



POLICY BRIEF 4

ROBBING DRUG DEALERS: AN INTRACTABLE PROBLEM FOR POLICYMAKERS

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Rates of armed robbery have been declining steadily for the better part of ten years.



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Rates of armed robbery have been declining steadily for the better part of ten years. Much of the decline has been attributed to decreases in crack use, incapacitation effects from swelling prison populations, and the absorption of offenders into a rapidly expanding U.S. economy (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998). Yet some criminologists assert that the decline may, at least in part, be illusory, and that offenders are simply shifting to victims who can't or won't call the police. Foremost among such targets are drug dealers. In many ways, they represent the perfect victim.

They are plentiful, visible, and accessible. They deal strictly in cash and have lots of it. Their merchandise is valuable, portable, and flexible (it can be used, sold, or both). They cannot rely on bystanders to come to their aid; on the streets, one must mind one's own business or suffer the consequences. They have no recourse to the police either: black market entrepreneurs cannot be "victims" and therefore lack access to official means of grievance redress. And, contrary to conventional wisdom, most are not armed, particularly those operating on the streets. Aggressive policing has made it not worth the risk. Indeed, most drug dealers are far more afraid of being arrested than of being robbed. That drug sellers are held responsible, both rightly and wrongly, for the wholesale destruction of individuals and communities alike, only legitimizes them as crime targets.

Not surprisingly, most of the drug robbers interviewed¹ had no plans to stop committing their crimes any time soon. Some talked about securing big scores and laying off, but such talk seemed less than genuine. The scores from drug robbery are big. But they are burned almost as rapidly as they are seized. Additional robberies provide a solution, albeit a temporary one. Freshly obtained revenues facilitate further consumption, inspiring a feedback loop in which at least some drug robbers chronically create the conditions that drive them to their next crime (Wright and Decker 1997).

Self-defeating behavior of this sort is remarkable only to the most naïve of middle class observers. The streets are a circumscribed social world that place extraordinary emphasis on sensory stimulation. The pursuit of illicit action – which revenues from drug robbery specifically permit – takes precedence over everything else. Hedonism is king. Money exists to be burned. There is no honor in asceticism; delayed pleasure is for "chumps". Living fast and loose is more than symbolic or dramaturgical, it cuts to the core of how identities are constructed and perceived. To be hip and "in," one must prove it on a continuous basis. Those able to "keep the party going" (through heavy drinking and drug-taking, gambling, etc.) move closer to membership in the mythic "aristocracy of the streets" (Wright and

¹I would like to thank Vokan Topalli and Richard Wright for their assistance in the interviewing process, and for their help in other facets of this research. In fact, it was Richard Wright's idea to do this project in the first place.

Decker 1997). Those able to do so at someone else's expense ascend to the loftiest of statuses, even more so when their victims are other criminals.

Though a few of our respondents recognized that drug robbery was not something they could do forever – some had children and wanted to lead more stable lives, others witnessed the slaying of associates which prompted them to recognize their own mortality – most insisted they would continue committing these crimes indefinitely. “I can't be stopped,” one declared. “Lay me down, kill me, then I be stopped but as long as my heart keep on going, I'll keep on [doing them]...”. Another proclaimed that, “there is nothing in the world that would stop me from doing it. I'm gonna do this until the day I die.” A third pronounced that robbery was in his blood and that he was “always gonna [do it].” Even if alternatives were available, it is unlikely they would be recognized. Menacing, volatile offenders caught in the grips of streetlife are notorious for one-track thinking. Each successive offense brings only greater encapsulation.

Policymakers will be hard-pressed to develop viable strategies for dealing with such “incorrigibles.” Targeted interventions – from intensive counseling to cognitive therapy to behavioral modification – are not likely to be of much value. People cannot be convinced to change because it's in their best interest, because they'll derive long-term benefits, or because it's the “right thing to do.” Enduring transformation comes only after the realization that one's life is no longer manageable (and sometimes not even then). This requires sensitivity, awareness, and a willingness to do things differently. Such qualities are in painfully short supply for most of the offenders with whom we spoke.

What policymakers really are up against is a lifestyle, as entrenched as it is intractable, forged from a noxious combination of low self-control, desperation, and cul-

tural imperative. Incapacitation may be the only realistic solution, but one likely to last only as long as the jail sentence; hardened further by prison life, offenders are likely to be only worse after they get out. The larger question of how to reintegrate those who have never been integrated in the first place may, in many ways, be unanswerable. This is not to say that offenders are immune from policies designed to influence their behavior. The robbers interviewed for this study targeted drug dealers, at least in part, because the authorities had clamped down so systematically on “normal crime.” What is clear is that a society that refuses to address the underlying cultural and structural forces that give rise to predatory street offending is doomed to perpetuate the conditions that produce future generations of intractable criminals.

Arguably, the only sure way to eradicate drug robbery is to dry up its opportunity structure, either by legalizing drugs (thus wiping out their blackmarket value) or by converting wholesale to cashless exchange (see Wright and Decker 1997 on the “cashless society”). Neither is likely to happen any time soon. Even if both or either did, habitual offenders inevitably will adapt, finding new and innovative ways to exploit others for material gain. Deviance and social control, as Criminologist Kevin Ryan (1994) notes, are dialectical processes; each side responds to the other in an endless cycle of evolution. Paradoxically, society may unconsciously yearn for drug dealers to remain viable victims; their presence provides an undeniable safety valve for the rest of us. Their importance in this role is only likely to rise as law-abiding citizens become harder, less lucrative targets (many of us now carry credit cards to the exclusion of cash) and as the spiral of desperation in which persistent offenders find themselves locked gets tighter and tighter.²

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²This brief was adapted from *Robbing Drug Dealers: Violence Beyond the Law* (Bruce A. Jacobs, Aldine de Gruyter, 2000).

FOR FURTHER READING

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**LIVABLE communities don't just HAPPEN.
They are CREATED by the PEOPLE who LIVE in them.**