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## Book Review

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## BOOK REVIEW

### BRINGING RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY BACK TO REALITY

RICHARD MORAN\*

RICHARD T. WRIGHT & SCOTT H. DECKER, *BURGLARS ON THE JOB: STREETLIFE AND RESIDENTIAL BREAK-INS*. Northeastern University Press 1994. 231 pp.

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The roots of rational choice theory trace back to the classical school of criminology and to the work of great eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophers Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham.<sup>1</sup> Both men were mainly interested in the control of crime through the manipulation of penal sanctions rather than the direct observations of criminals or the analysis of aggregate crime data. Firm adherents to the free will philosophy that was fashionable in Enlightenment Europe, they believed that man could determine his own destiny by the use of reason and knowledge. These early criminal law and penal reformers defined crime in legal terms and regarded the offender as morally guilty because he had freely chosen to commit a criminal act.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794), who published his epoch-breaking *Dei delitti e delle pene* in July of 1764, believed that humans are by nature self-seeking and motivated to gain all they can from one another. If society is to endure, a system of punishment is necessary to keep people from breaking the rules. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the father of Utilitarianism, was an eccentric character dedicated to practical affairs. His ethical principal was the greatest good for the greatest number. He believed that all men were motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. The function of the criminal law was to prevent crime by adjusting penal sanctions sufficiently to discourage the commission of deliberate unlawful acts. For an article discussing the contribution of Beccaria and Bentham to the classical school of criminology, see Elio Monachesi, *Cesare Beccaria in PIONEERS IN CRIMINOLOGY* 36 (Hermann Mannheim ed., 2d ed. 1972); Gilbert Geis, *Jeremy Bentham in PIONEERS IN CRIMINOLOGY* 51 (Hermann Mannheim ed., 2d ed. 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Baron Raffaele Garofalo (1852-1934) was among the first to recognize the limitations of a purely legal definition of crime. His search for the "natural crime," an act considered

Today, more than two hundred years later, the main tenets of classical ideas on crime and punishment have been dug-up, melted down, and recycled for a modern audience. Rational choice theory, which is really not a theory but merely a research methodology or perspective, seeks to restore the central operating assumption of classical criminology: criminals are rational and, much like the rest of us, consider the likely consequences of their behavior before deciding on a course of action. An interesting if painfully obvious insight to be sure, but one for which there is at best mixed empirical evidence.<sup>3</sup>

## II. BACK TO THE FUTURE

In the late 1960s, a future Nobel Prize winner in economics, Gary Becker, ignoring with apparent glee the long tradition in economics of linking crime with capitalism and changing economic conditions, proposed an artless cost-benefit analysis of criminal behavior as the basis for the allocation of scarce resources in law enforcement.<sup>4</sup> Edward Banfield, an urban policy analyst, boldly asserted that "when the probable costs exceed probable benefits, an individual will not commit the crime."<sup>5</sup> James Q. Wilson, a political scientist, advocated a similar approach, complaining that the "root cause" explanations favored by sociologists, psychologists, and social reformers had failed to lead to useful modes of intervention.<sup>6</sup> He proposed an abandonment of the last 100 years of criminological research and the adoption of a classical punishment/deterrence model.<sup>7</sup> The central goal of his new policy-driven criminology was raising the cost of crime and lowering its benefits.<sup>8</sup> The fact that this binary system of criminal motivation had all the intellectual sophistication of a game of tic-tac-toe seemed to enhance rather than diminish its appeal.

To policy makers and funding agencies desperate to do something about crime, the proposition of putting more criminals in jail for longer periods of time to reduce the crime rate seemed simple enough.<sup>9</sup> Today, after almost twenty-five years of steady growth in the

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criminal in all societies under all circumstances throughout history, led him to argue for a sociological definition of crime. See BARON RAFFAELE GAROFALO, *CRIMINOLOGY* (1968).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald L. Akers, *Rational Choice, Deterrence, and Social Learning Theory: The Path Not Taken*, 81 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 653 (1990).

<sup>4</sup> In economics this is called the "expected utility" principle. See Gary S. Becker, *Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach*, 76 J. POL. ECON. 169 (1968).

<sup>5</sup> EDWARD C. BANFIELD, *THE UNHEAVENLY CITY* 160 (1968).

<sup>6</sup> JAMES Q. WILSON, *THINKING ABOUT CRIME* (1975).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> See *id.* at 55-56.

<sup>9</sup> TREVOR BENNETT & RICHARD WRIGHT, *BURGLARS ON BURGLARY: PREVENTION AND THE OFFENDER* (1984). Bennett and Wright speculate on the difficulty in England of raising offenders' opportunities as a way of altering the cost-benefits deliberation. Offenders sim-

jail and prison population, from .3 million in 1970 to 1.5 million today, the crime rate is finally beginning to decline.<sup>10</sup> Is this a long awaited validation of our policy of raising the costs of crime through massive imprisonment, as rational choice advocates might claim, or merely the result of demographic or social changes?

However, a closer look at this policy of massive imprisonment reveals that violent crime has remained steady or risen slightly even as rates of imprisonment have soared. The experience of California and Texas is instructive. During the 1980s, California's prison population increased by 192%, while Texas' increased by only 14%. By the end of the decade, however, both states had experienced a 21% increase in violent crime. After spending nearly three billion dollars to build and operate prisons, California has little to show for its expenditures, except a modest reduction in property offenses.<sup>11</sup>

If increasing the cost of crime has had any effect, it appears to be limited to property crimes, mostly a drop in burglary rates. *Burglars On The Job* provides a detailed explanation of the limits of rational choice theory as a basis of public policy.<sup>12</sup> The book suggests that the slight drop in burglary is more likely due to an incapacitation effect or a switch among burglars to armed robbery than it is to a recalculation by street criminals of the costs and benefits of crime.

### III. STUDYING ACTIVE BURGLARS

For criminologists accustomed to pouring over statistical abstracts or manipulating data on a computer screen, *Burglars on the Job* comes as a welcome relief. Theories of crime arise out of other theories or computer-generated statistical models, each time getting further and further away from actual subjects. Field research helps reintroduce criminologists to the criminal, reminding them of the critical importance of the offender's perspective in the study and control of crime. In this remarkable book, Richard Wright and Scott Decker provide a clear and penetrating peek into the lives and crimes of street criminals, a glimpse into the real world of crime.<sup>13</sup>

There is very little quality street ethnography conducted today.

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ply require too much money to meet their life-style needs to make this approach feasible. The same undoubtedly holds true here in America.

<sup>10</sup> FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES (1994).

<sup>11</sup> Campaign For An Effective Crime Policy, *What Every Policymaker Should Know About Imprisonment and the Crime Rate*, PUB. POL'Y REP., February 1995; ALBERT J. REISS, JR. & JEFFREY A. ROTH, UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE 79-80 (Albert J. Reiss, Jr. & Jeffrey A. Roth eds 1993).

<sup>12</sup> RICHARD R. WRIGHT & SCOTT H. DECKER, *BURGLARS ON THE JOB: STREETLIFE AND RESIDENTIAL BREAK-INS* (1994).

<sup>13</sup> See *id.*

Many criminologists consider it too dangerous, expensive, and time consuming. Others believe that active criminals would not talk with researchers, much less share with them the tricks of the trade. The authors have proven the latter myth. On the contrary, once assured of confidentiality, most burglars welcomed the opportunity to speak with professional researchers about their skills, strategies, and achievements in the world of crime.<sup>14</sup> Also, the chance to appear in a book, if only anonymously, was a powerful acknowledgment of their competence as burglars.

*Burglars on the Job* permits the reader to understand how street criminals think, not only about crime but how they approach life. Good street ethnography affords a view of decision-making in the day-to-day lives of offenders. More importantly, it unravels the complex connection between their lives on the street and the crimes they commit in a way that no statistical study or armchair theory could capture.

The offenders in Wright and Decker's book are residential burglars who refer to themselves as "hustlers," always on the lookout for the chance to make a buck. This is a meaningful distinction because if given the opportunity, nearly all burglars commit other crimes. The book is distinct in criminological research in that it reports on active burglars, people still on the streets engaged in episodic burglaries, and not convicted criminals behind prison bars.

Most research on burglars has focused on prison inmates. Such research is problematic because not only are the burglars failed criminals, but their incarceration may affect what they say. No matter what the assurances, all inmates think that what is said to an interviewer will somehow get back to prison officials and perhaps influence their chances for parole. For example, almost all inmates tell interviewers that they have learned their lesson and that they plan to go straight upon release, although some have continued to commit crimes while behind bars. Retrospective interpretation may also distort the inmate's statements; looking back, the inmate constructs a different perspective of his behavior than when he was on the outside and committing crimes.<sup>15</sup>

By studying residential burglars in their natural setting, Wright and Decker are able to explore the limits of rational choice theory. Criminals do make choices, but those choices are bound by emotions, culture, and mitigated by routine. Deciding to commit a crime is not

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<sup>14</sup> Many of the burglars were suspicious of the researchers, fearing that they were a front for a sting operation. Active criminals are often caught by police because they have talked about their crimes on the streets. Initially, these active and therefore successful burglars had a natural reluctance to talk.

<sup>15</sup> See EDWIN M. SCHUR, LABELING DEVIANT BEHAVIOR 52-56 (1971).

the same thing as selecting which box of breakfast cereal to purchase, or where to go for lunch, even if these decisions share many of the same characteristics.

The authors conducted field research for eighteen months in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1989 to 1991. They employed two research sites: a predominantly black neighborhood, and a neighborhood inhabited by mostly poor whites. Both sites can be characterized as inner-city neighborhoods with a robust streetlife.<sup>16</sup>

Snowball sampling helped locate active burglars. Although difficult at first, the authors were able to hire an ex-offender, "Street Daddy," to recruit subjects. Street Daddy is a wheelchair-bound former thief who retains a solid street reputation. Through a referral system, and the promise of a \$25.00 payment,<sup>17</sup> Street Daddy provided the authors with 105 active burglars, 75% of whom had never been convicted of burglary. Two-thirds of the sample averaged ten or fewer burglaries a year, while 7% averaged fifty or more burglaries per year.<sup>18</sup> The subjects included eighty-seven males and eighteen females. The inclusion of females is unusual, especially for this kind of research.

#### IV. THE DECISION TO COMMIT A BURGLARY

In the last fifteen years, rational choice theory has been the dominant explanation for residential burglary. Rational choice theorists focus exclusively on the objective characteristics of the immediate criminal situation, and leave little or no room for the role of subjective influences such as emotions. For Wright and Decker, the question is "[H]ow and why mental states are related to the pursuit of material gain so that a crime results. [While not entirely rejecting rational choice theory, the authors] . . . contend that this cannot be done adequately without examining the part played by cultural forces in motivating the decision to commit an offense."<sup>19</sup>

According to Wright and Decker, the rational nature of a decision to commit a burglary is limited by the masculine ideals of inde-

<sup>16</sup> The predominantly black neighborhood is in North St. Louis. The mostly white neighborhood is in South St. Louis. For those familiar with St. Louis, Fairgrounds Park and Fox/Benton were among the neighborhoods studied.

<sup>17</sup> Several subjects assisted the authors in locating other active burglars by "pimping" compatriots, introducing them to researchers for a cut of the participation fee, generally \$10.00.

<sup>18</sup> See MARVIN E. WOLFGANG ET AL., *DELINQUENCY IN A BIRTH COHORT* (1972); PAUL E. TRACY ET AL., *DELINQUENCY IN TWO BIRTH COHORTS* (1985); LYLE W. SHANNON ET AL., *CRIMINAL CAREER CONTINUITY: ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT* (1988).

<sup>19</sup> WRIGHT & DECKER, *supra* note 12, at 198, quoting JACK KATZ, *SEDUCTIONS OF CRIME* 315-16 (1988).

pendence and self-reliance, as well as by the value street culture places on spontaneity. Most offenders simply refuse to consider legitimate means to obtain money. Street culture places intense pressure on offenders to act quickly lest their reputations as successful hustlers be jeopardized.<sup>20</sup> Within the context of street culture the criminal has no other "rational" choice but to consider the possibility of committing a residential burglary.

For theoretical guidance, Wright and Decker turn to the largely overlooked work of John Lofland.<sup>21</sup> In *Deviance and Identity*, Lofland stated that the decision to commit a crime is usually the result of a three phase process.<sup>22</sup> According to Lofland, the possibility of physical harm or the risk of social disgrace creates a perceived threat which is experienced within a sociocultural context.<sup>23</sup> The individual then moves to a state of "psychosocial encapsulation" where the perceived risks become diminished.<sup>24</sup> Finally a criminal act is committed.<sup>25</sup>

The St. Louis burglars closely followed the Lofland developmental sequence. Almost all of them began to think about a burglary under intense emotional pressure to obtain money quickly. Indeed, the number of times they committed burglaries during a given period depended upon how often they needed money. The financial pressure they felt was not to pay the rent or purchase food, but the desperate need for cash to keep up with street culture. Those with cash in their pockets had respect; those who were broke were called "scum bums" and excluded from street action. Thus, the lack of money to buy drugs and "keep the party going" was a serious threat to a person's social standing on the street.

Much of street life is oriented to getting and staying high. Toward this end offenders need a good deal of ready cash. A regular job could not satisfy the need for this much cash. For example, seventeen of ninety-five subjects were regularly employed. A number disdained work because they hated routine and because work interfered with their lifestyle. Their first goal was "keeping the party going," which meant taking drugs or procuring sex from prostitutes whom they called "ducks." To be regarded as hip, subjects needed to "keep up appearances." Fancy clothes and expensive cars were the items most often mentioned as status symbols, but drugs and sex were also important. Wright and Decker emphasize that it is the "living for the mo-

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<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 202.

<sup>21</sup> JOHN LOFLAND, *DEVIANCE AND IDENTITY* (1969)

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

ment" aspect of street culture, not true financial hardship, that motivates people to commit burglaries. In this environment, regular work is not a practical alternative.

Seven of the burglars said they committed burglaries primarily for the thrill of it rather than the money. Committing crimes made them feel like somebody and raised their self-esteem. In addition, the fun and challenge of crime was important. Many of the subjects reported they felt better about themselves after committing the burglaries. Freud called these people "criminals from a sense a guilt" and observed that the commission of a crime seemed to relieve feelings of guilt rather than produce them.<sup>26</sup> This theory, if correct, helps explain why most criminals appear immune to the threat of punishment, and seriously undermines the foundation of deterrence theory.

#### A. SELECTING A TARGET

Burglars choose a target in one of three ways. Usually they know the occupants; researchers have long observed that most crimes of violence are committed by people known to the victim.<sup>27</sup> This remains true today despite the FBI's recent claim to the contrary.<sup>28</sup> One of the remarkable findings to emerge from this study is the fact that many of the victims of residential burglary are acquainted with the offender. Wright and Decker estimate that this figure may well be more than fifty percent. While only a few of Wright and Decker's burglars selected homes belonging to close friends or relatives, most burglarized homes of people with whom they were acquainted.

Not surprisingly, the homes of drug dealers were a favorite target. The burglars knew the dealers' daily schedules; most lived alone, and spent day and night on the streets. Burglars also knew that they would be likely to find large amounts of money or drugs on the premises, allowing burglars to kill "two birds with one stone," since illegal drugs could be obtained directly. Furthermore, drug dealers are not likely to report their victimization to the police.

Employed burglars had a decisive advantage in locating potential targets. Those employed as repair or installation men were often left unsupervised in the victim's home, as were cable television and deliv-

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<sup>26</sup> SIGMUND FREUD, *CRIMINALS FROM A SENSE OF GUILT* (1876); SIGMUND FREUD: *THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE* (1965).

<sup>27</sup> FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, *CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES* 287 (1994).

<sup>28</sup> In January of 1995, the FBI put out a press release claiming that 53% of all homicides were committed by strangers, and that for the first time, all Americans have a realistic chance of being murdered. They arrived at this figure by lumping "unsolved" homicides with homicides committed by strangers. Thus they created the impression that homicide had become increasingly random.

ery men. Gardeners and cleaning people also had good opportunities, not only to case the house for valuables, but also to learn the routine of the occupants. Unemployed burglars often posed as door-to-door salesman, or even burglar alarm serviceman, which gave them an opportunity to learn about existing security systems.

Other burglars relied on tips from informants. Tipsters regularly passed on knowledge for a piece of the action. This reduced the risk of detection and increased the rewards of burglary. For example, airport clerks passed on information about the travel plans of local families, insurance agents told which houses had insured valuables, gardeners or maids told of the location of valuables as well as the schedules of the occupants. Some burglars avoided tipsters altogether, fearing a set up. Wright and Decker report that the "code of honor" among thieves has entirely broken down. To the St. Louis burglar, everyone was fair game, even friends, relatives, and other thieves.

Some offenders chose targets by watching a dwelling over time, enabling them to learn the occupant's routine. Also, the appearance of the residence gave cues as to the valuables inside. In general, burglars assumed the bigger and better houses contained the most valuables. Expensive cars, especially BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes, thought to be popular among drug dealers, were seen as positive indicators. These dwellings were often described as "asking to be burglarized."<sup>29</sup>

Most burglars chose a neighborhood they knew. This familiarity gave them a better feel for the people and place, and a sense of security. Feeling they must blend in, blacks tended to burglarize homes occupied by blacks, whites those occupied by whites. This is especially true for whites, who seldom enter black neighborhoods. Interestingly enough, both races thought there was a greater police presence and therefore a greater chance of getting caught in the other's neighborhood.<sup>30</sup> In an ironic twist, one burglar switched to robberies when police stepped up patrols because he believed it was easier to tell where the police were when doing a robbery on the street. "When you're comin' out of that window, you never know who's waitin' on the other side."<sup>31</sup>

"Neighborhood Watch" signs failed to discourage most offenders because many of the offenders knew these neighborhoods and were

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<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 84.

<sup>30</sup> This may help explain why burglary rates are highest in St. Louis' racially integrated neighborhoods; all potential burglars, regardless of race, view these areas as suitable places to commit burglaries.

<sup>31</sup> WRIGHT & DECKER, *supra* note 12, at 92.

not threatened by the signs. Neither decals warning of burglar alarms nor door locks were much use. By the time a burglar reached the front door, he was committed to the crime. Indeed, to some burglars, alarms and elaborate locks indicated there was something inside worth stealing.

Visibility was also an important consideration. Burglars did not want to be observed breaking into homes, and generally preferred points of entry hidden from the street. They also did not want to be heard. Security bars and storm windows did deter burglars; these homes simply required too much work for the burglar to gain entry, especially when there were easier pickings. Very few burglaries could be described as opportunistic. Not a single offense was prompted by the chance discovery of an open window or unlocked door. In addition, tricks to create the illusion that someone was home were ineffective: radios or televisions blaring did not deter a break-in.

#### B. ENTERING A HOUSEHOLD

Most burglars simply swallowed their anxiety.<sup>32</sup> Others used drugs or alcohol to embolden themselves, contrary to a large body of drug-crime research suggesting that addicts commit crimes to get money for drugs.<sup>33</sup>

Many of burglars approached a residence in the guise of workmen. Masquerading as carpenters, house painters, service technicians, or delivery men were commonly employed ruses. One female offender took her young children along, reasoning that a woman with children would not attract undue suspicion. Most burglars wore dark, nondescript clothing and affected a calm outward appearance so as not to attract attention.

Ninety percent of the burglars always avoided occupied residences, not out of a concern for the safety of the occupants (most were willing to use violence if necessary), but because occupied dwellings were considered high risk. Many burglars knew the occupants and therefore, wanted to make sure they were not recognized. They checked for occupancy by ringing door bells, knocking on doors, or calling on the telephone. If someone answered the door, they usually pretended they were searching for a friend's house but had the wrong address.

The use of the telephone was particularly ingenious. In cases

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 128-29.

<sup>33</sup> See JOHN C. BALL & M. DOUGLAS ANGLIN, *PROBING THE LINKS BETWEEN DRUGS AND CRIME* (1989); George Speckart & M. Douglas Anglin, *Narcotics Use and Crime: An Overview of Recent Research Advances*, 13 *CONTEMP. DRUG PROBS.* 741 (Winter 1988).

where they did not know the occupants, burglars got the household's name from the mailbox, looked up the telephone number, and called from a nearby phone booth to see if the occupants were home. If no one answered, they would leave the telephone off the hook. This way when they arrived at the residence, a ringing telephone would assure them that no one was home. Some even called the occupants at work, thereby assuring themselves that potential trouble was many miles away.

Each burglar had his or her own technique. One woman picked up a man at a bar, went back to his house for sex, cased the place while the man slept, and then returned a few weeks later with her boyfriend to burglarize the place. Two women teamed up as prostitutes, advertising themselves as two-for-the-price-of-one. Once inside a man's apartment, typically an elderly man, one woman would ransack the place while the other had sex with the man.

The fear of getting caught did not deter these burglars. Most believed in fate; whether they got caught was out of their control. Nor did pangs of conscience discourage them. Most offenders had no need to neutralize feelings of guilt before committing a burglary. Some even persisted in the belief that many of the victims welcomed the thefts as a chance to replace old equipment.

Burglars defended their crimes on moral grounds. All acknowledged that burglary was wrong. Some even said that they felt guilty about committing crimes. However, they typically dismissed these moral qualms by saying that they needed the money. As one burglar explained: "I mean I feel guilty about [the burglary] . . . but you gotta do what you gotta do to survive."<sup>34</sup> Here we can see how the mythology of "survival" helps to justify crime. As Wright and Decker continually remind us, these men and woman were not stealing bread to feed their families, but guns, cash, and merchandise to obtain drugs to "keep the party going."

### C. SEARCHING THE PREMISES

Once inside, most burglars checked to make sure no one was at home. They generally experienced the "burglar's high," a feeling of being a "kid in a candy store."<sup>35</sup> The high was usually followed by calm, the anxiety over detection practically disappeared. This calm allowed the burglar to search the residence while remaining mentally alert. Depending on the individual offender's tolerance for risk, he either conducted a quick or a leisurely search.

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<sup>34</sup> WRIGHT & DECKER, *supra* note 12, at 136.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 140-41.

The burglars in Wright and Decker's study realized that the longer they remained in a residence, the greater the risk of discovery. Most elected to do a brief search, believing they could quickly locate enough valuables to make the break-in worthwhile. The master bedroom was usually the first place hit. Through experience, burglars knew that they could often find expensive and easy to carry valuables in the master bedroom. Burglars were primarily looking for money, jewelry, and firearms. Initially, burglars searched the bedroom dresser, often emptying the drawers onto the bed. Then they searched the bedside table, the most likely location for handguns. If the occupant was poor or elderly, they looked under the mattress. Shoe boxes in the bedroom closet were another favorite place for burglars to check.

Some of the burglars quit after searching the bedroom, preferring a quick exit. Most, however, headed for the kitchen, not in search of appliances, but of money and jewelry. Burglars were aware that many people like to keep cash stuffed in the freezer or jewelry in a mayonnaise jar in the refrigerator. The bathroom and medicine cabinet were then hit, mostly in the search of drugs and cash. Burglars generally skipped the children's room, believing very little of value was stored there. The last room searched was the living room. Many burglars shunned large appliances like televisions, videocassette recorders, and stereos because of the risk of being seen leaving the premises with large bulky objects in hand.

Most of the St. Louis burglars preferred to work in groups. Although this reduced the individual's take, it also reduced the chance of detection and arrest. One burglar acted as a look-out while the other ransacked the residence. If they were spotted by police, they could run in different directions assuring that at least one of them would get away. Interestingly, all the burglars thought they would be the ones to escape. A few burglars preferred to work alone, believing most of their partners were not dependable. If caught, most believed they would probably rat on each other.

About seven percent of the burglars preferred to search the premises at a leisurely pace. These burglars knew the schedule of the occupants, and when they were likely to return home. Wright and Decker interpreted this behavior not only as ensuring the burglars got everything of value, but, more tellingly, as taking total control of the victim's living space. "Like teenagers left alone for the weekend by their parents, most simply helped themselves to whatever alcohol or food was available and took pleasure in not having to clean up

afterwards.”<sup>36</sup>

And some did urinate or defecate inside the house. Most used the toilet, but did not flush because of the noise. A few did relieve themselves on the floor or carpet, claiming they did not want to get trapped with their pants down in the bathroom. Finally, on the way out, most experienced “euphoria” that they had pulled it off.

#### D. DISPOSING OF THE GOODS

Once the burglary was successfully completed, offenders began to think about turning the stolen goods into cash. There were, of course, risks in selling “hot” property. Some potential customers did not buy goods if they knew the goods were stolen, while others refused to pay but a small fraction of their value. Unlike a professional fence, the burglar usually attempted to make his goods appear legitimate. Since the burglaries were motivated out of real or imaginary financial desperation (usually imaginary), all burglars wanted to turn stolen goods into cash immediately. Also, they knew that the longer they kept the goods, the more likely they were to be caught with them.

Burglars disposed of goods in four ways. One way was to use a professional fence. A professional fence offers many advantages: he is safe and convenient, and there is little need to hide the fact that the goods are stolen. Also, both burglars and fences know the “street price” of goods, typically one-quarter to one-third of retail, and can forego elaborate negotiation. Most low-level burglars, however, have no connection with professional fences and have little idea of how to find one. All St. Louis burglars interviewed desired a regular relationship with a reliable fence.

Pawnshops offered another, riskier avenue of disposal. Police keep close watch on pawnshops, which in St. Louis are required to request identification from sellers and to videotape all transactions. Most of the criminals who used pawnshops had an agreement with crooked owners to conduct their business off-camera. Those who lacked such agreements were forced to take their chances and conduct business on-camera.

Many burglars exchanged their goods for drugs. This tactic enabled them quickly and safely to obtain drugs without first having to convert the stolen goods into cash. “Most of the time . . . I take the stuff to the drug man . . . That’s what I’m gonna do with the money anyway . . .”<sup>37</sup> Drug dealers seldom paid the best prices. In St. Louis as elsewhere, addicts have flooded the market for stolen merchandise,

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<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 168-69.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 182.

depressing street prices.

The third avenue for disposal of stolen merchandise was friends, relatives, and acquaintances. These customers knew the goods were stolen, and some actually had put in standing orders. But burglars rarely stole merchandise "on demand." Instead they tended "to keep their eye out." They offered no discounts to friends; friendship only bought potential customers access to stolen property, not special prices.

Selling stolen goods to strangers could increase risk, but most burglars accepted the risk as going with the territory. "Walking the streets is risky [too]. Gettin' up out your bed in the morning is risky."<sup>38</sup> Burglars, however, did not sell goods in the neighborhoods from which they were taken, fearing that the owner might become aware of the burglar's identity. Bars, lounges, and taverns in nearby neighborhoods were favorite spots to sell stolen merchandise. Clients of these establishments were known to look favorably on the purchasing of "hot" merchandise, regarding the fact that the goods are stolen as evidence of a favorable deal.

Some of the burglars kept items they stole, most commonly, firearms and jewelry. On the streets, both bestowed status on the burglar. Handguns could be used for protection and, of course, to commit armed robberies. Carrying a gun also enhanced a person's reputation on the streets as being "ruthless."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps of equal importance, both handguns and jewelry could be easily converted to cash when the need unexpectedly arrived.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

*Burglars on the Job* redirects our thinking about rational choice perspectives and it raises serious questions about the efficacy of public policy based on the purely rational, calculating criminal. The book reminds us that when people (not just criminals) make choices, those choices are confined by both emotions and culture. Too often rational choice proponents have proceeded as if the decision (if it can rightly be called a decision) to commit a crime takes place in a vacuum with the aid of a pocket calculator. Criminals are not cost accountants and it does scholars who study crime little good to proceed as if they were.

According to Wright and Decker, "[t]hough . . . burglars made conscious choices throughout their crimes, their offending did not appear to be an independent, freely chosen event so much as it was

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<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 189.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 192.

part of a general flow of action emanating from and shaped by their involvement with street culture."<sup>40</sup> And it is this involvement in street culture that makes preventing burglary so difficult, for street culture is what fuels the engine of crime in the inner city.

Although endemic joblessness and persistent poverty undoubtedly help create the conditions under which street culture thrives, job creation would not reform these burglars. "Not only are the majority of them poorly educated and unskilled, many are unreliable, suffering from drug and alcohol problems, and resistant to following instructions or taking orders."<sup>41</sup> They are neither willing nor able to take advantage of job opportunities.

At the deepest levels, Wright and Decker's burglars realized that social forces were aligned against them, that their lives were circumscribed yet out of control. They were nobodies and they knew it. But they still had dreams, and involvement in street culture allowed them to continue dreaming. They believed the next burglary would solve all their problems. By living the life style of a hustler, they become somebody, a "contender" in the eyes of those on the streets.

Nor would the threat of severe punishment deter these burglars. Most made spur-of-the-moment decisions to offend while under intense emotional pressure to obtain cash quickly. They did not really plan their burglaries and having escaped apprehension so often, their perception of risk and the expectation of punishment were extremely low.<sup>42</sup> Since persistent criminals generally associate with one another, an arrest for burglary does not "set off" a whole series of informal costs.<sup>43</sup>

The policy implications of *Burglars on the Job* are all too clear: street culture is the major criminogenic force in the inner city. Wright and Decker report that once a youth becomes immersed in street life, with few exceptions, they are lost to that life. The challenge that lies ahead is to break up this "oppositional culture," and to prevent new recruits from entering its domain.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 205.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 207.

<sup>42</sup> Raymond Paternoster et al., *Perceived Risk and Social Control: Do Sanctions Really Deter?*, 17 L. & SOC'Y REV. 457 (1983).

<sup>43</sup> Most researchers believe the informal system of social sanctions is more powerful than the fear of arrest and imprisonment in deterring crime and delinquency. See FRANKLIN ZIMRING & GORDON HAWKINS, *DETERRENCE* (1973).

<sup>44</sup> See ELIJAH ANDERSON, *STREETWISE: RACE, CLASS, AND CHANGE IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY* (1990).