuals arrested for robbery offences from January to March 1989. From this list, a hundred and forty eight individuals were identified who had been arrested for robberies of personal property and ‘snatch’ thefts. Those who were subsequently convicted of the offence, seventy-six individuals, formed the sample of offenders from whom the majority of interviews were taken.

As many as possible of these seventy-six offenders were then traced. The prisoner index, court and probation records were used in this process and thirty offenders were eventually located. After six months of continual effort, it was decided that few if any more offenders were likely to be traced and the process was stopped.

An additional twelve interviews were held with street robbery offenders who were convicted of offences in the April and May following the original period January to March, simply in order to increase the size of the interview sample. The final three offenders interviewed were traced from those arrested for offences committed between January to March 1989, but were found at the point of interview not to have been convicted for the offence in question but for a later offence. Most frequently, the offence about which an interview was required was taken into consideration by the court.

Seventeen of the thirty-three victims were interviewed concerning street robbery offences about which we already had an account from the offender. The remaining sixteen were victims of street robberies committed by offenders from the January to March sample, who we had been unable to trace and interview.

The Interviews

The offenders were asked a number of questions about their family background and history; more detail on their offending and general experience of, and motivation for, street robbery; the specific offence for which they were arrested, and their ideas about how street robbery could be prevented. These interviews were conducted face to face.
The victims were interviewed by telephone about the attack: the conditions at the
time; what they were doing; what they were wearing; how they reacted to the attack;
how they felt; whether they had any suggestions for prevention, and finally whether
they had been contacted by victim support. Interviews were conducted, after victims
had received a letter from the Home Office and Metropolitan Police telling them
about the study, and informing them that researchers would be telephoning them
within the next seven days. Only two of the victims refused to be interviewed.

Description of Offender Sample

The interviewed offenders were found to be representative, on most points, of the
sample of seventy-six convicted offenders who had committed an offence during the
three month period.

The average age (18.5 years) of the interviewed offenders, was the same as that of the
whole group of convicted street robbers. The age range was from fifteen to thirty-four,
through all but one of the interviewees was under twenty-four. This is very much in
line with the small amount of previous research that exists, as for example, in Burney’s
study where the average age of fifty-two convicted Lambeth street robbers was
between eighteen and nineteen years (Burney, 1990). The street robbery offenders in
the current study were heavily concentrated in the sixteen to nineteen age group. The
striking youth of individuals involved in street robbery has been noted in other studies
(e; Pratt, 1980; Burney, 1990). One of the convicted offenders was only eleven years
old.

The interviewees’ ethnicity reflected that of the wider sample of convicted offenders,
approximately two thirds were of Afro-caribbean origin and one third white. As
Burney says, this crime is “disproportionately associated” (p. 39) with young black
people from London. Home Office statistics based on police assessments of ethnic
appearance reveal that 63% of those arrested for street robberies and violent thefts are
black, whilst white offenders tend to makeup the majority of those arrested for armed
and other sorts of robberies. The issue of race and its relationship with street robbery is
both sensitive and complex, and has in the past been vulnerable to negative media
exploitation. Some of the better researched and considered explanations for this
association are discussed later in the report, where the motivations of street robbers
are considered in the light of information from the offenders themselves.

The interviewed offenders had slightly more previous convictions for robbery than
did convicted street robbers as a whole; which is likely to be associated with the fact
that the majority of those interviewed were in custody, or had recently been released.
42% of the offenders had previous robbery convictions, and 72% had previous
convictions for other offences. The interviewees were not found to differ
significantly from the sample of convicted offenders on the numbers of preconvictions
they had.
Over two-thirds of the offenders (69%) were brought up in one parent families, 66% of them with working mothers. 25% spent at least part of their childhood in care. Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees (66%) described their childhood as happy. Probably because of their youth, most (70%) were found to be living at their family home at the time they were arrested.

The interviewed offenders’ school careers seem, on the whole, to have been short. The average age at which they left school was fifteen, a year below the legal school leaving age. Ten of them left school at fourteen or younger, and the large majority, when talking about school, said they simply never went. The number of these individuals who were suspended from school is evidence to the fact that they were undoubtedly a group of difficult students, but it is also an indication of how little in the way of formal education some of them will have received.

Two thirds of interviewees were unemployed at the time of arrest, though most of them had been in some sort of employment since leaving school. Of the remainder, ten were in employment and three were still at school.

In summary, the street robbery offenders in this study tend to be male between sixteen and nineteen years old, to be of Afro-carribbean origin and to have a mixed history of preconvictions. They were likely to have been brought up by one parent and to have been living in the family home at the time of arrest. They were unlikely to have had any further education and were probably not in employment when arrested.

**Description of Victim Sample**

The relatively small number of victims interviewed means that they are unlikely to be a representative sample. However, on a number of points the results of these interviews are broadly in line with the findings of more comprehensive victim surveys.

Of the thirty-three victims interviewed, thirteen were aged between fourteen and twenty years, two thirds of them were thirty or younger and none were over sixty-one years old. The comparative youth of these interviewees does not support the popular idea that victims of street robbery are the elderly and the frail. This finding is in line with previous research (eg. Ramsay, 1982). The analysis of 5,615 reported robbery and theft person offences, discussed earlier, found the main group of victims to be between seventeen and thirty-five years old.

Walmsley (1986) found that young men were most likely to be victims of robberies. Twenty-three out of thirty-three victims interviewed were indeed male, the majority of whom had been victims of a robbery attack, rather than ‘snatch’ thefts, as of a handbag, which tends to be less violent and involve less confrontation.
This sex-related difference in vulnerability to robberies and ‘snatch’ thefts has been remarked upon before (Burney, 1990), the obvious explanation being that women carry handbags where men carry wallets, the acquisition of which would necessarily require more physical contact. Burney makes a number of observations about the relationships between age, sex and vulnerability to street crime. However she concludes, based on her data and on previous research, that vulnerability is predicted best by lifestyle, habits such as going out at night or returning home late from work, rather than simply age or sex (Hough and Mayhew, 1983; Felson, 1987; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1990). This is discussed in more detail later.

The race of victims interviewed bore out the pattern shown in larger scale studies of street crime victims (op.cit.). Twenty six (80%) of the victims were white, five were Asian, one was Afro-caribbean, and the remaining individual’s ethnic origin was unknown. Differences in the rate of reporting of offences between different racial groups have been recorded (Jones, et.al., 1986). This may be one reason why certain racial groups are over-represented in this victim sample. Both victims and offenders were traced through police records, so the nature of the samples would very much depend on first, the reporting of offences to the police, and second, the successful conviction of offenders. Research has shown that Afro-caribbean women, particularly middle-aged Afro-caribbean women, are less likely to report street robbery attacks than white or Asian women of similar age (Jones et. al., op.cit.). The same research found that Asians are less willing to appear in court as witnesses (Jones, op.cit.). These two factors could, of course, distort the ethnic distribution of the victim sample. In addition, a recent British Crime Survey found that Afro-caribbeans and Asians were more at risk from robbery and theft from the person than whites (Mayhew et.al., 1989). This would, of course, raise further questions about the ethnic representativeness of this sample of street robbery victims.

To summarise, the victim of street robbery involved in this study tends to be either a white male under thirty, who will have been the victim of an offence involving some threat, force or minor violence, or a white woman of about the same age, who has been the victim of a ‘snatch’ theft. This has, of course, to be viewed in the context of the larger sample of incidents analysed in the first section of this report which suggests that most victims are women, and the findings of the 1988 British Crime Survey which indicate that Afro-caribbeans and Asians are more likely to become victims than whites.

**Description of Offences**

The forty-five offenders were interviewed in detail about the offence for which they had been arrested during the sampling period. These interviews described forty-one offences (in some cases there was more than one offender interviewed per offence). The forty-one offences appeared to be of four different types: wage snatches, robberies, snatches and, what are most accurately described as incidents of bullying, as Table 8 shows:
Table 8: Numbers of each category of offence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Offence</th>
<th>Nos. of Offences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robberies</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snatches</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage snatch</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table illustrates the variety of events classified as 'street robberies'. The wage snatch category is self-explanatory, and whilst not obviously conforming to the stereotype of street robbery is classified as such in police records. These tend to involve large sums of money, where there has obviously been some pre-planning. In one case, for example, a couple collecting wages from the bank were threatened with a knife outside the bank and told to hand over the case holding the money.

Offences in the robbery category in Table 8 are perhaps typical of expectations of this offence type. Although there was some variation in the nature of these offences, they were recognisably the same kinds of event. One example of such an offence took place in the West End of London. A young couple were returning to their hotel after having been out for a meal when they were stopped by a group of young men. One of them approached the male victim from behind and held him by the neck, while another of the offenders took the woman’s handbag. The offender then let go the victims and ran off. These offences tend, therefore, to involve force, by threat and/or physical contact, and in a small number of cases, injury.

The ‘snatch’ category covers bag snatches and swift snatching of jewellery, such as a necklace. These of fences tended, necessarily, to be over very quickly and to happen where the victim’s property was obvious and visible to the offender.

Offences described in Table 8 as bullying tended to be incidents where the victims and offenders were young and knew each other, often being at school together. The nature of these of fences ranged from the taking of the victim’s stereo headphones, to one of a series of incidents where the offender intimidated the victim, whom he had known at school, into giving him a small amount of cash in an amusement arcade. The appearance of these incidents in police records as “robberies” raises questions about the difference between bullying and robbery, and about the classification of some such minor incidents as imprisonable offences. What determines how an incident is recorded may simply be one of location: bullying in a school playground may not be reported to the police, but when the same incident happens outside the school gate, it is reported and classified as robbery. Burney makes the point that the
interpretation of such events as robberies can exaggerate public fear and give a false impression of the frequency and seriousness of street crime (Burney, 1990).

Looking at the extent to which offences were planned, over a third of the number interviewed reported just happening upon the victim and deciding then and there to do a robbery. This finding is in line with the observations of others, who found the majority of robberies to be particularly opportunistic and sudden offences (Feeney, 1986). Those who do plan their robberies also tend to rob alone. This implies that the ‘spontaneous’ offences happen when offenders are in groups. However, more than a quarter of the offenders reported that they left home for the purpose of doing a robbery on the day they committed the offence for which we have an interview. This group of offenders tended to have chosen the offence venue, have a reason for offending at that time of day, to wait at the scene until a suitable victim came along, and to have planned their escape route. The data seem to suggest two distinct styles of street robbery offending – planned and spontaneous.
5. Issues Raised by the Interview Data

Why do people commit street robberies?

In recent years, there has been much sensationalised reporting of, and media speculation about street robbery and the reasons for it. Reporting, suggested by headlines such as “Dressing to kill leads to murder in Chicago and LA” (Guardian, Feb 1990), and “Well-dressed muggers kill poverty myth” (Evening Standard, March 1990) seems to associate the offence with a cluster of factors, including young male machismo and an obsession with ‘style’, which are interpreted as part of a decline in the moral standards of today’s young people.

Academic research has contributed other explanations. Hall, in his influential study of street robbery in the 1970s, suggests that it is a social construction rather than a new and dangerous phenomenon, that it bears strong resemblance to much older offences of ‘garotting’ and that it is consequently, not an indicator of society’s crumbling moral standards or a new social problem (Hall et.al., 1978). Hall’s study shows how ‘mugging’, rather than just being a label for urban crime, came to connote social disorder and decay, and the collapse of our cities. Other writers have come to broadly the same conclusion (Ramsay, 1982; Pearson, 1983). Hall also documents how street robbery came to be associated with black people, and the racial tensions surrounding the offence. His view is consistent with the belief that Afro-caribbeans are the victims of structural, planned racism. ‘Mugging’, in this context, is said to be a label, rather than a type of offence which would involve a recognisable modus operandi and a certain type of offender.

Pratt (1980) and Pitts (1986), on the other hand, attempt to identify individual motivational factors behind street robbery. Pratt, in his examination of street robbery in London based on police crime reports, interprets it as an expression of the young black man’s need to “get his own back” on a white and discriminatory society (p. 165). Street robbery in his view is therefore “the perfect cultural option for disillusioned young West Indians” (p. 165). Pitts, in his consideration of the relationship between black young people and the law, prefers to see street robbery as a form of youthful delinquency, a delinquency that takes this form rather than any other because of the influence of local factors. To illustrate, he contrasts truancy in Scunthorpe with street robbery in Lewisham. Its youthful nature implies that in either case the activity is likely to be outgrown.

More recently, Burney (1990) concluded in her study of street robbery in Lambeth, that it is chiefly motivated by a desire in young people to attain all the trappings of a ‘style’ so expensive as to be unattainable through legal employment, but vital if they wished to conform to group norms. ‘Style’ may represent status to those who have few opportunities for acquiring it legally. In support of this explanation, she stressed that street robbery is often a group offence, and that it appears not to be related to ‘real’ need, drug or alcohol addiction or mental health problems. She came to these
conclusions from lengthy discussions with project workers on rehabilitation schemes. The main thrust of her argument is supported by work based on interviews with burglary offenders in the United States (Cromwell, 1990). There it was found that the burglars saw keeping up a ‘fast’ lifestyle as of primary importance, money for ‘partying’ being the chief reason given to explain their offending. In addition, Jack Katz’s work or robbers in the USA emphasises the intensely hedonistic and frenetic lifestyles they lived, supported largely by the gains from robbery (Katz, 1990).

Data from the current study also tends to support Burney’s explanation of the motives for street robbery. When asked, the majority of offenders said that they robbed for money. Thirty-three out of the forty-five said they looked only for cash or jewellery during a robbery, the jewellery often being sold. All offenders claimed to know how to dispose quickly of the stolen jewellery. One offender called himself an “earn-a-ton” lad, because he claimed to need to earn £100 per day from street robbery to support his lifestyle. By their accounts, they spent the money on expensive clothes, particularly the infamous ‘Nike’ trainers, luxuries and cannabis. One interviewee claimed to own twenty-six pairs of the trainers, each of which are likely to have cost a minimum of £50! These robbers who noted that they spent their gains on cannabis and clothing tended to have committed more robberies than the rest, presumably because of their demand for high income.

This graphically supports the belief of Burney’s project workers in Lambeth, that these offenders are not offending out of the need to provide essentials like food and shelter. The data suggests that there is a mismatch between the strength of their desire to conform to the current pervasive and very expensive ‘street’ style, and the likelihood that they would ever earn enough to pay for it by legal means.

How great a part do drugs play in causing street robbery?

There is little in the data to suggest that drugs play a primary role in street robbery offending, although thirty-one robbers reported using drugs of one kind or another, cannabis being most often mentioned, few robbers admitted to being users of ‘hard’ drugs such as heroin. The majority (27) claimed that they did not use drugs before committing a robbery, a few noting that this could impair their abilities. There was no suggestion that offenders were committing offences in order to ‘feed a habit’. Of the forty robbers who reported knowing other robbers, fifteen said that these robbers also used drugs, again not because of need but simply as part of their normal activities. The relationship between alcohol and street robbery appeared to be much the same.

One offender did admit during the interview to using cocaine before he committed the offence. He blamed the fact that this particular robbery ‘turned into’ a rape on the

1Interestingly in the light of earlier findings and recent publicity about the relevance of cheque and credit card fraud, there was no suggestion that offenders were looking for cheque books and credit cards (Levi, 1991). It is possible that they did not know how to ‘fence’ them and consequently saw no value in taking them, but this seems unlikely given that they all claimed to know how to get rid of other sorts of stolen goods.
drug use. However, there was no other evidence to link the taking of drugs with violence in the offences.

**To what extent is street robbery a ‘gang’ activity?**

There was a strong suggestion from the offenders that part of the reason for choosing street robbery as a means to gain income, rather than any other type of offence, is the ‘machismo’ associated with a youth who is able to handle a face to face confrontation. This would relate very much to the desire to appear tough in front of peers, an unexceptional feeling amongst the age group from which the majority of the offenders come. Street robbery appears to be a group activity, in as far as it seems sometimes to grow out of groups of teenagers and young people ‘hanging out’ on the street. Thirty-two of the offenders reported carrying out their robberies always or mainly with others, and twenty-seven of them said that the robbery would not always be their idea. Forty offenders said they knew others who committed robberies. Whether this constitutes a gang life is debatable.

One offender did claim to be a member of a gang, whose name appeared to derive from their habit of robbing people on buses. There was, however, no mention of the existence of ‘possees’ that have been described elsewhere (Burney, 1990).

**Are certain places more vulnerable than others?**

Much has been written about the relative crime risks attached to different types of place (eg. Brantingham and Brantingham, 1981; Sherman, 1989). Though clearly the geographical distribution of street robbery in London is significant, offending of this kind does not appear to cluster around individual facilities like pubs, clubs and underground stations, as might have been predicted by Sherman’s analysis. Offenders did not mention particular types of place when asked a hypothetical question about where they might choose to offend. This is in contrast to the results of the larger survey of street crime in London, reported earlier, where there was some small concentration of attacks around public transport locations.

Place did seem to be important at an area level, offenders targeting particularly the areas around their homes. Nineteen of the offences took place within one mile of the offender’s home, and another thirteen within six miles (although this is probably less significant in London). This is in accordance with a large body of research which emphasises the local nature of much offending (see for example Forrester et.al., 1988). A small handful of offenders emphasised the importance of place, but only in as far as they provided a good supply of targets, such as the West End, selected for its wealthy tourists. There was no reference made to other situational factors.

If the availability of victims was the only critical factor in an offender’s decision where to rob, there would be few places safe from street robbery. However, the fact that so many offences are so close to offenders’ homes suggests that familiarity with the area, and possibly the social environment, are important factors in this choice. Thirty-
eight of the forty-five offenders reported that they were familiar with the area in which they committed their offences, and the majority reported that they had travelled to the scene of the crime on foot, emphasising the very local nature of this offending.

The victim interviews also emphasised the ‘closeness to home’ of much street robbery. Many victims reported being attacked less than a mile from their homes (15/33) and two-thirds within two miles. This corresponds to the finding from the general survey that victims often live within the same police beat as the site of the offence. Women have a tendency to be attacked closer to home than men, and sixteen out of the thirty-three victims were on their way home at the time of the attack. The majority of them, like the offenders, were travelling on foot.

The only conclusion of any significance that can be drawn from this information reinforces the idea of robbery being part of the offender’s social activity, being near home and often with others, presumably friends.

**How do offenders choose their victims?**

When offenders were asked how they would choose a victim for a street robbery, by far the most mentioned factor was ‘wealthy appearance’. The next most frequently mentioned, and related factor was whether the victim had property visible, such as jewellery, a watch or a bag. These findings are displayed in **Figure 4**.

**Figure 4: Factors influencing choice of victim**

![Figure 4: Factors influencing choice of victim](image)
One or other of these factors was mentioned as reason for selecting a victim by thirty-four out of the forty-five offenders interviewed. Those who did not mention either factor tended to say that visible signs of wealth did not matter so much because all they wanted was money and everyone had some of that on them. Data from the victims verifies the importance of wealthy appearance in their selection. Twenty out of the thirty-three report being dressed smartly or very smartly at the time of the attack, in as much as they were in suits on their way home from work or dressed for going out.

Other factors often mentioned by the offenders were that the victim be male (by eleven offenders), or young (by ten offenders) or Asian (by eleven offenders). This contrasts interestingly with the victim stereotype for this offence type of a smaller, older vulnerable-looking woman. A substantial number of offenders (14) said specifically they would avoid attacking women, their feelings exemplified by the following quotes from interviews:

“I would never rob a woman. My mother was robbed and it frightened her.”
“I wouldn’t rob a woman. I’ve seen a lot of horrible things happen to women.”
“People who rob an old lady should be put on the telly and disgraced.”
“I wouldn’t intend to rob a woman, but I did once. They’d have to have a lot of money.”
“I’d rather rob a man; women don’t have a lot on them.”

The offender’s assessment of potential gain seems, therefore, to mitigate his choice of victim. This is, however, what offenders say they do rather than what they may actually do. Lejeune’s (1977) work with American street robbers suggests that they may well have an ‘ideal’ victim and be able to describe the characteristics of this ideal, but that actual victim selection may be greatly influenced by the situation the offender finds on the street. However, what the present sample of street robbery offenders say they do does appear to correlate with what they actually do. The data suggests that those who say they would not choose to rob anyone who looked “poor”, i.e. the converse of being of ‘wealthy appearance’, do not actually do so. The same can be said about those offenders who claim not to attack women or old people.

The issue of ethnicity of the victim as a factor in an offender’s choice is more complex. Eleven of the offenders suggested that they might particularly look for Asian victims. This suggests that some street robbery is racially motivated, though when the remarks of offenders are examined in context, it becomes much less clear. All but one of the offenders who specifically said they would select Asian victims, went on to explain that this was because experience taught them Asians either carried a lot of money or wore quantities of gold jewellery. Those Afro-caribbean and white offenders (10) who said they would not victimise their “own kind” explained this by saying that they were unlikely to have money, or that they too were “struggling”. “Own kind” might imply ‘own ethnic group’, but it seems that, in this context, it could equally mean ‘unlike
people who live in my neighbourhood’, ‘people I know’ or ‘poor people, like me’. Comments from offenders on victim choice reinforce this latter interpretation:

“I don’t rob blacks. I might know them.”

“I don’t rob around my house. They’re all like me – scrimping and saving.”

“Wouldn’t rob a black person. Wouldn’t find a lot of rich black people.”

“I wouldn’t go for black people, because they’re struggling just like me.”

To conclude, it appears that perceptions of the victim’s wealth are the key factors in an offender’s choice of victim. This, plus possible different rates of reporting in different racial groups, could to a large extent explain the apparently selective victimisation of certain racial groups. Larger scale research would be needed to test this.

**Does good street lighting prevent street robbery?**

Concern about the relationship between lighting and crime has initiated a number of research projects to examine the potential of improved street lighting in reducing crime (Painter, 1988, 1989; Atkins et. al., 1991; Ramsay, 1991). To suggest that street lighting can reduce crime is to assume that crimes happen at night, in dark conditions and on the street. In addition, it assumes that offenders will be deterred from offending in a brightly lit place because of the increased risk of being seen and caught.

The evidence from interviews with street robbery offenders does not bear out either of these assumptions. In only six cases did the offenders remember it being dark at the time of the offence. The rest of the forty-five offences they remember happening in full daylight (twenty-two offences) or in situations where there was street lighting (sixteen offences). Interviews with the victims bore this out. They reported twelve out of thirty-three offences taking place in broad daylight and fourteen out of thirty-three in areas covered by street lighting. All those victims attacked between 8pm and midnight were in places they describe as being well lit. It may be that these convicted street robbers are different in respect of their attitude to street lighting to those street robbers not caught and convicted. However, the conclusion that lighting conditions are not a critical factor in the offender’s decision making process is supported by evidence from the victims, not all of whom were involved in offences for which there was a conviction.

Offenders were asked whether they considered lighting when choosing an offence venue. Only three mentioned it as part of a range of factors they would consider and only two actively selected dark places. On the basis of these findings, it has to be concluded that street lighting does not deter street robbers from offending. This conclusion is supported by work with other types of offenders, such as burglars and car thieves, who seem to be equally unconcerned by lighting conditions (see Ramsay, 1991 for a review).

This lack of regard for street lighting seems to be based on the belief that it is unlikely that there would be any adverse consequence of being seen in the commission of an
offence. Car thieves, for instance, felt that, based on their experience, it was not likely that bystanders would intervene if they saw a car being broken into (Smythe, 1990). This experience is a well-documented phenomenon (see for example, Mawby (1985)), and appears to be shared by street robbers. Their choice of offence venue reflects this, since the largest proportion of the street robbers spoken to chose to offend on busy main roads. Twenty of the victims interviewed made it clear, that there were other people about at the time of the offence. Some of the twenty-seven victims who reported feeling safe before the attack, associated this with there being so many other people about. The data suggests that the presence of potential witnesses does not protect people from victimisation.

There was also the suggestion from victims that the daylight or good street lighting contributed to their feelings of safety. This is supported by research which makes a case for lighting reducing fear, rather than actually reducing crime (Ramsay, op.cit.).

How big a part do weapons and violence play in these attacks?

A large part of the fear of being attacked is associated with the possibility of being hurt or injured. Over half of the victims reported injuries sustained during the course of the robbery. This is twice as many injured victims as would be expected from the analysis of 5,615 recorded street crimes described earlier, but is probably explained by the higher proportion of robberies, as opposed to handbag snatchers, suffered by the interview sample. Two of these victims were seriously injured, one of them suffering a broken cheek bone and the other was cut on the throat. The rest of the injuries tended to be bruises and cuts; in one case being caused accidentally without the offender’s stated intention to hurt.

When asked how much force they would be prepared to use, the offender’s view was that they would use as much as was necessary to get what they wanted from the victims. This, coupled with remarks they made about their reasons for offending, seems to suggest that offenders are overwhelmingly concerned with the gain from the offence, rather than the effect on the victim. Nevertheless, offenders were not totally insensitive to the effect on victims with seventeen offenders saying they would not attack a woman and nineteen that they would not attack old people, some of them volunteering that “it wasn’t right” or “it was just wicked”.

It was clear from the victim interviews, that a number had found the attacks very traumatic. In one case, a taxi driver who had been attacked in the course of his work, was still upset eighteen months after the offence and had had to change his job as a result. Victim Support had been able to make contact with twelve of the victims, only three of whom took up their offer of counselling. However, there remained nine victims who claimed they had not been contacted and said they would have liked to have been; a small number of whom requested that they be put in touch with Victim Support even now, nearly two years after the offence. Being the victim of street robbery is obviously for some a traumatic experience with lasting effects. Whilst acknowledging the practical difficulties and resourcing problems that face Victim
Support, it seems that they are not reaching a number of those individuals who are going to have continuing problems as a result of their victimisation.

The victims’ responses show that offences do not have to be violent in order to be traumatising for the victim. Indeed, two-thirds of the street robberies in this study involved no force beyond verbal threats. Victims seem in general to have resisted little. Offenders’ remarks on dealing with victims suggest that this is the right approach. They see victims who resist as somehow more deserving of violent treatment, and hence, might escalate the violence:

“If they try and fight back, they get what they deserve”.

Less than a quarter of the offenders carried a weapon, the most commonly chosen weapon being a knife. Out of thirty-three victims, twenty-two of them remember more than one offender being involved in the attack against them, so it might be that outnumbering the victim is enough to make street robbers feel they do not need to carry weapons. Incidentally, this may mean there is less force used by the offenders to extract from the victims what they want. A study interviewing violent offenders in America suggested that the more nervous and insecure the offender felt when he attacked his victim, the more likely he was to be violent, supposedly to impress upon his victim the seriousness of his intent and the uselessness of resistance (Athens, 1980). This may not, of course, hold true for the less violent of the street robbery offenders, however, neither is there anything in the current study to suggest that resistance on the part of the victim would put the street robber off.
6. The Prevention of Street Robbery: a strategic approach

The fall in the numbers of street robberies reported in London has been accompanied by considerable efforts aimed specifically at preventing this crime. Recent research suggests, however, that during periods of economic growth property crimes seem to increase more slowly, and sexual offences and violence against the person seem to grow more rapidly (Field, 1990). Street robbery is not obviously either a property crime or a ‘personal’ crime. Consequently, it is not clear what the relationship would be in the case of street robbery rates. It is clear that there are other factors involved in the recent reduction of street robbery figures in London than simply the effects of crime prevention initiatives. Nevertheless, at the level of the individual and the community, there seems much that can be done to reduce street robbery and improve the quality of life for those who live in hard-hit areas. This section describes a number of such initiatives.

The conclusion of the research reported in this paper, and other recent work, is that street robberies are committed largely by groups of young men and boys, looking to take cash, jewellery and handbags, for the machismo associated with the act and to fund a high-spending lifestyle. Though the reasons offenders give for their offending are primarily economic, the earnings do not appear to be to provide necessities but luxuries, and certain features of the offences strongly suggest additional social and psychological motives. The places, times, and other situational variables do not point to any one situational response or obvious focus for opportunity reduction.

These findings imply that a strategic approach to the prevention of street robbery would have the best chance of success. This approach would most obviously comprise an element of improved, intensive policing; education of offenders about, amongst other things, the damage they do to their victims and their families, and some education of those individuals most likely to be at risk of becoming involved in street robbery. Also the approach should include some wider, social intervention aimed at improving legitimate opportunities for young people at risk of offending and enhancing the awareness and involvement of the local communities. And finally, such a programme should incorporate some publicity advising individuals what they can do to reduce their risk of being robbed. The rest of this report will look at these four components to a preventive strategy and, where possible, give examples from existing initiatives.

The policing of street robbery

Figures for clear-up and arrests in cases of street robbery illustrate the difficulty of detecting these offences. However, the chance of an arrest being made is highest immediately after the offence is committed. On this principle, the most effective strategies for improving detection and clear-up rates would be to provide a large police presence in areas known to suffer from street crime problems. In a more or less refined form, this is what several Metropolitan Police areas have attempted to do.
Burney (1990) describes a number of policing initiatives in Lambeth that aimed to reduce street crime through variations on the theme of saturation policing. In addition to those she describes, an initiative took place in Battersea also using a heavy police presence to deter and detect street robbers, and to target robbery suspects. The police have subsequently claimed a considerably reduced rate of street robbery offences and a much increased clear-up rate. The Battersea initiative began in 1986 with the development of a management information system to provide up to date and continuous analysis of street crime offences. Having identified the areas of highest incidence in the division over a twelve month period, a squad of twenty specially detailed police officers was formed, whose task it was to reduce Battersea’s street crime problem. The emphasis in the team’s work was on responding consistently, presumably to overcome the problems of earlier, more sporadic initiatives, which may only temporarily have reduced crime.

The squad targeted the high incidence locations and those individuals identified as active street robbers, using a uniformed police presence in some areas to deter and to displace potential offenders to other areas where there were plain clothes officers deployed. Plain clothes officers openly watched known individuals, and tracked them as far as was possible. It was also the squad’s duty to improve the victim support service. In so doing, they hoped to encourage reporting of offences and support for prosecutions.

In the two years following the start of this operation, the number of street crimes reported dropped by 58%, from 758 recorded offences in 1986 to 318 in 1988, and the clear-up rate increased from 5% to 22.5%. The Metropolitan Police claim this reduction is continuing. Those responsible for the Battersea initiative attribute the fall in crime to a carefully developed and consistently implemented strategy, good management and leadership, and dedicated police work by the officers involved. In relation to the possible displacement of crime, they conclude that there was no increase in street robberies in the areas surrounding Battersea, but that there was some suggestion that those people who might before have carried out street robberies were instead committing burglaries or thefts from cars.

This story does appear to demonstrate that considerable in-roads can be made into street crime, but as has been pointed out by more than one commentator, possibly at some cost in areas where community/police relations are already likely to be strained (Scarman, 1981; Pitt, 1986; Burney, 1990; Mooney, 1991). For this reason, it would be important to site a policing initiative of this kind in the context of a wider approach to the prevention of street crime, with considerable community involvement and support. Lord Scarman (1981), subsequent pieces of legislation and Home Office guidelines all stress the importance of consultation with the community in such initiatives.

Preventive social programmes

Social programmes, that is programmes aimed at improving the social conditions in areas of high levels of street robbery, could take a number of forms. An initiative that
ran recently in Brixton highlights the importance of a community-based, strategic approach to preventing street crime. The implementation of such an initiative necessarily extends beyond the jurisdiction and powers of any single agency. Consequently, agencies such as the police, local community representatives, the probation service and relevant local authority departments would have to combine forces. Though there are undoubted difficulties in running such ‘multi-agency’ work ( Sampson et al. 1991), the Brixton project attempted to combine the interests and energies of some of the above organisations with the specific aim of reducing street robbery in the area.

The Brixton Against Robbery initiative, or B.A.R., was the culmination of a period of intensive and focused policing of street crime in Brixton. The project aimed to sustain the recent decline in the area’s street robbery figures, and prevent future offending through contact with young people at risk of becoming involved. It attempted to “help young people on the fringes of crime by discussing problems and prospects with each me referred, to offer suitable and attractive alternatives to crime, ... to provide long term support and to work in the interests of referred youth with other agencies” (Metropolitan Police, 1991). Young people in the eleven to eighteen age range invited in street robbery, or believed to be becoming involved, were referred to members of the project team. Though the majority of referrals were from the police, some also came from other agencies in the local community. The project team responded by visiting the young person and his/her family, and providing advice and counselling. The team consisted of three people employed full-time, one of whom gave support and advice to the family, and another, having himself been involved in street crime in the past, ‘befriended’ the teenagers referred. By 1991, the team had worked with a total of forty three clients. They had successfully re-integrated a few long-term ‘school-refusers’ into education and had provided the majority with a full-time training place or further education (Burney, personal communication). An essential part of the project was the active Parents Group which offered a forum for airing anxieties and encouraging local networks.

The project’s activities were funded by a number of local charities, including the City Action Team and the Prince’s Trust. Local businesses assisted by increasing training and job opportunities. These organisations and other local agencies were represented on the project’s management committee. One of the police officers involved in B.A.R. described it as “a combination of practical crime prevention, and economic regeneration”.

B.A.R. was interesting in the extent to which it recognised that street robbery is as much about social life and lifestyle of young people as it is about crime. The research has shown the extent to which this is important. Breaking into this lifestyle is necessarily difficult, given the power of peer group influence on the age group involved, but by demonstrating that there are rewards to alternative, ‘straight’ styles of living, the project may have been able to undermine the attractiveness of street crime. These messages may have had more power coming, as they did in B.A.R., from
one who was not long before in the same position. Recent research has shown that young people are most likely to take to heart messages warning them of the danger of illegal activities from their peers (Coggans et al, 1989).

A second element of the Brixton work which seemed, in the light of the research, to be particularly pertinent was their attention to supporting and counselling parents. Over two thirds of the offenders spoken to in this research belonged to one parent families, and a quarter of them spent some of their childhood in care. It suggests that a number of the families from which the offenders came might well have been under stress, and that the support mechanisms provided by B.A.R. are consequently very welcome. The project team claimed that parents almost invariably welcomed the involvement of the project (Burney, personal communication).

The B.A.R. project suffered from a number of structural and conceptual problems, some of which may have contributed to its eventual demise. The dominance of one agency, the police, and the project team’s lack of accountability to the management committee have been suggested as the essential problems (Burney, op. cit.). Additionally the concept of targeting those young people who did not have a proven involvement in crime was held by some to be suspect. The concern was that the process may have served to label and ‘criminalise’ young people (Opray, personal communication). Similarly, some agencies involved in the project may have had difficulties accepting the use of an ex-offender as befriender and counsellor of vulnerable young people. These latter worries were apparently not satisfactorily resolved during the life of the project. Ultimately, B.A.R. has shown that despite the difficulties of inter-agency initiatives, there exists a willingness to address the problem of street robbery in London. Empirical support for some of the methods B.A.R. adopted suggests that within a different organisational structure they may be worth trying again.

**Educational initiatives**

One of the aims of the Brixton project was to stop young people getting involved in street robbery before they start, and one of the ways they, and other initiatives, tried to do this was through education. The aim was to change attitudes to crime and involvement in crime, and make offenders and others understand its damaging consequences. Unfortunately, in the absence of a thorough evaluation of the project it is impossible to judge the extent to which B.A.R. was able to achieve this. It is possible, however, to refer to other educational schemes.

The informal instruction given by an ex-offender to young people at risk in Brixton has already been described, but other schemes choose the formal education system through which to focus their efforts. The North London police began a campaign to reduce street robbery in December 1989, and by the end of 1990, were claiming some success. Part of this campaign has been to target school children, with police officers, youth workers and others visiting schools in the area to talk about the problem and the consequences of a robbery attack for both offender and victim. One of the police officers involved described the reasoning behind the intervention in schools:
“Many kids don’t have any idea about what happens if they are arrested. And many don’t think about the possible effects on the victim. Telling them about someone who has been severely injured and traumatised following a street robbery can have a very sobering effect” (Crime Prevention News, 1991).

Discussing the almost casual way he felt some of the robberies were committed, the officer went on to say:

“We’re trying to educate them to get the message that this attitude is unacceptable in a civilised society” (Crime Prevention News, op.cit.).

In support of their campaign, the police report that between February and April 1990, the number of street crimes in the divisions cornered by the initiative fell from 11.5 to 5.5 per week.

There are other issues concerning the role of formal education in preventing children from becoming involved in street crime. During the interviews, a quarter of the offenders admitted to taking money off other children at school as a precursor to their robbery careers. In addition, six of the forty-one incidents about which detailed information had been collected were what could be called ‘bullying’ incidents. These were cases where teenagers took money for goods from others with whom they had been, or still were, at school, though in every case this took place outside school grounds.

Given that the dark figure for crime is believed to be even greater for crimes against children than it is for adults (Mooney, 1991), this type of offence is likely to form a significant part of the actual incidence of street robbery. It would therefore seem logical to use schools both as fora for preventive education and as a means of identifying bullies who might go on to become more involved in street crime. The study also seems to provide more evidence to suggest that attention should be focused on children who truant from schools. The large majority of the offenders interviewed claimed to have attended school only rarely. These findings would support the case for targeting resources on those school children bullying at school, or truanting, if we wish to reduce the possibility that they become involved in street crime later.

There is a clear role for the Probation Service in the education of street robbery offenders. The Service’s response should include effective work with convicted street robbers, based on individually tailored programmes focusing on the offence, the factors behind their offending and the consequences for the victims. The earlier part of this report described some of the offenders’ attitudes to offending against women, which suggest that if the consequences to their victims can be personalised, as might be the case if it were their mother, sister or granny, then there is potential for changing offender’s attitudes. A programme which involved working in this way with street robbers ran in The Mount, a young offender institution, for over two years. Though there is no formal evidence of effect, those who ran the course believed they saw change in the offenders’ attitudes as a consequence. Evidence from this research suggests that more such programmes should be run and evaluated.
Crime prevention publicity and the potential for opportunity reduction

When victims and offenders were asked what, if anything, could be done to prevent street robbery, the most common response was to say that nothing could be done. Whilst this is clearly not the case, information gathered in the course of this research does not immediately suggest ways in which the environment or situational factors can be manipulated in order to reduce the potential for offences to occur.

There is, however, some justification in the research for offering advice to the public about how to reduce their personal risk of victimisation. Clearly, carrying a handbag makes a woman vulnerable to having it snatched. Whether it is realistic for women in areas of highest risk not to carry bags is a matter for the individual, but it would be interesting to see what effect the recent fashion for body belts, or ‘bum bags’, has had on the types and number of snatches being committed. On the basis of the findings about the importance of appearance, it would also seem sensible to advise that in high risk areas people might ‘dress down’ if they wanted to reduce their chances of being victimised. A number of the offenders claimed they would tend not to select victims who looked ‘poor’. Particular attention could be given to messages about the wearing of pieces of jewellery that might attract attention, in line with current Home Office crime prevention advice. Given that most people are attacked within a short distance of their homes, alertness and awareness on journeys home could be promoted, so that people do not fall into the trap of believing that because the area is familiar that they are necessarily safe. The latter suggestion does, however, risk increasing those individuals’ fear of being robbed.

It is more difficult to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of other sorts of preventive action that individuals could take. Using a personal alarm may frighten off an attacker as it is intended to do. The use of closed-circuit television is often suggested as a counter to street robbery. Some evidence that it increases the public’s feelings of safety has been produced (Honess and Charman, 1992), but there is at the moment no evidence of its impact on crime. However, it is currently being used on the streets of Birmingham, amongst other places, and is being evaluated on its ability to reduce street crime.

Conclusion

Those seeking to establish crime prevention projects might consider talking to offenders very specifically about why and how they offend. The particular advantage of speaking to the victims of those offenders is that their information can validate what the offenders are saying.

Finally, it is clear from accounts of recent initiatives that a good deal can be done to prevent street robbery. The holistic approach of the Brixton project, covering as it did all four areas of intervention outlined above, appears to have been an important test of what is possible in an area with a long-standing reputation as the worst area for street crime in London. Perhaps what is as important as reducing the actual incidence
of street crime, however, is the publicising of any success. Promoting the belief that an initiative is successful in reducing crime can actually have its own effect in reducing crime still further. Publicity has messages for both potential victims and offenders, and increasing public perceptions of safety could significantly improve general quality of life.
References


Police Research Group Crime Prevention Unit Series
