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Wright: Decisions of Street Offenders

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Drawing on interviews with active street criminals, Richard T. Wright and Scott H. Decker identify common elements of decisions made by offenders who committed residential burglary or armed robbery. Most criminological theory overlooks the decision-making process of criminals in favor of focusing on the background characteristics (e.g., family upbringing) of lawbreakers. Wright and Decker, however, ground their research in a theoretical framework that places a greater focus on more immediate lifestyle (e.g., drug use) and situational (e.g., multiple offenders) factors that shape the dynamics of urban street crime. This entry addresses the theoretical framework employed by Wright and Decker, describes how they conducted their research, summarizes why and how their subjects committed crime, and concludes by discussing the policy implications of their work.

Theoretical Framework

Wright and Decker's work with active street criminals was influenced by two theoretical perspectives: rational choice theory and phenomenological interactionism. Both conceptual approaches focus on the decision-making process of criminals and the potential weight given to situational circumstances by offenders when considering whether or not to complete a crime. Where these analytical viewpoints differ is that the rational choice paradigm views offender decision making as an emotionally neutral process where criminals carefully weigh the costs (e.g., imprisonment) and benefits (e.g., money) of perpetrating a crime, while phenomenological interactionism regards offender decision making as a less deliberate process where criminals often make choices that are emotionally driven and devoid of any serious forethought. In combining these two perspectives, Wright and Decker (1994, p. 31) "examine not only the hard, verifiable contingencies (e.g., risks, rewards, physical obstacles) that influenced the way in which offenders carried out their [crimes]," but also the impact of larger lifestyles in shaping criminals' perceptions of the risks, rewards, and physical obstacles associated with crime.

Methodological Strategy

Wright and Decker conducted semi-structured interviews with active residential burglars and armed robbers in St. Louis, Missouri. This study design is noteworthy in at least two respects. First, criminologists seldom directly ask offenders to describe or speak to the situational circumstances (e.g., the who, what, when, and where) surrounding the crimes they commit. But when such efforts have been made by criminologists, they generally have done so with incarcerated offenders who are far removed from their natural environments. What is more, some have argued that apprehended criminals may be merely unintelligent offenders whose experiences with crime are distinct from those of undetected criminals. And along this line, when asked to recall the importance of legal sanctions (e.g., arrest) in choosing whether or not to commit past crimes, offenders under correctional supervision may be more inclined to overstate the initial weight given to legal penalties. Wright and Decker overcame such concerns by interviewing active, non-incarcerated criminals. More specifically, they employed a “snowball” sampling strategy where they relied on an ex-offender to initially locate criminals who had recently committed residential burglary or armed robbery. These active offenders were then asked if they knew of other burglars or robbers on the street who might be willing to participate in the study. This process resulted in the recruitment of mainly black males from high-crime and economically distressed inner-city neighborhoods.

The Motivation to Commit Crime

The vast majority of these offenders decided to commit residential burglary and armed robbery because of a desperate need for money. The proceeds from these illicit activities generally were not exhausted on basic necessities such as housing. Instead, many of the criminals used their illicit gains to finance a lifestyle often characterized by routine drug use, alcohol consumption, and promiscuous sexual activity. In particular, Wright and Decker noted that offenders often spent money for [p. 261 ↓] the purpose of “keeping the party going” or “to keep appearances up.” The former involved instances (among others) where offenders were using drugs heavily and needed additional funds

to continue. Offenders also routinely used income from crime to purchase “status” items such as clothing. Much like their spending habits in general, criminals seldom acquired such items with the intent of meeting some basic need (e.g., protection from the weather), but rather to personify an image that commanded attention and respect among others on the street.

The Role of Street Culture

The intense need for money to acquire such nonessentials (e.g., drugs, designer clothing) is consistent with the conduct norms of a street culture. Persons situated within this culture often have a strong “here and now” approach to life where experiencing immediate gratification is highly valued, and each day is lived as though it is one big party. As such, no one wants to be empty-handed (i.e., without cash or drugs) or looking ragged. And often absent from this environment are persons who bear a feeling of responsibility (e.g., commitments to family) or who think beyond the moment. Wright and Decker indicate that their subjects ultimately made daily decisions while embedded within this volatile environment.

When viewed through this contextual lens, offender decision making appears more transparent. For example, it helps illuminate why participants in Wright and Decker's sample relied on illicit activities to acquire money rather than, say, legitimate employment. This legal option was not perceived as viable by offenders because it was largely incompatible with certain aspects of street life. Everyday employment requires workers (especially in entry-level positions) to sacrifice much time and to answer to authority figures in exchange for little pay. Such employment requirements are perceived by offenders as self-imposed restraints that prevent the pursuit of more gratifying activities (e.g., drug use) that can be financed by easier and more immediate sources of money. In contrast, Wright and Decker's subjects perceived residential burglary and armed robbery as imposing few restraints in that they can be completed with little time and skill, grant much autonomy (i.e., can be perpetrated at the discretion of an offender), and always represent a potential source of cash. It is particularly this latter benefit (source of cash), combined with an intense need for money and few realistic alternatives for acquiring it, that made burglary and robbery “subjectively available” to offenders interviewed by Wright and Decker. Stated somewhat differently,

these factors coalesce to create an immediate environment where offenders “enter a state of ‘encapsulation’ in which all that matters is dealing with the present crisis” (i.e., desperate need for money) using the only option they view as available to them (i.e., crime) (Wright & Decker, 1997, p. 129).

Sequential Decision Making

Wright and Decker also shed light on “sequential” decisions made by offenders prior to, during, and following the completion of residential burglary and armed robbery. With income-generating crime, offenders often are forced to make a number of successive decisions such as whom or what to target. Wright and Decker questioned offenders about a number of these decisions, and the criminals’ general tendencies are summarized here.

Residential Burglars

Wright and Decker found that residential burglars were disinclined to choose targets at random. Instead, they preferred residences where they knew something about its occupants and the materials it contained. In some instances, such information was acquired by briefly conversing with street associates or while partying. Once a target was selected, offenders generally approached the residence while trying to maintain a “conventional appearance” or while it was dark. Prior to entering the dwelling, the burglars tended to gain some reassurance that the residence was unoccupied by ringing the door bell or knocking. Once reassured, the offenders often gained entry through a door or window that was not visible from the street or neighboring residences. In most cases, entry could be gained by simply using a household tool (e.g., crowbar) or other items readily available (e.g., rock), but some burglars did express an unwillingness to proceed if the residence had an alarm or a dog, which increased the perceived likelihood that their presence would [p. 262 ↓] become known to others. Once inside, offenders were inclined to undertake a brief search where they first inspected the master bedroom for loose valuables and cash, then proceeded judiciously throughout the remainder of the house, while finally ending their search in the living

room where larger electronic devices are often located. When such noncash items were stolen, burglars were inclined to dispose of them in return for money. The burglars often attempted to unload stolen merchandise on a number of possible buyers, such as pawnbrokers, drug dealers (who generally had cash on hand), and family. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, few burglars used the services of a “professional fence,” that is, someone who knowingly purchases stolen items for resale.

Armed Robbers

The armed robbers interviewed by Wright and Decker encountered similar decisions such as choosing a target. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the majority of offenders disclosed that they normally targeted other criminals, while a sizeable minority preyed on noncriminal victims (commercial robbery was rare in the sample). Victimizing other criminals offered some advantages: They were prone to carry money (especially drug dealers and men soliciting the services of a prostitute), they were unlikely to involve the law, and they were readily accessible given the lifestyles of many of the interviewed robbers. In contrast, offenders who preferred to target noncriminals often had to be more judicious in where to find such victims. For example, some favored areas around ATMs and check-cashing establishments, while others opted for supermarket and shopping mall parking lots. After settling on an area, offenders still had to choose a specific victim who, ideally, was carrying cash and unwilling to resist. Identifying such victims was an imperfect science where offenders generally relied on physical cues (e.g., jewelry worn) and demographic features (e.g., older women). Once a victim was selected, offenders generally tried to approach their targets inconspicuously by quickly sneaking up on them or by “managing a normal appearance.” Offenders then usually gained victim compliance by verbalizing that they were committing a robbery and that any resistance would be grounds for lethal action. Depending on their general assessment of the situation, the robbers would physically confiscate cash and valued merchandise themselves or ask the victim to hand over such items. Once these goods were secured, the offenders were inclined to flee the scene as quickly as possible.

Policy Implications

An important policy implication that Wright and Decker draw from their research is that increasing the punishment (i.e., time in prison) for burglary and robbery would likely have little effect on active street criminals largely because such an initiative does not alleviate the need for money, nor does it objectively reduce opportunities for crime. Legitimate employment certainly is one way that street criminals could address their need for money. As discussed, however, even if the subjects interviewed by Wright and Decker could land good-paying jobs with little education, the formal demands of everyday work would likely be perceived as unacceptable for offenders committed to a street life. Therefore, given the difficulty of changing active offenders mindset toward crime, Wright and Decker (1997, p. 134) contend that in the short term it may be more worthwhile “to concentrate our efforts on reducing the vulnerability of potential victims.” With burglary, for example, homeowners would be well advised to increase the visibility of windows and doors from the street or neighboring residences, as well as hide valuables and cash somewhere other than the master bedroom. In regard to robbery, persons should be cautious about wearing expensive jewelry and flashing large amounts of cash. In addition, Wright and Decker advise that individuals should cooperate when confronted by a robber as a way of de-escalating the situation. More broadly, though, Wright and Decker clearly underscore the influence of the immediate street culture in shaping the decision-making process of urban criminals, which is often overlooked by rational choice theory.

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See also

- [Anderson, Elijah: Code of the Street](#)
- [Brantingham, Patricia L., and Paul J. Brantingham: Environmental Criminology](#)
- [Clarke, Ronald V.: Situational Crime Prevention](#)
- [Cornish, Derek B., and Ronald V. Clarke: Rational Choice Theory](#)
- [Felson, Marcus K.: Crime and Everyday Life](#)

- [Katz, Jack: Seductions of Crime](#)
- [Shover, Neal: Great Pretenders](#)

References and Further Readings

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