Stranger Danger and Violence in the Streets

The fear of crimes of violence is not a simple fear of injury or death or even of all crimes of violence, but, at bottom, a fear of strangers . . . this fear of strangers has greatly impoverished the lives of many Americans, especially those who live in high-crime neighborhoods in large cities.

—The President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1967

I was a brand-new sheriff. I didn’t even know the definition of a hate crime. What I knew was that somebody had been murdered because he was black.

—Sheriff Billy Rowles, Jasper, Texas

I don’t think there is any one factor that precipitates the commission of a crime . . . I think it’s just the conditions. I think the primary factor is being without.

—Robber in St. Louis, Missouri

Thus far, you have learned that acts of interpersonal violence are often perpetrated by those we love and trust as well as by friends and acquaintances. In this chapter, we focus on the crimes that are most likely to be committed by strangers and that are generally perpetrated in public locations. These include robbery, workplace violence including bank robbery, violent hate crime, and street gang violence. In his classic study of homicide in Philadelphia, Marvin Wolfgang divided homicide into primary homicides, which involved intimates, friends, and acquaintances, and secondary homicides, which involved strangers. He also coined the phrase stranger crime for this latter category.

Before reading this chapter, it is important for you to remember that the majority of all violent crimes, except for robberies, are committed by offenders known to their victims. Despite this fact, stranger crime is what we most dread. It is the stranger lurking in the alley or the bushes who captures our imagination and stirs our fears. Strangers are anonymous and dangerous, while our friends and acquaintances are known to us and therefore seem to be nonthreatening or at least less threatening. Even though the odds
are that perpetrators of interpersonal violence are most likely to be those familiar acquaintances, friends, and family, the fact is that we usually don’t fear them the way we fear strangers. We begin this chapter with a discussion of robbery.

Robbery

For many of us, the story of Robin Hood is a familiar tale that we grew up with that recounts the heroic exploits of a robber and his band of merry men who stole from the rich to give to the poor. It is an exciting story about a noble outlaw who was a champion of the poor and oppressed. Unfortunately, the reality of robbery seldom lives up to this romantic image. Robbery, as we shall see, can occur in a number of different contexts, including the home, a public location, or a commercial establishment. Sometimes it involves offenders known to their victims, but more often it involves strangers, and the dynamics of each robbery event can vary dramatically.

On February 2, 2006, in Worcester, Massachusetts, a 61-year-old man was walking to work after leaving a Dunkin’ Donuts store early in the morning. He noticed a Nissan Sentra following him and driving slowly, so he started walking faster. He turned down a side street thinking he would lose the car when two young men jumped out of the car and approached him. They wore dark clothing and headbands around their faces, and they carried large kitchen knives. They demanded his money, and when he told them he didn’t have any, they grabbed him from behind and put a knife to his throat. One of the men then punched him in the face and again demanded money. After going through his pockets and finding a small amount of cash, the assailants threw the elderly victim to the ground and fled in the Nissan. The man was able to describe the car and remembered the license plate number. The car was soon found and stopped; a large knife was discovered in the backseat. The two young men were arrested and charged with armed robbery.5

In many ways, this is a fairly typical type of robbery, although this victim was fortunate because robberies sometimes end in death. For example, on May 2, 2016, Joseph Micalizzi, a junior at New Jersey Institute of Technology, was returning to his fraternity after a night at the library when he was shot and killed in an attempted robbery.6 A few weeks prior to Micalizzi’s murder, a window in the same fraternity house had been broken and several personal items, including cell phones, had been stolen. In general, about 24% of homicides in which a circumstance has been identified were the result of another type of felony, most of them robberies.7
Although most robberies don’t result in death, they all involve the use of force or the threat of force. As John Conklin described over three decades ago, the crime of robbery incorporates two threatening elements: “the use of force against the victim and the theft of [the victim’s] property.” According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), robbery is defined as follows: “Completed or attempted theft, directly from a person, of property or cash by force or threat of force, with or without a weapon, and with or without injury.” The element of force or attempted force is the reason robberies are considered crimes of violence and not simply property crimes. This violence distinguishes a purse snatching, in which an offender grabs a victim’s purse and runs, from a robbery. A burglary, in which an offender(s) breaks into a residence and steals a homeowner’s belongings, is a property crime because there is no force or threat of force to a person. However, a burglary can become a robbery if an offender finds someone in the house and uses or threatens to use force against that person during the commission of the crime.

As you can imagine, there is a great deal of variability in the extent to which police officers classify particular victimizations as robberies instead of some other crime. For example, how would you classify a purse snatching that results in the victim sustaining an injury, such as a broken arm? Is this a crime of violence even though the offender did not “intend” to harm the victim? Which is more important? The intention or the outcome? Consider a case where a burglar has been casing a home and knows the owner is away at work between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. So he enters it within that time frame, but is surprised to find the owner home from work early because she is sick. Should this be classified as an attempted robbery, making it a crime of violence, even though that was not the original intended crime? In many ways, the definition comes down to the discretion and judgment of the law enforcement officers at the scene, and obviously these decisions affect police report data on the prevalence and nature of robberies.

According to the NCVS—which you will recall is based on reports of victimization to interviewers regardless of whether the victimization was reported to police—although rates of robbery have declined from the highs witnessed in the early 1990s, since 2002 they have remained relatively stable. For example, the robbery rate per 1,000 individuals aged 12 and over in 2002 was 2.7 compared to a rate of 2.5 in 2014. This translates into almost 664,200 robbery victimizations every year. As is the case with all violent crime, young adults are more likely to experience a robbery compared to their older counterparts. According to the NCVS, those between the ages of 18 and 24 have the highest rates of robbery. While those living in poverty, regardless of race and ethnicity, are more likely to become robbery victims compared to those with higher incomes, African American and Hispanic individuals living in poverty conditions are particularly vulnerable to this particular crime of violence. This is most
likely because robbers—like other types of violent offenders—usually perpetrate their violence in the same communities and neighborhoods in which they live. Additionally, the poor are less likely to be able to afford security systems for their homes and businesses, are more likely to live in apartments that make the residents more vulnerable in stairwells and hallways, and are more likely to shop in stores and eat in restaurants that are considered good locales for robbers because of a lack of adequate lighting or security personnel. We also know that younger males are at a higher risk of experiencing a robbery compared with their younger female counterparts; however, this is not the case for the elderly. In fact, elderly males and females are equally vulnerable to robbery. As you will see in the next section, the elderly—particularly elderly women—are often targeted by robbers. Marital status and geographical location are also related to robbery victimization. Not surprisingly, those living in urban locations are more likely to experience a robbery compared with either their suburban or rural counterparts. Being single, either through never marrying or being divorced or separated, also increases the risk of robbery.11 This is probably related to the increased number of leisure activities in which single people engage outside of the home, particularly evening activities that place people at greater risk of victimization.

While we often fear the nighttime, it is important to note that robberies are about equally likely to occur in the daytime as at night. Similarly, over four in ten robberies occur at or near a personal residence, while a smaller proportion of all robberies occur in public spaces. And finally, despite the fact that robberies involve both theft and violence, only about 60% of robbery victims reported their victimization to police. This underscores the deficiency of relying exclusively on police report data to measure crimes of violence, even those most likely to be perpetrated by strangers.

If you were being robbed, what would you do? Would you run? Fight back? Scream for help? Or would you simply hand over what was demanded? According to the NCVS, about two in three robbery victims engaged in some type of self-protective action, but this included such things as appealing to or reasoning with the offender. The majority of those who did take some action told interviewers that the action helped the situation in some way, including such things as avoiding injury and protecting their property.

About one in three robbery victims sustained an injury as the result of their victimization. This was true for both males and females. Interestingly, victims robbed by strangers were equally likely to be injured as the result of their victimization compared with those robbed by known offenders. Perhaps this relates to victims being more willing to argue and/or resist a robbery from a friend or acquaintance. The greater familiarity with the perpetrator in these
situations might engender less fear. Remember, however, that the NCVS obtains information on nonfatal injuries only and does not include the percentage of robberies that resulted in a victim's death.

**Why Do They Do It?**

In this section, we will focus exclusively on the motivations for typical street robberies involving individuals, sometimes referred to as *muggings* or *stickups*. While some robbers engage in both individual and commercial robberies, most, typically engage in one or the other. Those who victimize primarily commercial establishments are very different in their level of sophistication and modus operandi from the typical street robber. In fact, after interviewing incarcerated robbers, Roger Matthews found that those who primarily targeted commercial establishments perceived themselves as more elite than the typical street mugger and even had disdain and contempt for robbers who primarily targeted individuals.\(^\text{12}\) Some of the best information on robbers comes from a study by Richard Wright and Scott Decker, who interviewed over 80 active robbers in St. Louis, Missouri.\(^\text{13}\) Not surprisingly, they found that for the majority of those interviewed, the decision to commit an armed robbery was based on the desire to get cash and other valuables. This need for loot, however, was not usually about meeting long-term goals, such as paying for an education or buying a home, but typically to satisfy immediate and often illicit gratification needs, such as gambling, drug use, or heavy drinking.

The majority of the offenders in Wright and Decker's sample spent most of their time on the street abiding by the *code of the streets*, a term coined by Elijah Anderson,\(^\text{14}\) as we discussed in Chapter 2. One of the “codes,” you will recall, is protecting one's honor and reputation against acts of disrespect, even with violence if necessary. However, this environment is also characterized by other “codes” that members must abide by as well, one of which is what Wright and Decker refer to as “an open-ended quest for excitement and sensory stimulation,” which tends to include things such as gambling, drug use, and heavy drinking.\(^\text{15}\) Jack Katz also observed this activity in his study of robbers. In fact, he interpreted the armed holdup as just another form of excitement in the lives of many of the men he studied.\(^\text{16}\) Similar to Anderson, Wright and Decker interpreted this street culture as an attempt by many of the offenders to achieve a form of success in their lives that they could not attain through the legitimate routes to material success (e.g., a college education and good job). Because these traditional means of success were not available to them, the “code of the streets” had replaced the conventional moral order. Others have similarly described the street culture as the “enjoyment of good times with minimal concern for obligations and commitments.”\(^\text{17}\) This endless pursuit of excitement, of course,
can't be continued for long without money. Most of the offenders in Wright and Decker's study were under constant pressure to find money, which in turn often led them to commit robberies. Acting the part and enjoying the good times is only part of street culture; you also have to look the part. Researchers have found that outward appearances, such as dress and accessories, are also an important part of street culture.\textsuperscript{18} A small percentage of the offenders interviewed by Wright and Decker also reported that they committed robbery to buy status items like the correct brand-named clothes and accessories, like jewelry.

Despite this tendency by robbery offenders to use the proceeds of their crimes for short-term gratification and nonessential status symbol items, several offenders in Wright and Decker's sample did rob to get money to meet essential needs. Some used the money to pay for rent or food, while one offender told Wright and Decker that he had committed several robberies in the past month because he was going to trial on assault charges and needed to pay for a private attorney, because he didn't trust the ability of public defenders. One has to wonder if this brash young man understands the meaning of irony.

Obviously, robbery is not the only way to obtain money. Why not get a job instead of mugging people? The sample of robbers in Wright and Decker's study were all unskilled and poorly educated and as a result were not able to obtain suitable employment. Most of the jobs available to these individuals were menial with no opportunity for advancement or status. In fact, a third of the offenders claimed that they would stop robbing if they were given a good job. One offender specifically stated, “If I had a union job making sixteen or seventeen dollars an hour, something that I could really take care of my family with, I think that I could become cool with that.”\textsuperscript{19} We also need to understand that the “rush” or thrill provided by the danger of committing the robbery can also play a part in the decision-making process of robbers, as a number of researchers have found. Robbing someone because of the inherent risk can be quite a thrill, and this motivation shouldn't be discounted.

**Robbery in Action**

How do robbers choose their targets? Wright and Decker discovered that, for most offenders, the decision to rob was usually quick and involved little deliberation. When offenders found themselves in need of cash, they would rob the first suitable target that appeared. **Routine activities theory** contends that there are three elements that are generally necessary for the commission of a crime to occur: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and lack of capable guardianship. Basically, this means that when someone wants to commit a robbery, he is more likely to go after someone he perceives as vulnerable, who
doesn’t have any protective mechanism in place, such as bystanders. Importantly, the majority of the offenders in Wright and Decker’s sample preyed upon those involved in criminal activity, such as drug dealing. In the inner city, where the majority of these offenders lived and robbed, drug dealing is a part of the scenery. As Bruce Jacobs notes,

[Drug dealers] deal strictly in cash and tend to have lots of it; drug selling is a high-volume, repeat business. Their merchandise is valuable, portable, and flexible; it can be used, sold, or both. . . . Drug sellers cannot rely on bystanders to come to their aid; operative norms dictate that witnesses mind their 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.20

Of course, robbing other criminally involved people, such as drug dealers, also carries risks. Not surprisingly, drug dealers tend to be armed and are often members of criminal groups that can protect them or retaliate with street justice. Nevertheless, many offenders viewed drug dealers and others engaged in criminal activity as easy targets. Other robbers, however, preferred law-abiding citizens as victims. In selecting a law-abiding citizen as a target, robbers first chose an area for the robbery and then a suitable victim. The areas selected were generally believed to be locations where people were more likely to carry large quantities of cash. Some preferred the downtown locations, where businesses and banks were located, while others preferred to stick to the marginalized and low-income neighborhoods, because the people there were more likely to carry cash compared with credit cards. As you might guess, check-cashing businesses and automatic teller machines were prime targets. In locating victims, offenders generally relied on external signs to identify who was most likely to be carrying cash; clothing, jewelry, and demeanor were indicators of this. For example, one offender described his judgment process like this:

I’m a pretty good judge of character. I ain’t come up empty-handed yet. . . . My wife kids me about that: ‘How’d you know they got money?’ . . . I know by the way they dress and the way they act. They be dressed nice. Got on nice clothes, brand new clothes, and stuff like that. A lot of them act nervous and be walking real fast . . . people that got something you can tell cause they be looking behind them and all that, walking fast trying to get to their car.21
Two demographics—gender and age—also affected the vulnerability attached to potential victims. Women were generally thought to be more defenseless than males, and elderly people were perceived as weaker than their younger counterparts. Of these two characteristics, age was probably the more important, as many offenders noted the attraction to elderly victims. For example, one offender noted, “When I need to find a robbery victim, I look for an older person . . . because you don’t have to worry about struggling with them and being real forceful with them. They might just give the money to you anyway, to keep from being hurt I guess.”

When an appropriate victim has been selected, the next issue for potential robbers is figuring out the best way to pull off the crime without getting caught. To make sure victims comply, robbers must use violence or the threat of violence. Lindegaard, Bernasco, and Jacques describe a robbery event as beginning when “the offender makes the victims aware they are being robbed, and its progression, the subsequent flow of events until the offender leaves the scene.” Physical force and injury can occur during any stage. The robbers interviewed by Wright and Decker generally used two methods to approach their victims and take control of the situation. The first was to sneak up on their victims, usually from the rear to avoid being detected. In this way, victims had no advance warning and were therefore unable to evade their attackers. The other method used by robbers involved trying to fit into the social setting and looking normal and nonthreatening, sometimes asking the intended victims a question, such as directions or the time. The modus operandi of robbers has not changed much since these tactics were uncovered almost three decades ago by David Luckenbill in his study of robbers and their behavior.

The next step in the robbery was to announce the stickup and establish dominance and control over the situation. According to Wright and Decker, most offenders typically opened their armed robberies with a demand that victims stop and listen to them and then quickly summarize the situation for the victim. For example, one robber often informed his victims, “This is a robbery, don’t make it a murder!” The majority of assailants also used a gun, the bigger the better. If a potential victim refused to comply, the robbery offenders most often responded with brutality. One offender stated, “You would be surprised how cooperative a person will be once he been smashed across the face with a .357 Magnum.” While a few of the offenders in Wright and Decker’s study had been involved in armed robberies that resulted in the death of a victim, these were rare, and the vast majority of offenders never intended to seriously injure, much less kill, their victims.
In general, research with offenders suggests that victim resistance increases the likelihood that the robber will use physical force against the intended target. However, NCVS reports from robbery victims indicate that victims who resisted did not necessarily provoke physical violence by the offenders. In one recent study, 104 people who had “experience committing robberies” were interviewed (28 of whom were incarcerated) in Amsterdam, Netherlands. In just over half the robberies described by the offenders, no physical force was used, but about one in three incidents (32%) were violent at the onset of the robbery. Results indicated that robbing a “street credible” victim (e.g. someone who is also likely engaged in criminal behavior) was more predictive of physical violence being used at the onset of a robbery. For example, one offender recalled shooting a street credible victim:

When he entered the alley, I said, “Give me that necklace.” Then he says, “What the fuck?” And I see he wants to pull up his shirt to get something. Then I shot him right in his leg, and then he said “Aah!” and he fell on the ground . . . . I knew he was from the street, and if someone is from the street, he is always unpredictable, because he could always have a gun in his pocket.

However, after a robbery had progressed, victim resistance significantly increased the likelihood that physical violence was used by the offender to obtain compliance. The robbers interviewed generally did not want to use physical force, but perceived it necessary when victims did not comply. One offender recalled how he and his co-offender robbed a man entering his home:

I saw them [co-offender and victim] there in front of the door, but inside the house, but in front of the door, and the door was still open. So I see them fighting there, they are lying there [and then] bam! Bam! Bam! [the co-offender shoots]. [He states] “This is a robbery, don’t mess around, don’t fight because you’ll not win, there are two of us, do you understand? Did you realize that? This is a real gun, don’t do anything, just do what we say then we’ll leave earlier.”

Once the money and/or other goods have been taken from the victim, robbers need to quickly make their getaway. While some robbers reported that they made the victims leave the scene first, most preferred to be the ones to flee first. To do this successfully, they first had to make sure that the victim wouldn’t attempt to follow them or make a scene. Most robbers accomplished this by threatening the victims with their lives, while others tied their victims up or incapacitated them through injury.
Female Robbery Offenders

While the majority of all robbers are male, females represent about 19% of the robbery offenders recalled by robbery victims in the NCVS. To determine whether motivations and methods of offending were different for male and female robbers, Jody Miller analyzed 14 interviews with active female robbers from Wright and Decker's sample described above. Because of this small sample, it is hard to know how representative these women are of female robbers in general, but her research does reveal some interesting gender differences in robbery offending. Miller found that the motivations for robbery were essentially the same for male and female robbers; however, their modus operandi was different. She found that the most common form of female robbery was to rob other females in a physically confrontational manner. While male robbery is more likely to involve guns in all situations, the females in Miller's sample most often relied on knives when robbing other women. Like their male counterparts, female robbers selected female targets primarily because they believed these targets were less likely to be armed and less likely to resist. Another tactic employed by female robbers was to target males by appearing sexually available. In these scenarios, the female robbers almost always armed themselves with a gun but kept themselves at a safe distance from their male prey to prevent physical resistance and also to prevent having the gun taken from them.

About half of the female robbers in Miller's sample also robbed other men with male accomplices, although they rarely used accomplices for the robbery of females. In these scenarios, the crime most often resembled the typical male robbery, with close physical contact and frequent use of violence. In sum, female robbers committed their offenses for the same reasons as their male counterparts; however, the way they carried out their crimes was different, depending on the gender of their victims.

What Are We Doing About Robbery?

Some of the leading theories that attempt to explain criminality were reviewed in Chapter 2, and many of them can be applied to the specific crime of robbery. However, because robberies are all about getting money, valuables, and other resources, those theories that link offending behavior to economic deprivation or to the disjuncture between the material goals of society and the unequal availability of the means to achieve these goals are particularly salient for explaining robbery. These explanations include anomie and general strain theories. Simon Hallsworth, who has extensively studied robbery in Great
Britain, outlines the connection between robbery and economics nicely when he states,

> The street robbery problem in its contemporary form is a problem of a society that induces young people to desire and covet the very goods they have been pressurized from an early age to associate with the good life. The kind of designer branded objects, in other words, they have been led to desire through their exposure to the capitalist culture industries that target them remorselessly and relentlessly. At the same time . . . this is a society which, while inducing a universal desire on the part of young people to build their lifestyles and establish their identities through consumptions, does not equip everyone with the wherewithal to consume legitimately.²²

This sentiment is very much like that articulated by Messner and Rosenfeld in their institutional theory of anomie that was discussed in Chapter 2. The assumption behind these theories is that if all citizens had equal access to a quality education and a good job that would allow them to provide a good life for themselves and their families, rates of robbery would most certainly decrease. Other theories, however, propose alternative measures. Rational choice theory, you will recall, contends that would-be offenders will be deterred from committing an offense if the costs of the crime outweigh the benefits. This theory assumes, of course, that offenders make decisions rationally. The fact that most of the offenders in Wright and Decker's study were under a lot of financial pressure, so that the perceived monetary reward of the robbery generally outweighed the perceived risk of incarceration, doesn't seem to support this perspective. Similarly, those who engage in robberies in order to maintain their drug and/or alcohol addictions also cannot be said to be rational in their decision-making process. Nevertheless, while the majority of robbers anticipated getting arrested in the future, most of them did not perceive this as a real threat or cost. The offenders in the study spent their lives on the street, and their lives were riddled with insecurity, poverty, and disorganization. In fact, most didn't even have a home and as a result had to depend on the charity of friends and family for a place to stay. As a result, many never slept more than two or three nights in the same place. For them, prison was seen as a “pleasant break from the turmoil and physical dangers that marked their day-to-day existence on the street.”³³

When we understand this reality, it's easy to see why the threat of being arrested and sent to prison does not represent a real deterrent to committing robbery. Some may respond to this by recommending that penalties for
robbery be increased to make it a more tangible threat. However, the penalties for robbery are already very extreme. Except for the crime of murder, convicted robbers are more likely to be sentenced to prison compared with offenders convicted of other crimes of violence, including rapists. Even if penalties were increased for robbery, remember that these offenders are generally under tremendous financial duress and typically see no other alternative to robbery, so their immediate needs will probably outweigh the threat of formal sanctions they perceive to begin with (i.e., arrest and prison), regardless of how stiff the penalties are.

In contrast to understanding the underlying causes of criminology, situational crime prevention seeks to understand technical and structural solutions to crime and in response design environments or products in ways that minimize the risk of victimization. Measures such as installing cameras in crime-prone areas are among such techniques. While cameras have proven effective in some commercial areas, critics contend that their presence simply moves street crime outside the camera range. Other situational changes, such as improving lighting, may also deter some offenders—but again, they may simply move to less well-lit areas to do their dirty deeds. In other words, some of these changes may simply displace crime to other, less protected areas.

One interesting idea advanced by Wright and Decker to reduce robbery is to replace cash in the economy with electronic monetary transfers like credit and debit cards. On most college campuses, for example, students can get debit cards that the university uses to pay for meals and other university services. Many states also now administer a form of debit card to food stamp recipients; this serves not only to reduce the risk of robbery but also reduces the stigma associated with paying with food stamps in checkout lines. Wright and Decker state, “Many armed robbers already regard the theft of checkbooks and credit cards to be more trouble than it is worth. In a truly cashless society, the vast majority of them almost surely would come to view these instruments as having no practical value whatsoever.”

**Bank Robbery**

You only have to think of movies such as *Hell or High Water*, *Heat*, *Point Break*, *Set It Off*, *The Town*, *Public Enemies*, or *Citizen Gangster* to realize how iconic the bank robber is in popular culture. Part of this can be traced back to the era of the Great Depression, when bank robbers such as John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, Pretty Boy Floyd, and others were perceived as latter-day folk heroes who stood up for the ordinary person against the big banks. Banks were associated with
big business and government authority, and, in an era when poverty, job loss, foreclosures, and hopelessness were prevalent, many bank robbers were seen as underdogs fighting a cruel and unjust system. Times, however, have changed. Nowadays, bank robberies rarely capture much media attention unless they result in multiple deaths or a shootout with police that happens to be captured by video. Despite the lack of media coverage and more sophisticated security systems, bank robberies are still relatively common. In 2015, for example, there were 4,091 robberies in financial institutions in the United States. While the majority of bank robberies in 2015 occurred in urban and suburban locations, over one in three (36%) took place in small cities and/or rural areas. In total, 56 hostages were taken in the bank robberies that occurred in 2015, but miraculously only one innocent victim was killed while eight bank robbers were killed during the commission of robberies. And finally, it appears that you should not go to the bank on a Tuesday, as that was the most likely day for a bank robbery to take place.38

Today, California has the highest number of bank robberies compared to other states. For example, in 2011, California had 697 bank robberies; compare this to the state of New York, which had only 339 robberies.39 Why California? According to one FBI agent who spent years investigating bank robberies, California’s high rate is primarily a function of the

- easy mobility of the freeway culture,
- the loose state banking regulations that allow a branch bank or a savings and loan or a credit union on nearly every corner—almost 3,500 of them in the L.A. area by the latest count—[and] the laid-back attitudes that discourage banks from installing bullet-resistant Plexiglas bandit barriers or access control doors.40

Like most robberies, the majority of these offenses were committed by males, but females represented about 8% of all offenders. The relatively rare female bank robber does tend to generate more media attention simply because of her novelty. For example, images of one young female bank robber, who became known as the “Ponytail Bandit,” made media headlines after she had conducted bank robberies in three states: Texas, California, and Washington. The FBI reported,
She’s a pretty young woman whose shoulder-length blonde ponytail sprouts from the back of her baseball cap in images captured by banks she allegedly robbed. . . . She approaches bank tellers, demands money, then waits, arms crossed, slouching slightly, as tellers comply.41

A baseball cap with a ponytail doesn’t seem like much of a disguise, but if you examined snapshots of bank robberies in action at the FBI website for wanted bank robbers, you would be amazed at how few of them actually wear disguises that effectively conceal their identity. In fact, many appear not to have made an effort to conceal their identity in the least, as is illustrated by a photo of one lone bank robber caught on tape at the First National Bank in Copperas Cove, Texas. He didn’t even bother to turn his baseball cap around. Evidently, he wasn’t thinking much about security cameras when he planned his crime.42

Most bank robberies involve a single individual waiting in line for a teller and passing a note to the teller letting the teller know that the bank is being robbed. This kind of robbery happens very quickly, and most customers usually don’t even know that a robbery is taking place. A takeover robbery, on the other hand, involves several armed individuals seizing control of a bank. While the risks are greater, there is also a potentially larger payoff, since this kind of robbery allows the perpetrators to gain access to all of the registers as well as the vault.43 One notorious and extremely violent bank robbery occurred in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles in 1997. At 9:15 a.m. on Friday, February 8, two heavily armed and masked men entered a Bank of America branch in a takeover bank robbery attempt.44 The two men were dressed all in black, including ski masks, and had also protected themselves with body armor.

One of the men was a Romanian emigrant named Emil Matasareanu and the other was a young man named Larry Phillips Jr. They had met while bodybuilding at a Gold’s Gym and became friends who shared not only their mutual pursuit of weightlifting but a taste for armed robberies as well. The North Hollywood takeover was not their first. They were armed with AK-47 automatic assault rifles and pistols and plenty of ammunition. Upon entering, they began shouting for everybody to get down and cover their eyes. They also opened fire with their AK-47s and shot into the ceiling and the Plexiglas barriers between the lobby and the employee area. The golden rule of bank robberies is that the perpetrators need to leave within 2 minutes in order to beat the police response time to the silent alarms that are invariably triggered. By the time Matasareanu and Phillips had cleaned out the vault and exited the bank, some 15 minutes had elapsed. This doesn’t sound like a long time, but
for bank robberies it is an eternity; when the two masked men went outside, over two dozen police vehicles and officers confronted them. Instead of surrendering or running back inside, the two young men simply opened fire with their automatic weapons. In a scene inspired by the movie *Heat*, a film often watched by Matasareanu and Phillips, a gun battle erupted that lasted for just under an hour.

The police were dramatically outgunned, so much so, in fact, that a number of officers went to a nearby gun store to acquire heavier weapons. The body armor worn by the two assailants allowed them to shrug off repeated hits to the torso, and after about 40 minutes of exchanging fire with the police, Matasareanu got in their getaway car and began slowly driving while Phillips followed behind and continued to fire. Eventually they split up. Shortly thereafter Phillips shot himself in the head after his assault rifle jammed and he realized that there was no escaping the police. Matasareanu was also unable to escape, since the police shot out his tires and he was unable to commandeer another vehicle. He was arrested after being wounded more than 29 times. Cuffed and lying face down in the street, he quickly bled to death. Although eleven officers and six civilians were wounded, amazingly, aside from Matasareanu and Phillips, no one was killed. Considering how many rounds were fired, this fact is truly remarkable.

Banks, it should be noted, are not the only places of employment that experience violent crime, and it is to the broader issue of workplace violence that we now direct our attention.

**Workplace Violence**

The most notorious types of workplace violence are mass shootings that receive a great deal of media attention and that are often referred to as “going postal.” Because these types of killing were discussed at length in Chapter 4 as a type of mass murder, they are not the focus of this particular discussion. Generally speaking, except for a few jobs that we typically think of as being dangerous, like policing for example, most of us don’t think of the workplace as an inherently risky place. Most violence, as we have seen in this book, tends to occur while people are not working. But we shouldn’t ignore the reality that being violently attacked while working is still far from uncommon. In 2014, for example, out of the 4,679 workplace fatalities that occurred around the country, most were caused by accidents, but 749 of these deaths were because of violence. Specifically, 458 were workplace homicides, while 271 were the result of suicide. This means that about 16% of workplace deaths were homicides. The remainder of workplace fatalities were generally the consequence of
transportation accidents, fires and explosions, accidental hits by machinery or other equipment, falls, slips, trips, and exposure to toxic substances.\textsuperscript{47}

Breaking these statistics down further reveals some interesting and important characteristics. Firearms were the most common weapons for both homicides and suicides, at 78\% and 45\% respectively. As with so many crimes of violence, firearms were the preferred method of killing in the workplace. Important gender differences also emerge when the data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics are examined. In 2014, of the 359 fatal work injuries suffered by females, 5\% were homicides, this compares to less than 1\% homicide fatalities for males. In other words, females were much more likely to be murdered on the job compared to their male counterparts. This pattern makes more sense when we look at the relationship pattern of these killings. In almost two out of every five female workplace homicides, the perpetrator was a relative—almost always an intimate partner or an ex. This can be compared with male homicide victims at work, whose relatives perpetrated the crime in only 2\% of the cases. One study looking at workplace killings of females from 2003 to 2008 found that the leading cause was robberies; this was followed closely by intimate partner homicides.\textsuperscript{48} Essentially, what we are seeing is that many of the deaths experienced by women while at work are the result of intimate partner violence.

Which occupations are most vulnerable to workplace violence? To examine the risk of nonfatal violent victimization, we can’t simply rely on the total number of victims in each occupation category, since different occupations employ different numbers of people. We therefore need to control for the total number of people who work in a particular occupation category by generating rates of victimization by occupation. Table 7.1 presents these rates generated from NCVS data for particular types of occupations; it shows rates for both government and private-sector employers. As you can see, there is a great deal of variability of risk across occupation categories. What is clearly evident, however, is that employees in the law enforcement and security professions are much more likely to experience workplace violence compared to those in other occupations. Those working under the umbrella of the mental health, both for the government and for the private sector, had the second highest rates of violent victimization.

When these categories are examined even more closely, we find that particular occupations within each umbrella category are responsible for this variability. Not surprisingly, those who teach in elementary schools are much less vulnerable to being attacked compared to high school teachers. One group that might surprise you as being at a relatively high risk is people in health professions, such as mental health workers. Nurses are also particularly at risk, especially
those who work in emergency rooms. This tends to make more sense when we realize that people admitted to emergency rooms, for example, are sometimes high or intoxicated, suffering from mental illness, or going through withdrawals and detoxing, all of which can increase the risk of violent assault. Specifically, people in retail sales have the highest risk for robbery victimization, while law enforcement personnel have the highest assault risk. Even within job categories, however, risks can vary. For example, not all retail sales positions are at equal risk for violence. Statistics indicate that within retail sales positions, bartenders appear particularly vulnerable to workplace violence, as do gas station attendants. Also, while those in law enforcement appear to be especially vulnerable to violence on the job, police officers are over twice as likely to be victimized as corrections officers.49

Part of this relative risk depends on the nature of the job. We find that there are certain kinds of job characteristics that increase the likelihood of victimization. These can include interacting with the public in positions that involve money,
such as working a cash register. Being alone or with only a few other coworkers is also a risk factor, as is working late at night and early in the morning. Jobs located in high crime areas heighten the risk as well. A position that requires an employee to be out and about in the community, such as driving a taxicab, makes the job a bit more dangerous. Having to deal with criminals and/or people with mental health issues is a risk factor. Think of the people who law enforcement has to interact with in the course of patrolling a beat, and you get the idea. Guarding property or delivering goods and services increases risk. Keep in mind that these factors don’t influence risk individually. A taxicab driver, for example, usually works alone and may be driving in high crime areas at night picking up and delivering passengers who may or may not be criminal or unstable. Needless to say, driving a cab can pose a bit more risk than a job in which a person avoids these kinds of higher risk scenarios.50

Violent Hate Crimes

One night in June 1998, James Byrd Jr., a 49-year-old African American, declined a ride home from a friend during a party and later started to walk home alone on Martin Luther King Boulevard in Jasper, Texas. A gray pickup truck driven by Shawn Berry, the 23-year-old manager of a local movie theater, and two other men Byrd did not know pulled up. and Berry asked Byrd whether he wanted a ride. When Byrd climbed into the back of the truck, Berry gave him a beer. Byrd’s decapitated body was found the next morning; his head and one of his arms were found over one mile away from the rest of his body. At the scene where an obvious struggle had initiated the crime, cigarette butts and a lighter with the symbols for the Ku Klux Klan and the word “Possum” etched in the dirt were found. Later, Berry’s written confession detailed the facts: He and two other men, Bill King and Russell Brewer, had picked Byrd up on Martin Luther King Boulevard; they then drove him up to Huff Creek Road, beat him up in a clearing, spray-painted his face black, and then dragged him with a logging chain tied to his ankles about three miles before they dumped his body at the side of the road. Byrd’s head and arm had been cut off when his body was pulled over a sharp metal culvert.51

The nation, the state of Texas, and the town of Jasper were all outraged that such a horrific crime could have taken place. The country showed an outpouring of support for Byrd’s family in particular, and for the African American community of Jasper in general. To demonstrate their support, thousands wore yellow ribbons, and at Byrd’s funeral, speeches about reconciliation and healing were given by dignitaries, including Jesse Jackson and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, and a letter from then President Bill Clinton was read. For their crimes, King
and Brewer were sentenced to die, and Berry was sentenced to life in prison. In the end, however, James Byrd Jr. was buried on the black side of the Jasper City Cemetery, “still segregated in 1998.”

The brutal murder of James Byrd Jr. brought the term hate crime to the forefront of public consciousness in the United States. Unfortunately, within four months, the nation would be shocked by yet another brutal murder motivated by hate—this time against gays. The victim in this case was a 21-year-old college student named Matthew Shepard, who attended the University of Wyoming. On the evening of October 7, 1998, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney went to a known gay bar with the intent of targeting a gay man for robbery. They met Shepard there and offered him a ride home. Instead of taking him home, however, they took him to a remote area, tied him to a fence post, pistol-whipped him in the head to unconsciousness, and then left him there to die. Shepard was found over 18 hours later by a cyclist. He never regained consciousness and died four days later on October 12. Henderson and McKinney were found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Although none of the defendants in the Byrd or Shepard murders received enhanced sentences for their crimes, today nearly every state and the federal government have laws that require sentencing enhancements for offenders who commit crimes motivated by hate. As such, an ordinary crime becomes a hate crime when offenders select a victim because of some characteristic, such as the victim’s race or religion. Each state has its own definition of what characteristics are included within its hate crime legislation; however, the FBI’s definition is a useful starting point:

A hate crime, also known as a bias crime, is a criminal offense committed against a person, property, or society that is motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity/national origin.

Many states include other characteristics within their hate crime statutes, including age, gender, political affiliation, and transgender status or gender identity. As the statute notes, bias crime is sometimes used as another term for
Violence: The Enduring Problem

hate crime. The first major hate crime legislation passed at the federal level was called the **Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990**. The law directed the attorney general to collect data “about crimes that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.” In September 1994, Congress passed the **Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act**, which amended the Hate Crime Statistics Act to include both physical and mental disabilities.

The most recent law enacted at the federal level against hate crimes is called the **Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act**; it was signed into law by President Obama in March of 2010. The law expanded federal hate crime legislation to include violence based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability in addition to the already-existing criteria based on race and religion. After signing the legislation, President Obama stated, “After more than a decade of opposition and delay, we’ve passed inclusive hate crimes legislation to help protect our citizens from violence based on what they look like, who they love, how they pray, and who they are.”

As mandated by the **Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996**, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program began collecting statistics on offenses motivated by bias against physical and mental disabilities in January 1997. However, remember that the UCR collects data only on those incidents that are reported to the police, which is only a small percentage of victimizations. Figure 7.1 displays the breakdown of 5,462 single-bias crimes reported to the police in 2014 by the type of bias. As can be seen, the largest percentage of these crimes were based on racial bias, followed by both religious and sexual orientation bias. Of these crimes, the majority (4,048) were against persons, including 4 people who were murdered and 9 who were raped, while the vast majority were forms of assault or intimidation.

Keep in mind that these numbers reflect only those hate crimes that were reported to police. To more accurately estimate the prevalence of hate crimes, the NCVS also added questions to its interview guide that now ask crime victims whether they perceive their victimization to have been motivated by hate. From both of these sources of data, we now know more about the characteristics of hate crime victimization in the United States. The NCVS defines hate crimes as those incidents in which victims believe the offender selected them for victimization because of one or more of their personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. This definition also includes incidents in which the offender perceives the victim as belonging to
or associated with a group largely identified by one of these characteristics OR perceives the victim as associating with people having certain characteristics. Before a crime is classified as hate related, corroborating evidence of hate motivation must also be found to have been present at the time of the incident, including at least one of the following:

- The offender used derogatory language.
- The offender left hate symbols.
- The police confirmed that a hate crime had taken place.

Not surprisingly, the NCVS estimates many more hate crime victims compared to police report data. The most recent data available indicate that there were almost 264,000 nonfatal violent hate crime victimizations in 2012, with the

majority of these being assaults. The most likely type of bias, according to the NCVS data, was directed against a person's ethnicity, which includes the person's ancestral, cultural, social, or national affiliation. As such, hate crime represents about 4% of all violent crime committed annually. The second most likely bias reported by victims was racial bias, followed by religion, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. About one-third of hate crimes were perceived to have been motivated simply because of the victim's association with persons who have certain characteristics—that is, victims were attacked simply because they had a relationship with someone with a hated characteristic, such as race, sexual orientation, or religion. African Americans tend to be the most frequent target of racially motivated hate crimes, while those perceived to be Jewish were the most common victims of religiously based attacks. You may be surprised to learn that just over half (52%) of violent hate crimes reported to the NCVS were perpetrated by known offenders, and about 61% of were male. Violent hate crime is also more likely to involve multiple offenders than other violent crime. For example, about 34% of violent hate crime incidents involved more than one offender compared with only 19% of violent victimizations that were not motivated by hate. As we will see in Chapter 8, people will often engage in behavior in a group they would not otherwise engage in if alone.

Although most offenders are prosecuted for hate crimes at the state level, hate crime charges are also brought against offenders at the federal level. Moreover, hate crime prosecutions are successfully being made for victimizations not typically thought of as motivated by hate. For example, on September 20, 2012, Samuel Mullet Sr., a leader of a so-called “renegade Amish sect,” and 15 of his followers were convicted in federal court of hate crimes for terrorizing another Amish community in eastern Ohio by forcefully shaving the beards of men and cutting the hair of both men and women. While the crimes themselves constituted assaults, the jury convicted the “renegade sect members” of hate crime because they were attempting to “suppress the victims' practice of religion.” The US attorney described the incidents quite graphically: “The defendants invaded their homes, physically attacked these people and sheared them almost like animals.” This is a significant victimization in traditional Amish communities, because “men's long beards and women's uncut hair are central to religious identity.” One female victim recounted how the attackers forcefully entered her home at night and how several of them held both her and her husband down, shaved her husband’s beard with clippers and then cut his hair while he repeated prayers, and then cut her hair with shears used to cut a horse’s mane.
What Are We Doing About Hate Crime?

At some level, all violence is the result of an “us” versus “them” mentality. Perpetrators usually see their victims as being different and somehow of lesser worth or value. They also tend to perceive their victims as having brought on their own victimization. Remember back to Chapter 1, when we pointed out that many who commit violence tend to understand their actions as being necessary or justified. This is a common tendency among many different kinds of offenders, whether the bully in the schoolyard, the genocidal killer, or the hate criminal. The victims are typically seen as having caused the violence against them because of what they’ve done or said or perhaps simply because of how they look. In their own minds, these offenders are being violent only as a kind of righteous payback or retaliation. We can certainly see this in action when we look at the connection between economic conditions and xenophobia, the tendency to have contempt for foreigners or other strangers, which is particularly likely in times of economic hardship, when resources are scarce.

Researchers have found that groups tend to develop much more reactive and punitive attitudes during uncertain economic times, periods of high crime rates, and eras of social and cultural change. Uncertainty and fear, in other words, tend to breed and strengthen hostility and anger against those defined as being dangerous, threatening, or different. Thus, although hate crimes may not be directly linked to economic needs like many robberies, tougher economic times do increase the likelihood of hate crimes and other forms of violence. We find, for example, that in the United States, negative stereotypes of immigrant populations and crimes against them have both been shown to increase during times of economic depression. For example, during the depressions of 1893 and 1907, the latest immigrants from Italy were the targets, while the depression of the 1920s set the stage for the recent immigrants from the Mediterranean and Slavic nations to become the scapegoats. During more recent economic hard times, Latin American immigrants, both legal and illegal, have become the target of the moment. This correlation between economic hardship and xenophobia has been observed at other times in the United States and in other countries around the world. In many ways, then, certain kinds of hate crimes are motivated by the fear surrounding economic uncertainty and cultural change. Ironically, perpetrators of this kind of violence often define themselves as being the victims, and the groups they target are seen as being the perpetrators because of the social, cultural, and demographic changes they represent.
This tendency is made easier by preexisting prejudices and stereotypes against minority groups. One particularly potent example of this concerns anti-Semitism.

In Focus 7.1
The Internet, Hate Groups, and the Emergence of the Lone Wolf

The Internet is providing society with a host of new possibilities, but not all of them are positive. Unfortunately the Internet’s promise of anonymity provides many hate groups with the visibility often denied them in regular media channels and allows them to introduce their propaganda to thousands. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of websites devoted to hate group propaganda continues to increase at a rapid pace. The Internet has also allowed hate groups to recruit through mass e-mailing and to establish a sense of community through cyber bulletin boards and chat rooms for people hundreds of miles apart. Of course, this visibility has also allowed researchers access to the worlds of these hate groups. Through the messages and images presented on hate sites, we now have more information about how they recruit new members, how they build a sense of community, and how they compel individuals to action.\(^{61}\)

The list below includes five reasons, delineated by tolerance.org, why hate groups and hate speech can flourish on the web. All of these conditions have increased the effectiveness of recruiting so-called lone wolves, who are individuals who take part in a movement but remain largely anonymous. Many hate groups encourage “lone wolf” action by telling their members, “Don’t keep membership lists, don’t go to rallies or meetings where you can be observed, and, should you decide to break the law, be sure not to tell anyone about it.”\(^{62}\)

1. **Privacy:** Even though many sites remain open for anyone to post information or participate in a chat room, many are now requiring a screening and approval process for participants, thereby allowing greater privacy from public scrutiny.

2. **Persuasion:** Open discussions on the web allow extremists to more personally talk with individuals who may feel alienated from the rest of society, but may not be convinced that an affiliation with a hate group is the way to go. The immediate availability of this communication makes such propaganda much more persuasive.

3. **Anonymity:** Although access to Internet traffic has the potential to be subpoenaed...
Anti-Semitism refers to derogatory speech and action targeted against Jews and relies on very old images and prejudices. In fact, anti-Semitism has sometimes been referred to as the longest hatred. Because anti-Semitism has been around such a long time, many people are at least somewhat familiar with the negative images and stereotypes associated with the Jews, even if they are not necessarily anti-Semites themselves. This means that when times get tough or tragedies happen, these old ideas are easily resurrected to explain what happened and why. Globalization, for example, and all of the resulting economic and social changes and dislocation are not always easily understood or explained. They are scary phenomena for many people who see their jobs or way of life being threatened by the changes. This was worsened by the 2008 financial collapse and the widespread anger directed against Wall Street and the banking industry. An easy way to make sense of what happened and have a target to focus anger against is to scapegoat a group for the economic downturn. Scapegoating can be used by political, social, and religious leaders in order to capitalize on old prejudices and further their own goals, whatever those might be. One anti-Semitic theme, for example, that has been relied on in recent years portrays the Jews as rich and exploitative industrialists and bankers responsible for our economic problems.

After the collapse of Lehman Brothers and other large investment banks, a rumor spread across the Internet that just prior to the collapse, $400 billion was secretly transferred to Israeli banks. Similarly, in the wake of the Bernie Madoff scandal in 2008, a great number of anti-Semitic postings appeared on various Internet forums. The fact that Bernie Madoff is a Jewish businessman who created a $50
billion Ponzi scheme allowed for a great deal of anti-Semitic comments to be voiced, including

Just another Jew money changer thief. It's been happening for 3,000 years. Trust a Jew and this is what will happen. History has proven it over and over. Jews have only one god—money,

and in a similar vein,

Madoff is another Jew banker. . . . The Sec [SEC] is filled with Jewish gatekeepers who routinely turn a blind eye to Jewish financial bandits. . . . It's no conspiracy that the Jews are the source of all the financial troubles in the world.”65

It's no accident that the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) tracked an increase in anti-Semitic hate crime in the wake of the 2008 downturn. The problem with the kind of stereotypes and prejudices that lead to hate crimes is that they are remarkably enduring. In many ways they are like a forest fire that, after the flames have been doused, continues to smolder underground for a long time. You think it's been eradicated, but then given the right conditions, those smoldering embers can burst into flame again. So too with prejudice. Education, legal changes, and tolerance training can all be used to combat intolerance and hatred so that it goes underground. But given the right economic, social, and political conditions, those old prejudices can quickly be resurrected. There are many reasons why these ideas persist.

One explanation relates to a deep-seated instinct among groups to distinguish between who is and who is not included. The tendency to separate ourselves into in-groups and out-groups is very strong. Jack Levin and Gordana Rabrenovic state,

If no ethnic or religious differences exist, humans will invent them to set up a hierarchy of those of us who are the richest, most intelligent, most morally superior, best hunters, and so on.”66

However, this predisposition to divide the world into “us” versus “them” does not inextricably result in hate. Levin and Rabrenovic conclude,

Hating “the other” is learned behavior, pure and simple. . . . Haters learn such ideas either early in life from their parents or later in life from their friends, classmates, teachers, religious leaders, and the mass media.”67
As such, the elements responsible for socialization—including family, school, religious organizations, and society as a whole—each play a role in creating hate. In fact, we all play a role. It is important to remember that everyday acts of prejudice and bigotry are also related to acts of hate-motivated violence. When we allow bigoted comments and jokes to be told without comment, we are acting as bystanders to hate. When a classmate makes an anti-Semitic comment; when your roommate insults something by saying “that’s so gay”; when a coworker uses racial and ethnic slurs in casual conversation; when the coach of a child’s baseball team tells a player that he throws like a girl—each of these seemingly small instances helps to foster prejudiced environments where hateful attitudes and behavior are more likely to flourish. Each presents an opportunity to step out of the role of a bystander into one of action. We will have more to say about the role of bystanders in Chapter 10 on genocide.

In US society, the First Amendment protects a citizen’s right to free speech, including hate speech. This is a fundamental right that we believe should never be jeopardized. Nevertheless, there are ways in which communities can respond to events, such as rallies and other gatherings, that promote hate. The Southern Poverty Law Center has published methods that have been successfully used by communities to combat hate groups. For example, if a hate group such as a White supremacist organization plans a demonstration, an alternative event can be organized that encourages multiculturalism. Hate crime victimizations should also be responded to by the community, not just by law enforcement. This is important not only to show unity within the community against hate, but also to send a message to the hate crime victims that their community cares about them.68

Street Gang Violence

What is a gang? While you probably have an image of what you believe a gang to be, by now you should not be surprised to learn that defining exactly what a youth gang is might not be so easy. In fact, there is no single accepted definition of a “gang” in general. What further confuses the issue is that other terms are often used interchangeably with gang, including street gang, youth gang, and so on. The National Gang Center, sponsored by the US Department of Justice, uses the following criteria for classifying groups as gangs:

1. The group has three or more members, generally aged 12–24.
2. Members share an identity, typically linked to a name, and often other symbols.
3. Members view themselves as a gang, and they are recognized by others as a gang.
4. The group has some permanence and a degree of organization.
5. The group is involved in an elevated level of criminal activity.

Importantly, these criteria exclude other types of gangs that are typically more organized and composed of older adults, including prison gangs, motorcycle gangs, and other organized crime gangs. Although some youth gang members who become incarcerated may become part of a more organized prison gang and/or may remain part of their street gang while incarcerated, prison gangs are notably different than street gangs. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have legislation that defines gangs and gang-related activity somewhat differently. This section will focus exclusively on the street youth gangs; for ease of presentation, we will use the term gang throughout the remainder of this section.

How do we estimate the prevalence in street gangs in the United States? One of the best tools for determining the extent of gang presence in an area is the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), which is filled out by law enforcement agencies across the country. The sample includes more than 2,500 agencies in larger cities, suburban cities, and smaller cities as well as rural counties. The most recent survey was conducted in 2012. Nationally, the percentage of agencies reporting the presence of active gangs in their jurisdictions is around 30%. However, as Figure 7.2 indicates, there is great variability in the presence of gangs by geographical location. Not surprisingly, law enforcement agencies in larger cities are more likely to report gang presence, while rural areas are least likely to report gangs. Another trend evident from Figure 7.2 is that while the majority of jurisdictions reporting gang presence was highest in the mid-1990s and then dropped, gang presence increased again in the mid-2000s and has remained relatively constant since then.

This trend is mirrored by the estimated number of gangs present in the United States, as depicted in Figure 7.3. As can be seen, the number of gangs estimated to exist across the United States was around 30,000 in 1996 and declined to a low of around 20,000 in 2003. However, since then the number of gangs estimated to be present is once again 30,000 in the most recent data, for 2012. About 4 in 10 of these gangs exist in larger cities, about one quarter
exist in both smaller cities and suburban areas, and only about 6% present in rural counties.  

Why do young people join gangs? To investigate this question, most researchers rely on talking to gang members directly and letting them speak for themselves. One study found that the need for protection is the main reason members gave for joining. In addition to wanting to feel safe, wanting to be respected and wanting to belong are other common reasons given for joining. Yasser Payne, who has spent over a decade studying street-involved youth, theorizes that adapting to street life is a “site of resilience” that emerges as a function of blocked economic and educational opportunity; young Black men “have turned to the streets as a way to secure personal, group, and communal levels of resiliency and resilience.” In this context, resilience is how street-life-oriented young men “organize meaning around feeling well, satisfied, or accomplished and how men choose to survive in relation to adverse structural conditions.”

So how is gang presence related to violence? The answer appears to depend on the geographical location generally, and even the city specifically. Not surprisingly, gang violence is a greater issue in large cities. However, in some cities, gang violence represents a larger proportion of all violence than in other cities. For example, in the so-called gang capitals of the United States, Chicago and Los Angeles, about half of all homicides are gang related. Figure 7.4 presents the number of gang-related homicides that occurred between 2007 and 2012 by type of location. As you can see, the number of gang-related homicides has remained relatively stable in both small cities and other small areas, including rural locations. However, the number of gang-related homicides has increased in large cities over the past few years. In fact, the number of gang-related deaths in some cities is increasing at much higher rates than it is in other cities. For example, Chicago, which has more gangs and gang members than cities twice as

large, has seen its murder rate skyrocket in recent years. One explanation for the increase in the number of both gangs and violence in Chicago is the high degrees of concentrated disadvantage in some neighborhoods, where residents are forced to live in crumbling public housing communities with little hope of economic advancement. Residents are responding on their own to prevent violence, including using a campaign called, “Don’t shoot, I want to grow up” (Photo 7.3) which are printed on signs and worn on t-shirts all over Chicago. It is important to note that the majority of gang violence is directed at other gang members, and while the presence of

![Figure 7.4 Percentage of Gang-Related Homicides by Geographical Area, 2012](image)

gangs is related to levels of violence in a city, these violence incidents are still fairly sporadic and infrequent in the vast majority of cities. In fact, researchers who have conducted field research with gangs have found that gang-involved youth have lives similar to those of most teenagers, which includes going to school, hanging out, or working.

Despite this fact, there are a few factors that have been found to increase the likelihood of gang-related violence. Recall our discussion of guns as facilitators of violence in Chapter 3. James Howell and Elizabeth Griffiths note that firearms availability also is an important facilitator of gang violence, specifically because guns are the weapon of choice for gang members. However, because these individuals often use illegal guns, gun control legislation mandating measures such as background checks is unlikely to affect gang-related homicides. Another important element related to gang violence in certain cities is drug-related activity, but it is not clear how it is related. Some contend that the illicit drug trafficking and sales conducted by gangs is what increases violence, while others contend both drugs and gang activity are caused by the preexisting conditions of social disorganization and economic disadvantage. And finally, conflict between rival gangs is also related to gang violence. This violence, which includes homicides, is frequently the result of several conflict-related circumstances, including maintaining turf, defending one's identity as a gang member, defense of the gang's honor and reputation, and revenge or retaliation.

What Are We Doing About Street Gang Violence?

Efforts to prevent gang violence are inextricably related to efforts to prevent juvenile delinquency in general. As you can imagine, these efforts cannot be effective without taking into consideration the larger community and societal contexts in which gangs exist. For example, providing conflict resolution
training to a teenager embedded within a gang in high school will hold little promise if that youth is not provided educational and/or vocational training along with an equal opportunity to apply this knowledge in the workplace. That being said, the goal of this section is simply to provide a brief overview of a few programs that have been scientifically proven to be effective in decreasing gang-related violence.

The US Department of Justice’s **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)** developed a **Comprehensive Gang Model** designed to reduce gang crime in targeted neighborhoods using interventions that had been shown to work in addressing individual, family, and community factors that contributed to juvenile delinquency and gang activity. The model includes five strategies that are displayed in Table 7.2.

Several cities across the United States have utilized components of the Comprehensive Gang Model to address gang problems in their own city contexts, which has resulted in tailoring different programming strategies. For example, Richmond, Virginia, included many intervention activities in its program, including job training and placement, role modeling and mentoring.

### Table 7.2 The Five Strategies in OJJDP’s Comprehensive Gang Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community Mobilization</strong></td>
<td>Involvement of local citizens, former gang-involved youth, local agencies, and community groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities Provision</strong></td>
<td>A variety of educational, training, and employment programs targeting gang-involved youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Intervention</strong></td>
<td>Involvement of youth-services agencies, schools, faith-based organizations, police, and other organizations to reach out to gang-involved youth and their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suppression</strong></td>
<td>Formal and informal social control, including close supervision of gang-involved youth by criminal justice and school-based agencies as well as grassroots groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational Change and Development</strong></td>
<td>Development of policies and procedures that result in the most effective use of available resources across agencies to address the gang problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

mental health and substance abuse services, and tattoo removal services, among others. In addition to these services, Los Angeles, California, also included anger management and conflict resolution training. While Richmond and Los Angeles both included prevention activities targeting younger children, Richmond included many more activities directed at very young children, including prenatal and infancy support, afterschool and summer programs for elementary and middle school youth, and arts and recreation programming for all at-risk youth.

Very few cities have incorporated all five strategies into a comprehensive program to combat gang violence. Moreover, when they have, it is virtually impossible to determine what factors, if any, actually produced the desired outcome. We talked about true experimental designs earlier in the book; it is this design that would be necessary to determine whether a program had the intended effect. Like trials for new prescription drugs, these experiments allow researchers to randomly select some youth to receive the intervention (e.g., substance abuse services, tattoo removal) while other youth do not. If the group that received the intervention shows decreased rates of violence compared to the group that did not have access to the intervention, only then can we determine whether it was the intervention and not some other factor that caused a reduction in violence. As you might imagine, only a few of these experiments have been done.

One such program that has showed promise is called Cure Violence. Cure Violence, as the name implies, views violence from a public health perspective. The goal of this program is to reduce homicides by identifying youth who are most at risk of being shot or shooting someone else. Trained mediators, who are often former gang members, mediate conflicts between gang-involved youth both in the streets and in hospital emergency rooms. “They interject themselves into on-the-spot decision making by individuals at risk of shooting others, helping potential shooters weigh the likely disastrous, life-changing outcomes against perceived short-term gains.”77 This program has been used in several cities, and experimental evaluations indicate that it did significantly reduce homicides in the vast majority of cities in which it was implemented. While this and similar programs have shown promise, it is important to remember that they do not change the underlying factors from which gang members are created, which include structural disadvantage, blocked educational and economic opportunities, and alienation from the larger society, schools, and often their own families.
Conclusions

In this chapter, we have provided an overview of several types of interpersonal violence that are more likely to be perpetrated by strangers than by offenders known to the victim. It is important to remember that while these crimes are more likely to be committed by strangers, known offenders still perpetrate a significant proportion of these crimes. This chapter has also illustrated the fact that, while robbery is clearly motivated by the prospect of economic gain on the part of the offender, crimes that are not so obviously linked, such as hate crimes and gang-related violence, are also inextricably related to economic hardship. Thus, while the installation of crime prevention techniques like closed-circuit cameras in crime-prone areas may reduce the likelihood of crime occurring in particular areas, these attempts do little to ameliorate the underlying sources of violence that exist in society, like inequality.

KEY TERMS

- bank robberies 233
- bias crime 239
- burglary 223
- Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996 240
- code of the streets 225
- Comprehensive Gang Model 253
- Cure Violence 254
- First Amendment 247
- hate crime 239
- Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990 240
- Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act 240
- muggings 225
- National Gang Center 247
- National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) 248
- negative stereotypes 243
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) 253
- primary homicides 221
- robbery 222
- routine activities theory 226
- secondary homicides 221
- self-protective action 224
- situational crime prevention 232
- Southern Poverty Law Center 247
- stickups 225
- stranger crime 221
- Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act 240
- xenophobia 243
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Go to the FBI website and find the link to information about their Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program called “Crime in the United States” (www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm). Here you can obtain a breakdown of robberies reported to police by state and region of the country. Examine robbery rates by state. Where does your state fall in the ranking? What factors do you think are related to robbery offending in your state? How do these factors differ from those of neighboring states?

2. The Anti-Defamation League has a website where they have compiled a list of Hate Crime Laws for each individual state at http://archive.adl.org/learn/hate_crimes_laws/map_frameset.html. Find your state's statutes for hate crimes. What categories are included for special protection against hate in this statute (e.g., race, sexual orientation, religion, gender)? Do you think your state's statute could be more inclusive of other at-risk groups? Why or why not?

3. Go to the FBI website and find the most recent publication and/or data on bank robberies. Has the rate of bank robberies increased or decreased during the past decade? What factors do you think are responsible for this change? If the incidence of bank robberies has not changed, what policies do you think could be implemented to help decrease the rate?

4. A great place to get information about the prevalence of gang violence and strategies that have been successful at preventing it is the National Gang Center (https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/). The center is funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the US Department of Justice. Go to this website and learn more about the Comprehensive Gang Model that communities can use to implement programs to help prevent gang violence. Also, click on “Publications,” and look for the most recent publication highlighting the National Youth Gang Survey. Find out for yourself what the survey tells us about the trends in prevalence and composition of gangs and gang membership across the United States. What trends do you see in gang membership across small cities compared to large cities? Has female involvement in gangs changed over time? Do you think that different strategies should be used to prevent females from joining gangs compared to those that have been used for gang-involved males?