

*Annual Review of Criminology*Carjacking: Scope, Structure,
Process, and PreventionBruce A. Jacobs¹ and Michael Cherbonneau²¹School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, Program in Criminology, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, Texas, USA; email: bruce.jacobs@utdallas.edu²Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, USA; email: m.cherbonneau@unf.eduANNUAL
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**Keywords**

carjacking, robbery, crime trends, National Incident-Based Reporting System, victimization, crime decision-making

Abstract

Carjacking is a violent crime with a broad motivational landscape related to the unique opportunities that a motor vehicle, as the item targeted, makes available to offenders once it is stolen. Although carjacking is technically a form of robbery, carjacking is a hybrid offense because it draws from elements of both regular robbery and motor vehicle theft. Nuanced in its etiology and expression, carjacking boasts a structure and process that require offenders to navigate multiple challenges under considerable time pressure and uncertainty. The fact that carjacking is so often opportunistic yet simultaneously requires a fair amount of calculation makes the offense even more subtle in its complexity. The purpose of this review is to examine these nuances through the lens of official data and existing empirical research. Nascent but growing, this research provides insight into the scope of the problem, the method and manner of the crime's commission, and the challenges of curbing a clear urban menace.

INTRODUCTION

In September 1992, Dr. Pamela Basu—a 34-year-old suburban Maryland mother and award-winning chemist—was paused at a neighborhood stop sign less than one block from her home. She was driving her 22-month-old daughter, Sarina, to her first day of preschool. Two young men approached, flung open the door to her BMW, and forced her out. But Dr. Basu became ensnarled in the seatbelt as she tried to prevent her daughter from being driven away. The assailants sped off anyway—dragging Dr. Basu facedown for a mile-and-a-half to her death and dislodging her body only after ramming the stolen BMW into a wire fence. Sarina was found unharmed and safely strapped into her car seat by a neighbor who observed the carjackers stop a short distance from the crime scene (the assailants cast Sarina to the side of the road, reportedly with Dr. Basu’s body still in tow). The whole sequence of events started because the offenders’ borrowed Cadillac ran out of gas (Dominguez 1993, Donahue et al. 1994, Sevilla 1993, Sevilla & Beyers 1992, Washington 1992).

Just weeks after this incident, on October 25, 1992, the federal Anti-Car Theft Act of 1992 was signed into law, making armed motor vehicle theft (i.e., carjacking) a federal offense. The recent and graphic nature of the Basu incident was particularly impactful to lawmakers, who cited it in their call for an expanded motor vehicle theft bill that subsumed carjacking and warned of a growing menace of similarly tragic crimes around the country (Pressler 1992).

Carjacking is a violent crime with a broad motivational landscape related to the unique opportunities that a motor vehicle makes available to offenders once it is stolen. Although carjacking is technically a form of robbery (especially when using legal criteria relating to the use of force or threat of force to make the distinction), carjacking is a hybrid offense because it draws from elements of both regular robbery and motor vehicle theft. In particular, carjacking unites the varied motives of motor vehicle theft (see Cherbonneau & Wright 2009, Copes 2003, McCaghy et al. 1977) with the confrontational style of robbery (see Luckenbill 1980, 1981).

Few crimes are more frightening—or “more symbolic of contemporary urban violence” (Topalli & Wright 2004, p. 150)—than carjacking. The offense is also democratic in the sense that it can threaten almost any driver at any given time. From a victimization standpoint, carjacking undercuts one’s sense of both corporal (body) and material (property) security. An assailant—typically unknown to the victim, customarily young and male, frequently armed, sometimes with a co-offender, and often under cover of darkness (Donahue et al. 1994, Fisher 1995, Friday & Wellford 1997, Klaus 2004, Rand 1994)—approaches the driver and demands the vehicle. Shock gives way to panic as the driver realizes there is no time to debate the merits of compliance. Many carjackers know this and leverage stealth, shock, and awe to separate the driver from the vehicle quickly. The driver, fearful that the incident may be more than “just a carjacking,” might do something imprudent and inadvertently turn the crime into a murder. As Miethe & Sousa (2010, p. 255) ominously conclude: “The decision to resist or not is a grisly choice that may have adverse consequences no matter what [carjacking victims] do.”

Media accounts have reported a striking increase in this offense at the turn of 2021 and into 2022. Such accounts lean toward the sensational (Cherbonneau & Copes 2003), are geared to instill fear (Glassner 1999), and have ambiguous external validity, but they do provide important leading-indicator data—particularly at the city level, where beat reporters interface with police sources on a regular basis. And the apparent rise in carjacking from these accounts is remarkable. Carjackings more than doubled in one year in Chicago; the city reported over 1,400 carjackings in 2020 alone (Alani 2021, Corley 2021). Chicago finished 2021 with more than 1,800 carjackings, which is the highest recorded number of that offense in 20 years and five times as many offenses as recorded in 2014 (Crime Lab 2021, Nickeas & Krishnakumar 2022). Other large cities recorded similar increases. New Orleans experienced a 154% rise between 2019 and 2020, which continued into 2021 with 210 carjackings—an increase of 160% since 2019 (Morse & Jackman 2021, Nickeas

& Krishnakumar 2022, Simerman & Adelson 2022). In Washington, DC, the increase between 2019 and 2020 was 143%, while in Minneapolis, it was well over threefold (Marshall 2021). Speaking about carjacking trends in his city, the Philadelphia police commissioner said that carjackings averaged around 230 per year from 2010 to 2019 but that the annual average is no longer relevant, as carjackings “jumped. . . to 409 [in 2020 while] last year [2021] we saw 750 carjackings in the city. These numbers have almost triple[d] since 2019” (Conklin 2022). Philadelphia’s soaring trends appear to be continuing, with a recent report suggesting the city recorded 140 carjackings in the first five weeks of 2022 alone (Palmer 2022).

Much of the increase reportedly was driven by young offenders and the unintentional consequences of COVID-era public health policies. “With many schools closed for in-person education, school-aged youths with free time—some as young as 12–15—are committing a large portion of the increase in carjackings” (Police Executive Res. Forum 2021). Chicago data seem to show increases and decreases in carjacking that track closely with school-related lockdowns (Alani 2021) as well as a high rate of participation by youth from underserved areas of the city (King & Jackson 2021) with limited internet access and lower levels of school attendance (Crime Lab 2021). The ubiquitous COVID face mask may have stoked a favorable opportunity structure by providing little fear of identification or even of standing out (Fies 2020, Gerner & Berlin 2021), while recent retractions in the criminal justice system—be they pandemic-induced, borne of social unrest, or inspired by legislative reforms (e.g., Nickeas & Krishnakumar 2022)—reduced the bite of sanctions on the back end. Posing few barriers to entry and requiring almost no startup capital, carjacking promises fast rewards for perceptibly fleeting risk. “It is a no-fuss, quick fix, thirty-second crime of preference for the not-too-ambitious crook,” lawmakers observe (Wing 1994, p. 396).

Empirical research reveals that carjacking is by no means monopolized by the young, nor are economic motives necessarily primary. Simplistic in its brutality, carjacking is nuanced in both etiology and expression. It also boasts a structure and process that requires offenders to navigate multiple challenges under considerable time pressure and uncertainty. The fact that carjacking is so often opportunistic yet simultaneously requires a fair amount of calculation makes the offense even more subtle in its complexity. The purpose of this review is to examine these nuances through the lens of official data and existing empirical research. Nascent but growing, this research provides insight into the scope of the problem, the method and manner of the crime’s commission, and the challenges of curbing a clear urban menace.

THE SCOPE AND ETIOLOGY OF CARJACKING

As a crime, carjacking is as old as the automobile itself. It first gained notoriety during Prohibition, when the hijacking of alcohol shipments became commonplace. The offense continued with forcible seizures of other commercial vehicles, such as armored cars and inventory-laden trucks (Donahue et al. 1994). Although some (but not all) states with laws specific to carjacking chose to define the offense using more technical terminology, such as vehicular hijacking or hijacking a motor vehicle, the first apparent use of the word “carjacking” came in a 1991 *Detroit News* article about a drug store cashier who reportedly was murdered for her Suzuki Sidekick (Morewitz 2019). The first federal attempt to address carjacking arose shortly thereafter under the above-described Anti-Car Theft Act of 1992, which, fittingly, was signed by President George H.W. Bush in Detroit, the Motor City (Wing 1994).¹

¹The legislation made carjacking with a firearm a federal offense (18 U.S.C. § 2119), with provisions for sentences of up to 15 years, 25 years, and life in prison depending on the severity of victim injury (e.g., if crime results in no injury, up to 15 years; if crime results in serious bodily injury, up to 25 years; if crime results

As noted above, carjacking is a form of robbery—with robbery defined as using force or threat of force to take something of value from someone else—but it has dynamics akin to motor vehicle theft as well. The uniqueness of carjacking relative to other forms of robbery lies in what is stolen—a motor vehicle. Not unlike motor vehicle theft, carjacking typically occurs on or around parking areas and streets (Miethe & Sousa 2010). Like robbery, carjacking more often than not involves offenders and victims who do not know one another and a weapon of some sort—usually a firearm (Klaus 2004). Despite the presence of weaponry, resistance is not uncommon—perhaps because victims are able to leverage their vehicle as both a weapon and shield. Although carjacking rarely involves death, it engenders tremendous fear (Cherbonneau & Copes 2003, James 2017).² Resistance is no doubt an artifact of that fear, particularly if victims believe they are about to be kidnapped or killed (Fisher 1995, Morewitz 2019).

Unlike other forms of robbery, the prototypical carjacking involves an occupied vehicle with the engine on and the driver inside, but there are significant exceptions (Young & Borzycki 2008, Miethe & Sousa 2010). Victims may be leaving or entering their vehicles when targeted (Donahue et al. 1994). Victims may be bumped and then “jacked” after they exit the car to inspect the damage (Davis 2003, Wing 1994). The offense may also be part of a broader robbery transaction in which other valuables are seized. Taking the car might even be an afterthought or a mechanism to prevent the victim from giving chase.

Motives for carjacking also vary significantly. And it is perhaps here where carjacking has the most synergy with motor vehicle theft. Like motor vehicle theft (Copes 2003, Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2019a), carjackings may be committed to further some other crime (Morewitz 2019) or they may unfold as a way to escape immediate danger (Topalli & Wright 2004). Like motor vehicle theft (Cherbonneau & Jacobs 2015, Copes 2003), carjacking may be enacted for thrills or even as a social control device to teach others a lesson (Jacobs et al. 2003). Because on their face, motor vehicles carry obvious monetary value, money is perhaps the most prominent motive in both crimes (Copes & Cherbonneau 2014, Topalli & Wright 2004). Vehicles might even be stolen (Copes 2003) or carjacked (Jacobs et al. 2003) for valuable parts and accessories for use in offenders’ own vehicles.

Like motor vehicle theft (Copes 2003, Copes & Cherbonneau 2014), and especially robbery in general (Wright & Decker 1997), carjacking is nested within the broader pursuit of hedonic action (Cesar & Decker 2017, Jacobs et al. 2003, Topalli & Wright 2004). Hedonic action (drinking, drugging, gambling, and clubbing) is expensive and creates pressing needs for fast cash (Wright & Decker 1994). Emerging deficits often cannot be remedied, or remedied fast enough, through legal work, borrowing, or even other (slower) forms of crime like burglary and drug dealing (Jacobs & Wright 1999). Like regular robbery, carjacking is a “proximate and performable” offense (Lofland 1969, Wright & Decker 1997) that has the potential to net rewards quickly, with few complications—although, like motor vehicle theft, extracting monetary proceeds from carjacked vehicles can incur delays in some circumstances (e.g., a buyer is not immediately available; parts must be stripped).

in death, up to life in prison). In 1994, the federal carjacking statute was revised in two significant ways: to include the death penalty as a sentencing option in carjackings resulting in death and to remove and replace the legal requirement of a defendant possessing a firearm with the less restrictive requirement of finding that the defendant intended to cause serious bodily harm or death to the victim.

²Both the James (2017) study as well as a study by Davis (2003), which we cite elsewhere, examine carjacking in South Africa; other research (e.g., Felson et al. 2022, Young & Borzycki 2008) comes from Brazil and Australia. Carjacking is not unique to the United States and putatively occurs anywhere that motor vehicles operate and provide an opportunity structure. The paucity of research on carjacking in general, and of international accounts of carjacking in particular, preclude us from making cross-national comparisons.

Regardless of how it unfolds or the etiological forces that inspire it, carjacking is not regular (i.e., noncontact) motor vehicle theft. It involves direct victim confrontation and transactional violence (Copes et al. 2012) that requires cooperative action between victim and offender—coercive as this cooperative transaction may be (Luckenbill 1981). This transaction evolves through distinct stages—copresence, contingent threat, goods transfer, and escape—and it is the offender’s job to move the victim efficiently through these phases to secure the vehicle quickly.

The generic robbery transaction has long been a focus of criminological research. Scholars have studied it in numerous settings and circumstances—from street muggings and commercial robberies to bank heists and drug rip-offs (Contreras 2012, Desroches 2002, Gill 2000, Jacobs 2000, Lejeune 1977, Lindegaard et al. 2018, Luckenbill 1981, Paes-Machado & Viodres-Inoue 2017, Wright & Decker 1997). How transactional violence operates in carjacking has increasingly become an empirical focus in its own right—with research focusing on compliance-generation techniques, spatial aspects of crime commission decisions, expertise in decision-making, choice structuring properties of the offense, and the conceptual implications of these choices for decision-making theory (Copes et al. 2012; Jacobs 2012, 2013; Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2018, 2019b; Topalli et al. 2015)—a set of matters we examine below.

Historically, carjacking has not been a major contributor to robbery totals in the United States. Estimates from the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) suggest that traditional robberies outnumber carjackings by approximately 15 to 1 (Klaus 2004). But these are only estimates. Carjacking is not counted separately from robbery in national databases like Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) or the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). States occasionally provide data on the offense, but the reports are time-bound and geographically limited. The New Jersey State Police, for example, formed a statewide carjacking task force that provided annual carjacking data (including prevalence and victim, offender, and event characteristics) but only for that state and only up to 2016 (N. J. Dep. Law Public Saf. 2017), and Maryland offered more up-to-date coverage with relatively easy access to carjacking statistics by treating it as a separate offense in their UCR database. It is possible to generate city-level carjacking data in some jurisdictions,³ but doing so is not easy for the untrained researcher. Although qualitative data from offender samples provide a rich source of empirical information, these data provide few insights into the crime’s scope or prevalence. As Lersch (2017, p. 34) concludes of this state of affairs, “the lack of valid, consistent data on the occurrence of carjackings is somewhat surprising given the severity of the crime.”

What we do know quantitatively about this offense has largely come from a small number of research briefs compiled by the BJS (Klaus 1999, 2004; Rand 1994); these reports use the NCVS to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of carjacking incidents in the United States on a periodic basis (i.e., 1987–1992, 1992–1996, and 1993–2002). A profile of carjacking in the United States can also be gleaned from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), although to our knowledge no one has assembled these data to do so.

Carjacking Victims, Offenders, and Incident Characteristics

The FBI defines and counts carjacking as a form of robbery in the UCR Summary System and has continued this practice with its implementation of NIBRS—a supplement to the UCR that

³The Chicago Police Department is one example, where carjacking incidents from 2001 can be accessed through a public database with Illinois Uniform Crime Report (IUCR) code 0325 for “Vehicular Hijacking” and IUCR code 0326 for “Aggravated Vehicular Hijacking.” The Dallas Police Department also recently began classifying carjacking separately from robbery (Nickeas & Krishnakumar 2022).

provides incident-level data for every crime reported regardless of the Hierarchy Rule and is scheduled to replace the UCR Summary System altogether. This means that although carjacking cannot be assessed directly under either program, it can be examined indirectly in NIBRS by logically parsing such offenses from overall robbery counts using specific indicators of robbery events—namely the robbery of a motor vehicle. This possibility is recognized by the way the FBI distinguishes carjacking as a form of armed robbery instead of motor vehicle theft in its data collection guidelines for the UCR and NIBRS: “Carjackings are robbery offenses in which a motor vehicle is taken through force or threat of force. In such cases, following the Hierarchy Rule, agencies must report only a robbery, not a motor vehicle theft” (FBI 2004, p. 21) and include “the type of vehicle taken (automobile, truck, etc.) identified in the property description” (FBI 2021, p. 37). Because the FBI (2004) classifies a motor vehicle theft as the (nonforceful) theft of a motor vehicle inclusive of automobiles, buses, recreational vehicles, trucks, and other motor vehicles (e.g., motorcycles, mopeds, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles), for our purposes, we define carjacking as robberies in which the property taken was one of these five types of motor vehicles.⁴

Our descriptive account of carjacking merges 10 years of NIBRS extract data (2007–2016) (NACJD 2021).⁵ We began by identifying all cases in which a robbery was one of the three most serious crimes recorded in the incident and then used the property description criteria to identify all robbery incidents where one of the five types of motor vehicles listed above was taken. Specifically, there were 749,453 total robbery incidents (both co-occurring with other crimes and not co-occurring) from 2007 to 2016, and of these incidents, 41,424 were completed⁶ carjackings (or 5.53% of total NIBRS robberies, which corroborates the 15-to-1 annual robbery-to-carjacking estimate provided by the BJS) (Klaus 2004).

Using these data, we begin by examining completed carjacking incidents and the degree to which they co-occur with other crimes. As shown in **Table 1**, of the 41,424 completed carjacking incidents in NIBRS from 2007 to 2016, 9,420 carjacking incidents co-occurred with one or more other crimes, while 32,004 carjacking incidents co-occurred with no other crime. In terms of the types of crimes with which carjackings co-occur, 2,141 incidents involved one or more crimes that were more serious (per the Hierarchy Rule) than the carjacking itself (e.g., murder, kidnapping, rape). And within these 2,141 incidents, a total of 2,254 more serious co-occurring crimes were committed alongside a carjacking. Kidnappings and abductions were the most common

⁴Finer distinctions are possible based on victim types and/or victim–offender relationships. For example, robberies of motor vehicles might be limited to incidents involving individuals (thereby excluding businesses or financial institutions) and/or incidents in which the offender(s) and victim(s) were strangers. On these matters, we opted to be more inclusive than exclusive because NIBRS includes victim information regardless of victim type (e.g., that of the cashier during a convenience store robbery) and because of the large number of NIBRS cases in which the relationship between victims and offenders is classified as unknown—even though many such cases likely involve a stranger relationship.

⁵We used the most recent NIBRS extract data that were publicly available as of July 2021. Ten separate data sets were merged, including the ICPSR37066 data set (NACJD 2021) as well as the ICPSR36851, ICPSR36421, ICPSR36121, ICPSR35036, ICPSR34603, ICPSR33601, ICPSR32562, ICPSR27741, and ICPSR25341 data sets. NIBRS extract files consolidate individual victim, offender, offense, property, and arrestee segments into a single incident-level file that includes information on only up to the three most serious crimes recorded per incident and up to three victims, offenders, types of property, and individuals arrested per incident.

⁶The NIBRS extract files we are using record only a description of the property taken when the offense was classified as completed. Therefore, we cannot distinguish analytically between attempted and completed carjackings, as there are no attempted “takings” of motor vehicles recorded in NIBRS. At any rate, only a small portion (11.4%) of the total robberies ($n = 749,453$) in our combined data set is classified as attempted robberies.

Table 1 Carjacking incidents and crimes in co-occurring incidents by relative crime seriousness, 2007–2016 (NIBRS)^a

Carjacking incidents	Carjacking incidents		Co-occurring crimes				All co-occurring crimes	
			More serious		Less serious			
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent ^b	Frequency	Percent ^b
Carjacking (all co-occurring)	9,420	22.7	—	—	—	—	—	—
With more serious co-occurring crime(s)	2,141	5.2	—	—	—	—	—	—
With less serious co-occurring crime(s)	7,279	17.6	—	—	—	—	—	—
Carjacking (non-co-occurring)	32,004	77.3	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total incidents	41,424	NA	—	NA	—	NA	—	NA
Crimes in co-occurring incidents								
Murder	—	—	122	5.4	—	—	122	1.0
Kidnapping/abduction	—	—	1,893	84.0	—	—	1,893	16.2
Sexual offenses (forcible)	—	—	239	10.6	—	—	239	2.0
Assault offenses	—	—	—	—	1,094	11.6	1,094	9.4
Burglary	—	—	—	—	728	7.7	728	6.2
Larceny/theft offenses	—	—	—	—	207	2.2	207	1.8
Motor vehicle theft	—	—	—	—	1,735	18.4	1,735	14.8
Property destruction/damage	—	—	—	—	2,998	31.7	2,998	25.6
Drug/narcotic offenses	—	—	—	—	566	6.0	566	4.8
Weapon law violations	—	—	—	—	1,346	14.3	1,346	11.5
Other offenses	—	—	—	—	770	8.2	770	6.6
Total co-occurring crimes	—	NA	2,254	NA	9,444	NA	11,698	NA

^aIncidents include completed carjackings only.

^bColumn does not add to 100% due to rounding.

Abbreviations: NA, not applicable, NIBRS, National Incident-Based Reporting System.

co-occurring serious offenses ($n = 1,893$, or 84% of all more serious co-occurring incidents) followed by sexual offenses (i.e., rape, sodomy) ($n = 239$; 10.6%). Fatal carjackings were the least frequent among serious co-occurring incidents, with 122 carjackings that resulted in murder—or 5.4% of all co-occurring more serious carjacking incidents and 1% of all co-occurring carjacking incidents regardless of crime seriousness. Meanwhile, among the 7,279 co-occurring incidents that involved one or more less serious crimes (per the Hierarchy Rule), property destruction/damage (likely done to the carjacked vehicle itself) was the most frequent less serious co-occurring offense (31.7%) and the most frequent co-occurring crime in co-occurring incidents overall (25.6%).

Table 2 shows characteristics (frequency and percent) of carjacking victim, offender, and event dynamics for completed offenses reported to NIBRS between 2007 and 2016. Comparable NCVS data published (when possible) in the most up-to-date carjacking reports are also shown in the far-right column for reference. Unlike **Table 1**, which considered all NIBRS carjackings that were the first, second, or third most serious crime in both co-occurring and non-co-occurring incidents, the analysis presented in **Table 2** is limited to all robberies of motor vehicles that do not co-occur with any crime per the Hierarchy Rule ($n = 32,004$ incidents) and robberies of motor vehicles that co-occur with one or more less serious offenses (e.g., aggravated/simple assault, destruction

Table 2 NIBRS victim, offender, and event characteristics for completed carjacking incidents (2007–2016) and NCVS total carjacking incidents (1993–2002)

Victim, offender, and event characteristics	Completed carjackings NIBRS 2007–2016		Completed and attempted carjackings, NCVS 1993–2002
	Frequency	Percent	Percent
Victim characteristics^a			
<i>Number of victims</i>			
One victim	27,005	72.7	90.0
Two or more victims	10,155	27.3	10.0
<i>Victim age^b</i>			
Under 25	13,507	29.0	22.5
25 to 49	24,484	52.6	67.1
50 or older	8,107	17.4	10.4
Unknown	433	0.9	—
<i>Victim gender^b</i>			
Female	15,252	32.9	39.8
Male	31,171	67.1	60.2
<i>Victim race^b</i>			
White	21,666	47.7	68.2
Black	23,002	50.6	28.7
Other race	786	1.7	3.1
Offender characteristics^a			
<i>Co-offending</i>			
One offender	19,102	51.4	44.0
Two or more offenders	18,058	48.6	56.0
<i>Offender age^c</i>			
Under 21	18,403	29.4	22.0
21 to 29	17,033	27.2	53.0
30 or older	9,238	14.7	10.0
Unknown	18,031	28.8	15.0
<i>Offender gender</i>			
Female	5,046	7.2	3.0
Male	58,946	84.3	93.0
Unknown	5,941	8.5	—
<i>Offender race</i>			
White	11,152	17.8	21.0
Black	44,380	70.8	56.0
Other race	297	0.5	16.0
Unknown	6,876	11.0	7.0
Event characteristics			
<i>Victim–offender relationships^{d,e}</i>			
Unknown relationship	36,514	47.6	5.7
Known relationship	40,141	52.4	94.3
Stranger	30,519	76.0	75.9
Intimates	1,345	3.4	10.6
Other relatives	557	1.4	4.7
Other known to victim	7,720	19.2	8.8

(Continued)

Table 2 (Continued)

Victim, offender, and event characteristics	Completed carjackings NIBRS 2007–2016		Completed and attempted carjackings, NCVS 1993–2002
	Frequency	Percent	Percent
<i>Weapon</i>			
Offender was unarmed	2,159	5.8	26.0
Faced an armed offender	35,001	94.2	74.0
Firearm	21,775	62.2	45.0
Knife	1,965	5.6	11.0
Personal (hands, feet)	7,827	22.4	—
Other or unknown	3,434	9.8	18.0
<i>Victim injury</i>			
Not injured	26,211	72.9	76.0
Injured	9,764	27.1	24.0
Minor injury	7,918	81.1	15.0
Serious injury	1,846	18.9	9.0
<i>Location of offense</i>			
Residence/home	6,776	18.2	17.0
Commercial place/parking lot	11,730	31.6	24.0
Open area/public transportation	17,301	46.6	44.0
Other	1,353	3.6	15.0
<i>Time of offense</i>			
Day (6:00 AM–5:59 PM)	11,401	31.3	32.0
Night (6:00 PM–5:59 AM)	25,066	68.7	68.0

^aNIBRS victim and offender data for age, gender, and race combine characteristics from up to three victims and three offenders per incident.

^bNCVS victim age, race, and gender are based on analysis of carjackings between 1992 and 1996 (Klaus 1999, supplemental table TB1CJ).

^cNCVS offender age is based on completed carjackings between 1987 and 1992 (Rand 1994).

^dNIBRS victim–offender relationship data combine relationships for up to three victims and three offenders per incident.

^eNCVS victim–offender relationship is based on an analysis of carjackings between 1992 and 1996 (Klaus 1999, supplemental table RELCJ).

Abbreviations: NCVS, National Crime Victimization Survey; NIBRS, National Incident-Based Reporting System.

of stolen property, drug or weapon offenses; $n = 5,421$), except for burglary and regular motor vehicle theft,⁷ for a total of 37,435 carjacking incidents.

As shown, the majority of carjacking incidents reported to NIBRS involve single victims (73%) who are between 25 and 49 years old (52.3%) or younger than 25 (29%) and male (67.1%) but

⁷We exclude both property offenses because the description of the “property stolen” variables we used to logically separate carjackings from regular robberies in the incident-level NIBRS extract files does not allow users to distinguish which property (up to three recorded per incident) is associated with which offense in co-occurring incidents. Therefore, it is not possible to determine whether a motor vehicle reported stolen during a co-occurring robbery and burglary incident was acquired in pursuit of the former or the latter (same as in the case of robbery and motor vehicle theft). Although we have reason to believe, based on an exploratory analysis of other crime event variables in NIBRS, that many of these excluded cases are indeed carjackings, we cannot be sure without a direct measure of carjacking based on the original incident report or more precise offense-specific indicators of NIBRS’s property stolen variables and therefore chose to exclude co-occurring burglary and regular motor vehicle theft incidents from our analysis in Table 2. Likewise, readers should also be mindful of this limitation when interpreting carjacking’s co-occurrence with burglary or motor vehicle theft in Table 1.

who are no more likely to be Black (50.6%) than White (47.7%)—which differs from the NCVS [a higher degree of victimization was reported among Whites (68.2%) than Blacks (28.7%) in carjackings between 1992 and 1996] (Klaus 1999, supplemental table TB1CJ). Turning to the offenders, incidents with single or multiple offenders are generally split at 51.4% and 48.6%, respectively; multiple-offender incidents with two or more offenders are more common than multiple-victim carjacking incidents. As for gender and race, carjacking is committed predominantly by men (84.3%) and by Black offenders (70.8%) compared to White offenders (17.8%). Not surprisingly, carjackers are more likely to be younger than older, with 27.2% between 21 and 29 years old and 29.4% of offenders reportedly under 21 years old. When instances in which the age of the offender was unknown (28.8%) are removed, the prominence of young carjackers is more telling, with offenders under age 21 accounting for 41.2% of offenders and those between 21 and 29 years old for 38.1%.

As for event characteristics, information about the victim–offender relationship for up to three victims and three offenders is available in NIBRS extract files; among all such individuals where the relationship was known (52.4% of cases), victims and offenders were more likely to be strangers (76%), with acquaintances being the second most common relationship recorded (19.2%). As with robbery in general, weapon use is inherent in carjacking, wherein 94% of victims faced an armed offender who, in a majority of cases involving weapons, used a firearm (62.2%), on-person weapons (i.e., hands or feet; 22.4%), or some other weapon (e.g., a blunt object or motor vehicle; 9.8%). Despite the ubiquity of weapons, it appears that offenders mostly used them to convey a credible threat, as injury was infrequent and typically minor: Only 27.1% of victims in single-victim carjackings or first victims in multiple-victim incidents ($n = 9,764$) were injured, and only 18.9% reported serious injury such as broken bones, internal injuries, or severe lacerations. As a final event indicator, temporal and geographic patterns of carjacking suggest that the majority of incidents took place during the nighttime, in open areas away from residential places [such as on the street or highway or near public transportation (46.6%), or in a parking lot and/or near a retail or commercial establishment (31.6%)]. Comparatively fewer carjackings occurred in residential areas or near the victim’s home (18.2%), although it would be interesting to see whether the pandemic has caused a material change in this pattern when those data become available.

Youthful Involvement in Motor Vehicle Crime and the Allure of Carjacking

Motor vehicle theft in general has historically been a crime of the young, and the NIBRS and NCVS data suggest this of carjacking as well.⁸ Seventy years ago, Hall (1952) observed that the majority of motor vehicle thefts reported each year were the work of young males, many of whom did it for thrills. “Youth with its desire to ride in an automobile,” Hall (1952, p. 249) commented, “is the constant and most important single factor in large-scale automobile theft.” Little has changed in seven decades, and young offenders continue to steal for excitement and to show off (Anderson & Linden 2014, Fleming 1999, Lopez 2008). Their misdeeds need not be protracted to garner such expressive rewards, as vehicles typically are appropriated for only a short period and hastily abandoned. At its core, joyriding “expresses the attitudes of the young, especially those who feel deprived of a common pleasure” (Hall 1952, p. 256). As McCaghy et al. (1977, p. 378) cogently observed, “the car is not stolen for what it does, but for what it means.”

Stealing to joyride, however, is no longer so easy. Today’s automobiles have considerably hardened as targets, and auto thefts were in a state of decline prior to the pandemic (Farrell et al.

⁸NIBRS arrest statistics regarding the age of those arrested corroborate this even more so than the victim self-reports of offenders’ age reported in **Table 2**. Among the 13,236 individuals arrested for carjacking from 2007 to 2016, 67.5% ($n = 8,929$) were 25 years old or under.

2011). They routinely require computer chips, electronic keys, and/or proximity readers to get them started and moving. The flimsy plastic ignition columns of old—with simple ignition wires to cross right beneath the surface or ignition switches that can be manipulated into starting the vehicle manually—have given way to sleek, digital, and virtually tamperproof platforms. Many of today's automobiles do not even have an ignition port into which to plunge a screwdriver—the modal way to “hot-wire” a car in years gone past. This is to say nothing of the blaring alarm that will likely greet offenders before they even get the chance to get the car started. Such obstacles can deter even the most proficient auto thieves, and young offenders are not necessarily proficient (Light et al. 1993, Mullins & Cherbonneau 2011).

Carjacking is simple to commit: Brandish a weapon, threaten the victim, seize the car, and drive it away. Ease of effort increases the potential attraction of crime (Clarke & Eck 2005) while providing rewards net of the actual car. And taking something of value by force or threat of force can be reinforcing in its own right (Jacobs 2000). Criminologists have long observed that crime is as much about process as outcome (Katz 1988), and carjacking is no exception. Research on offenses ranging from shoplifting and graffiti-tagging to motor vehicle theft, burglary, and drug robbery underscores the sensual allure of crime (Cromwell et al. 1999, Jacobs 2000, Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2019a, Lofland 1969, Sanders 2005, Wright & Decker 1994). Carjacking may be particularly evocative of this potential. Cesar & Decker (2017, p. 617) recognized this possibility when they questioned the presumed economic primacy of the carjacking motive. “If fast cash is the primary goal of a street robbery,” they asked rhetorically, “why rob someone inside what amounts to a mobile fortress?” They continued (Cesar & Decker 2017, pp. 617–18):

Even granting that a need for cash is a primary motivator for carjacking and other street crimes, what role might a sense of challenge [citation omitted] or an existential desire for transcendence . . . play in the decision to carjack someone? . . . [Carjacking] is a risky street crime that affords perpetrators high levels of excitement and results in potent development and maintenance of status as a “badass” [citations omitted]. . . [It is] a predatory act at the apex of violent criminality. . . .

Carjacking may well represent an emerging form of edgework (Lyng 1990)—particularly among younger offenders seeking fearsome reputations by “going for bad” (Anderson 1999). Such efforts are especially applicable in the current social media era where attention has become the currency of interpersonal exchange. Unremarkably, young carjackers have been known to film their criminal activity, boast about it, and post it for “likes.” One law enforcement source commented that “young people steal cars so they can post videos online speeding in the stolen vehicles and evading police in order to impress friends” (Byrne 2021). Another police source likened youthful carjacking to a twisted form of competition: “You’ll have one of them post that they got a Lexus, and then the other responds and say he stole a Mercedes. It is almost like a game, where they want to one up each other” (Norman 2018). Or, as a third source put it, “We think they have been making somewhat of a spectacle or game at keeping score outta something like this” (Reid 2022). Florida carjacker Kevin Gaines was caught by police after livestreaming some of his crime-related exploits on Instagram (Gearty 2019).

All these dynamics are seemingly nested within a vortex of concentrated disadvantage. Disadvantage—and the desperation it breeds—is what often causes predatory violence like carjacking to be a feasible action alternative in the first place. And what might start out as something novel or fun or thrilling can readily mutate into something different when offenders realize what they are stealing: a mobile bank vault that can be sold whole or chopped into parts while boasting accessory items (high-end audio systems, state-of-the-art video technology, and performance rims) that can be monetized separately. Auto thieves have long transitioned from stealing for thrills to stealing for money as they progressed in their criminal careers (Cherbonneau & Wright 2009),

and carjacking is no exception. In that transition lies the realization that the competence of a “badass” (Cesar & Decker 2017, Katz 1988) requires considerable—and calculated—attention to the structure and process of the offense.

THE STRUCTURE AND PROCESS OF CARJACKING

Much of the research on robbery in general, and on carjacking in particular, has focused on the structure and process of the offense and, more specifically, on how offenders manage setting and circumstance to maximize the speed, efficiency, and probability of compliance. Carjacking may be brazen, but it is not necessarily reckless. A litany of studies has examined the method and manner of this crime and, in the main, found it to be reasonably contemplative despite its phenomenological undertones (Cesar & Decker 2017).

Carjacking evolves through four distinct phases: copresence, contingent threat, goods transfer, and escape (Luckenbill 1981). Copresence requires that offenders get close to victims without spooking them. Offenders then levy contingent threats to make it clear that a crime is underway and that noncompliance will result in severe consequences. Goods transfer and escape are more or less coterminous, as offenders seize the vehicle and take flight as soon as that happens. Qualitative research has been invaluable in unearthing the interactional processes by which carjackers move through these phases (Copes et al. 2012; Davis 2003; Jacobs 2012, 2013; Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2019b; Topalli et al. 2015).

No phase is more consequential than copresence because mistakes here can end the offense before it begins. “For carjacking to work,” Jacobs (2012, p. 475) explains, “offenders must become proximate to victims without alerting them first and providing them a chance to skirt the encounter.” Copes et al. (2012, p. 257) similarly observe that offenders must “establish copresence with victims in a way that [does] not allow their prey foresight into what [is] coming” and that “failure to achieve and maintain control of the scene could give victims an opening to escape or mount an effective defense” (Copes et al. 2012, p. 254).

Research has identified two principal modalities for establishing copresence: normalcy illusions and blitzes. In the former, offenders engage in some mundane overture—asking for the time, directions, or a cigarette—to get close to the target without raising his or her suspicion. The blitz, by contrast, leverages shock and awe to entrap the victim by rushing him or her. Unlike the normalcy illusion, blitzes merge the crime’s announcement and approach into one motion (Jacobs 2012; see also Copes et al. 2012).

Amid these undertakings, offenders appear to be sensitive to the prospect of being seen by third parties. That prospect is consequential given that carjacking, as noted above, is typically committed in the public realm (Klaus 2004), often on streets or in parking lots where the specter of natural surveillance is high (Miethe & Sousa 2010). Concern about natural surveillance encourages offenders to rely on decision-making protocols that reduce the perceived risk of discovery. Jacobs & Cherbonneau (2019b) identified three such protocols: isolation (i.e., confronting the victim in a secluded area), speed (i.e., enacting the offense rapidly), and exploiting audience indifference (i.e., enacting the crime in places where spectators are not inclined to intervene). They note that isolation permits (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2019b, p. 42)

Offenders to overcome natural surveillance by leveraging the insularity of secluded enactment settings while enacting their crime; speed [embraces] natural surveillance but [weakens] its strength by precluding audiences from becoming “wise” (Goffman 1963) to what the offenders really were doing; exploitation of audience indifference [allows] offenders to create a spatio-temporal “bubble” within which to enact the crime worry-free—a function of bystander apathy that offenders defined situationally.

Offender sensitivity to specific crime commission protocols extends to the way in which they manipulate fear to maximize the probability of compliance. Decision-making research (Copes et al. 2012, Jacobs 2013, Topalli et al. 2015) suggests that offenders address the significance of fear both before and during the offense. Pre-offense tactics include targeting individuals who are perceived to be weak (Copes et al. 2012, Davis 2003). Jacobs (2013, p. 531) explains that some offenders single out what they call “scary” victims, which sounds at first like the opposite of “weak,” until one adjusts for the inverted sociocultural referents of the offender’s milieu. In “street culture, scary has the opposite of its traditional, middle-class meaning. On the street, scary denotes someone who betrays fear rather than instills it. To be scary is to be vulnerable, and to be vulnerable is to invite victimization. . . .” Vulnerable victims are those least likely to resist and who may be only marginally streetwise. Such victims are perceived to be easy marks and can trigger an offense irrespective of some urgent need to steal a vehicle.

But the robbery literature also reveals that fear must be manipulated within the actual crime commission sequence to maximize the speed and probability of compliance (Luckenbill 1981). This is especially true given that carjackings frequently occur in high-crime areas where would-be victims may be vested in a street code that instructs them not to give up their possessions without a fight (see, for example, Lindegaard et al. 2015). Offenders must recognize the potential for victim recalcitrance and respond in real-time with increasing increments of force, as one active carjacker illustrates when a streetwise drug dealer resisted him (Jacobs 2013, p. 534):

I ran up over there, put the gun to his head, asked him if he was going to get out or die. . . . He was steady bullshitting, time was steady ticking. He bullshitting. . . . Don’t want to get out. I’m gonna make him get out. [H]e tried to spin off with it so now I’m. . . tussling with him. I dropped my gun on his lap. I had to pick the gun up, right? So we still tussling and everything. . . . So I grabbed the gun and put it to his throat. I asked him, you know, “So what you gonna do? Is you gonna die or give up this car?” He don’t want to give up his car, right. So I cocked it one time, you know, just to let him know I wasn’t playing, you dig? Shot him in the leg. . . . Boom. Shot him on his leg. He got out the car. I opened the door and pushed him out. Drove off. . . . But before I drove off I backed up, ran over him I think on the ankles like. . . . I hear bones break, like all this down here [indicating] was just crushed.

As with all robberies, however, too much force threatens to promote panic and undermine the offense altogether (Luckenbill 1981, Wright & Decker 1997). This outcome may be especially likely if the victim believes she/he is about to be killed rather than “just” carjacked. Data provided by the BJS seem to bear this out—finding that a full 67% of victims resist despite confronting an armed attacker 74% of the time (almost half of whom reportedly have a firearm) (Klaus 2004). The 2021 high-profile carjacking and murder of retired Chicago firefighter Dwain Williams provides a tragic example of the paradox. Walking to his vehicle after leaving a local popcorn shop, Williams was confronted by three assailants, two of whom were armed. Williams reflexively produced his own firearm, igniting a firefight in which he ultimately was killed. Everything happened in broad daylight, in full view of surveillance cameras and anyone else who happened to be passing by (ABC 7 Chic. Digit. Team 2021).

Carjacking deaths, however, do appear to be rare, likely because of the tactics offenders use to establish copresence and generate compliance. Despite the presence of both firearms and victim resistance, the aforementioned BJS carjacking study from 1993 to 2002 reveals that only 1% of victims are injured to the point of requiring hospitalization, and few are killed (Klaus 2004). The NIBRS data referenced above corroborate the rarity of lethal violence in carjacking, as do more recent data on robbery in general. UCR data suggest that just one-fifth of 1% of robberies result in murder (FBI 2020), which is corroborated by robbery-homicides in our NIBRS series from 2007 to 2016, wherein 1,231 of the 749,453 total robberies, or 0.16%, were fatal. Lethal outcomes in carjackings are consistent with this trend.

The spatial patterning of carjacking may have something to do with this. Risk terrain modeling (Lersch 2017)—a methodological technique that nests spatial characteristics of crime sites within a broader geographic quilt—suggests that carjackings are concentrated in particular street nodes where victims can be easily trapped. Gas stations, convenience stores, bus stops, liquor stores, and restaurants are prominent in this regard (Felson et al. 2022, James 2017, Lersch 2017). Such patterns are supported by qualitative research among active offenders, who explain how, where, and why they like to trap victims (see, for example, Jacobs 2012). Related research finds that carjackings are more likely to occur in and around short blocks and street corners (Felson et al. 2022) and in certain residential areas (Davis 2003). Such venues permit offenders to approach victims as they enter and exit their vehicles—a situated vulnerability that prohibits easy escape. Carjackers seem to realize that mobile victims (i.e., those already in their cars with the engine on) can use their vehicles as weapons and shields—something even a 12-year-old DC-area assailant and an accomplice learned after just their third attempt in a 2021 spree (Wainman 2021):

Police said the first incident happened at approximately 6:29 pm in the 1900 block of Second Street NE. According to the police report, the victim told police he was an Empower rideshare driver and was picking up a customer. When he arrived, two males told him to drive into the alley. When he told them no, one of the suspects pointed a gun at him and told him to get out of the car, the police report said. The other suspect grabbed the driver's phone before the victim was able to escape and drive away down Second Street NE. Around 7:15 pm, police said another victim reported that he responded to 311 V Street NE for a rideshare request. The police report says both suspects approached the car on the passenger side, and one suspect opened the front door, pointed a gun at the driver and demanded his keys. Police said the victim was able to drive away before anything more happened. . . . [A]t 7:24 pm a female delivery driver said she was returning to her car in the 300 block of V Street NE across from 311 V Street NE after making a delivery when the two males approached her and pointed a black gun at her. The suspects motioned for her to get out of the car, and when she did, both suspects got in the car and fled westbound on V Street NE towards Rhode Island Avenue.

CARJACKING AND OFFENDER DECISION-MAKING THEORY

The crime commission research presented above points to an uneasy coexistence between risk sensitivity and criminal propensity. Offenders recognize the importance of managing setting and circumstance to maximize the speed, efficiency, and success of the crime and are reasonably contemplative in how they go about doing it. Such sensitivity would not be expected given the nature of criminal propensity (e.g., low self-control) and how carjacking advances almost every one of its core dimensions (for an overview of these dimensions, see Grasmick et al. 1993). Paradoxically, almost none of these dimensions is, or should be, consistent with reasoned calculation.

Few crimes are more emblematic of risk-taking. Offenders confront a victim with unknown defensibility (Copes et al. 2012), typically within the confines of a two-ton vehicle that can be used as both a weapon and a shield. The offense frequently is an impulsive, spur-of-the-moment affair with little advance preparation or prequalification of targets (Bernhardt & Topalli 2016). The offense prioritizes self-centered, acutely predatory interests at someone else's expense. The offense is simple—make a threat, brandish a weapon, and get what you want—and is accomplished through brute physical force. Finally, the offense attracts participants who are frustration intolerant and perceptibly unable to solve their problems in more ordinary ways (see also Jacobs & Wright 1999).

Yet the crime commission research discussed above shows that sensitivity to risk infuses almost every stage of the offense—from copresence to fear manipulation to vehicle seizure. And what those studies do not tap—but other research does—is perhaps even more telling: Offenders appear to gravitate to carjacking in the first place (over nonviolent motor vehicle theft) because the outcome is more controllable relative to what they would face in “hot-wiring” an unattended car

parked on the street (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2018). Carjackers reportedly are averse to ambiguity and sensitive to risk and see violent motor vehicle theft as a way to manage both ambiguity and risk in ways that regular motor vehicle theft does not.⁹ By way of illustration, carjackers report concerns that they will be surprised and confronted by car owners if or when they break into a parked vehicle and try to get it started—a fear entirely neutralized by carjacking (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2018, p. 205–6):

[O]le boy [car owner] he could come up and “boom boom” shoot at you, people can shoot at you. You try to take their car, especially with the stuff they’ve put on, but if you do it so quick though and take their car by jacking, you know it’s easy ’cause you got them off guard, they don’t know what to do, they just like this, like that [motioning].

Carjackers also express concern about formal detection owing to the method and manner of non-violent motor vehicle theft—something they can avoid by using force to seize the vehicle quickly (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2018, p. 206):

... if you steal on the streets you have to break it down, worried about somebody coming, worried about the law. I mean there are just too many worries [with] just stealing a car when you can just take it. Why steal it when you can just take [jack] it?

No, you can’t do that [steal off the street], you can’t do that, you get caught up like that you trying breaking and stealing, police will come then. That’s when the police will come.... Somebody gonna call the police then.

Carjacking is a quick risk that is over in a flash (Felson 1987). And—as any reader who has made an imprudent left turn in front of oncoming traffic can tell you—large risks seem more manageable when their duration is fleeting. If nothing else, carjackers recognize the connection between duration of exposure and threat. This connection is understood by other serious offenders in other contexts and reflects risk sensitivity (Jacobs 2010a). Emerging research suggests that criminal embeddedness and risk sensitivity may even vary directly (see, for example, Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2018, Pogarsky 2007, Thomas et al. 2013, Wikström et al. 2011, Wright et al. 2004). The fact that discrete carjackings may be motivated by impulse or thrills or desperation does not make them insensitive to risk. Hot affect and cool rationality can coexist (Cesar & Decker 2017), and it is this coexistence that speaks to the broader reconciliation between fast and slow decision-making (see, for example, Kahneman 2011) that is found in carjacking more generally.

Efficient yet measured decision-making is precisely what allows calculation to transition so seamlessly from impulse (Jacobs 2010a,b). The pace of this transition can be fast. Speed comes from automaticity—the recognition that certain cues signal vulnerability and that these cues must be exploited immediately, but strategically, lest one botch the opportunity (i.e., seize it wrongly) or lose it altogether. This capacity is often referred to as “alert opportunism” and was first recognized by Neal Shover (1971, p. 61) 50 years ago as a readiness for illicit action among persistent offenders. Researchers have subsequently advanced the concept in decision-making models of burglary (Bennett & Wright, 1984, Cromwell et al. 1991), carjacking (Topalli & Wright 2004, 2014), and motor vehicle theft (Copes & Cherbonneau 2006) to demonstrate offender motivation as an interplay among crime propensity, cue recognition, and emergent opportunity. In carjacking, the time-limited nature of opportunity coupled with the siren call of an attractive vehicle requires a lightning-fast conversion rate between cue recognition and action amid uncertainty. This transition has been widely reported in qualitative accounts of active carjackers and perfectly encapsulates the synergy between hot and cold decision-making as it relates to rapid decision-making under time pressure (Jacobs 2010b, p. 519):

⁹Decision-making research (Loughran et al. 2011) corroborates the idea that offenders who contemplate non-contact crime fear consequences when there is ambiguity about risk.

I was coming from the club and I was drunk and high. . .you know, everybody go to the East Side to go see girls and stuff, you know, meet girls. We was coming back to [town]. We was leaving [one place and] coming back in to [town]. We seen him [the eventual victim] on our way to [town]. We had seen him at a stoplight. It was like at night, real late at night, about 2:00 in the morning. He was just riding through and he stopped at a stoplight. I was like, man, I like that car, man and I love [the color] red. It [the idea to carjack] come in my head once I see the car. I say I want that and I'm gonna go get that. He [the victim] looked like a punk. I wanted to take the car from him you know so we went over there and took it. I already got what I need, a gun. . .ran up to him and put the gun to his head, "get out of the car." He got out of the car and we was up on him, we skirted off.

The transition from impulse to action must be fast given the spatiotemporal constraints of carjacking. Whereas a regular robbery victim "might be banked in a perceptual reservoir for future consideration. . . [citations omitted], a desirable car is there one minute and gone the next. Acting decisively can mean the difference between hitting a 'lick,' as offenders refer to it, or going home empty-handed" (Jacobs 2010b, p. 519). Offenders may not even be able to articulate what they are looking for and why but—akin to Justice Potter Stewart's famous quip about pornography—they know it when they see it. Criminal self-efficacy provides the scripts that place offending front of mind and move thought to action in a situationally calibrated way (Copes et al. 2012, Nee & Ward 2015; see also Topalli et al. 2015).

CARJACKING, DETERRENCE, AND PREVENTION

The speed with which offenders move from an unmotivated state to one in which they are determined to act certainly makes deterrence a grim prospect. The offense can also happen virtually anywhere cars and drivers happen to be, and almost no level of sanction threat can catch up with this level of portability of risk. Broad immersion in criminality makes matters worse by encouraging superoptimism and perceptions of invincibility (Walters 1990). For most offenders, the prospect of getting caught is a remote and improbable contingency (Shover 1996, p. 102).¹⁰

Paradoxically, threats of sanction may be the only thing to which committed offenders respond. The extralegal forces that inhibit most regular citizens from crime—shame, embarrassment, and social censure (Grasmick & Bursik 1990)—hold little sway among those bold enough to commit carjacking. This paradox becomes cruel when one considers how, among serious offenders, responsiveness to sanction threats can channel criminality rather than shut it down (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2018). Numerous studies within the restrictive deterrence tradition show the extent to which high-propensity offenders analyze risk in order to defeat it (Beauregard & Bouchard 2010; Cherbonneau & Copes 2006; Holt et al. 2009; Jacobs 1996; Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2014, 2018; see also Moeller et al. 2016). The decision-making research referenced in this very review demonstrates this. Carjackers choose vulnerable locations in which to commit their crimes. They manage setting and circumstance to minimize the probability of standing out. They control victim conduct to maximize the speed of compliance. They recognize the correlation between offense duration and detection risk. They gravitate to carjacking over regular motor vehicle theft because

¹⁰The vast majority of carjackers are never arrested for their crimes. That being said, the clearance rate for carjacking is substantially higher than it is for motor vehicle theft and more akin to what is observed in regular robbery. For example, despite its exceptionally high reporting rate, motor vehicle theft typically has one of the lowest clearance rates of all Part I crimes (Cherbonneau & Wright 2009); indeed, in 2019, only 13.8% of motor vehicle thefts were cleared by arrest or exceptional means (the lowest clearance rate of all Part I crimes for that year) (FBI 2020). An analysis of NIBRS data from 2007 to 2016 suggests that the clearance rate for carjacking (both co-occurring and non-co-occurring incidents) is 30.5%, whereas for all other robberies in NIBRS during this period it was 26.9%.

the risk is quicker and more controllable. When fear of sanction threats becomes a resource to commit crime with reduced risk of detection, deterrence is undermined, not enhanced.

The crime's phenomenological underpinnings make matters worse. Whereas purely economic crimes may be vulnerable to the inhibiting power of sanctions—they appeal to the utilitarian calculation of risks and rewards that lies at the heart of deterrence (Becker 1968)—phenomenologically infused offenses show less of this tendency. This is especially true of offenses committed on the spur of the moment by young offenders seeking to show off, kill time, seek thrills, or advance other criminal pursuits. Then there are the potential rewards from overcoming personal reservations about taking someone else's life into one's own hands. Such reservations are not trivial, even for serious violent offenders, and surmounting them promotes an additional source of reinforcement (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2019a). Few crimes permit offenders to demonstrate competence in a more powerful way, and in that demonstration lies a deeper potential source of motivation with which any sanction threat will have to contend.

Then, finally, there is the deterrent-sapping cognitive dissonance of not acting. That dissonance is especially germane given the time-limited nature of carjacking opportunities. Research on judgment and decision-making suggests that the prospect of missing out on a gain and/or experiencing a loss (referred to as “framing”) reduces deterrability (see, for example, Piquero et al. 2011, p. 351). Positive framing promotes risk-averse behavior as actors seek to lock in a gain. Negative framing promotes risk-seeking behavior as actors seek to avert a loss after coming into that gain (Kahneman 2011). Carjacking seems to activate both positive and negative framing, which is the worst possible combination for deterrence: It creates a strong situated commitment to crime (“I better act now lest I risk losing out on this fleeting/irretrievable opportunity right in front of me”) but also triggers the potential for genuinely desperate conduct on the back end (“I've done what I've done; now I need to do whatever I have to do to get away”).

This dual framing also muddies the distinction between risk and ambiguity that might otherwise deter offenders. Risk is the probability of something bad happening; ambiguity is the uncertainty surrounding that probability (Camerer & Weber 1992, Loughran et al. 2011). Ambiguity can make risk seem higher than it really is, which is the logic behind Sherman's (1990) notion of residual deterrence (irregular sanction threats make the probability of detection seem higher, creating a deterrent effect even when authorities are not around). But what if ambiguity encourages risk-taking? The brief exposure duration of carjacking makes sanction threats uncertain, if not downright improbable, and can encourage offenders to take chances (see Midgette et al. 2021). Offenders will be especially emboldened if they conceptualize loss aversion as not wanting to squander an attractive, time-limited opportunity as opposed to just not wanting to be caught on the back end for seizing it. Not locking in a perceptibly certain gain is in fact a loss if that same opportunity never again presents itself, and the serendipitous nature of carjacking opportunity (Jacobs 2010b) can threaten this state of affairs more often than not.

Each of these points speaks to the agentic role of offenders in the risk management process. The historic failure of analysts to recognize this role has led to a fundamental misspecification of deterrence itself because it assumes that risk perceptions are determined exogenously. Specifically, it presumes that “actors process available information from the decision-making context, estimate risk, and then decide whether or not to offend” (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2018, p. 214). But as the research outlined in this review makes clear, the relationship between actor and risk is interactive. Serious offenders size up risk to manage it, allowing them to alter the inputs that affect risk in real-time. Not only do these efforts change risk dynamically, but they do so at the very front of the deterrence funnel—the most consequential part. Sanction certainty, as Nagin (2013, p. 201) notes, flows from a series of conditional probabilities, including “the probability of apprehension given commission of a crime, the probability of prosecution given apprehension, the probability of

conviction given prosecution, and the probability of sanction given conviction.” But these downstream possibilities mean nothing if offenders obfuscate others’ awareness of what they are doing first and/or prevent victim reporting until long after the offense is over (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2019b). Without awareness there is no detection, without detection there is no apprehension, and without apprehension there is no prosecution or conviction. Crime enacted cagily and speedily, with sensitivity to who might be watching and when, does precisely that.

Ultimately, deterring carjacking may rest more squarely with the would-be victim than anything else. Criminology has historically underemphasized the victim’s role in the crime inhibition process. But, as Berg & Schreck (2022, p. 288) argue, “the target’s decision-making becomes a matter of importance potentially equal to that of the offender. The target—the potential victim—conceivably can affect all three basic requirements for crime: They can make themselves unattractive to offenders, can keep themselves or their belongings out of reach, and can take whatever action necessary to increase the difficulty and risk for the offender.” Cesar & Decker (2017, p. 626) advocate for “alert preventionism” in this regard; vigilance about where one is and what one is doing can thwart offenses before they begin by minimizing distractibility and providing exit strategies. That being said, vigilance is a skill that asks a lot of would-be victims, particularly those who are not streetwise. Vigilance is also cognitively draining and not always feasible or practical. Insofar as offenders meld their crimes into normal social intercourse, it may not even work. Would-be victims may also find themselves in the unenviable position of having to refuse mundane overtures from strangers or even fleeing from potential encounters proactively. Besides their corrosive influence on public life, such reactions can promote exactly what victims sought to avoid. Offenders, for example, may target someone precisely because that person treated them as if they were in fact threatening when they were not.¹¹ As Berg & Schreck (2022, p. 287) aptly observe, “cultural norms may endorse the view that acts representing defensive behavior to one group symbolize provocation to the other, leading to even worse outcomes.”

Enhancements in victim defensibility—through improved access to weaponry, for example—may not do much good either. Awareness of predatory intent usually comes only after victim entrapment, and as we have shown through the NIBRS data, carjackers typically have weapons of their own (see also Klaus 2004). As one offender crisply remarked of this phenomenon, “The ups beat the draw” (see Jacobs et al. 2003, p. 676). Technology may be a seductive solution, but remote kill switches and biometric ignition systems can unintentionally increase victim exposure to more serious violence or even abduction if or when offenders realize such measures exist and levy countermeasures of their own (Davis 2003).

CONCLUSION

The extraordinary rise in carjacking across the country in part motivated this review. The COVID pandemic upended societal routines and inverted the opportunity structures that underpin many offenses, resulting in wild fluctuations in crime types, not just carjacking (Rosenfeld & Lopez 2021). Generally, interpersonal crimes such as homicide and aggravated and gun assaults have remained significantly higher than their prepandemic levels (Rosenfeld & Lopez 2021). Contrary to these trends is robbery, which is down overall from prepandemic levels (Rosenfeld & Lopez 2021), but, curiously, carjacking (a subset of robbery counted in its totals) appears to have dramatically increased in many jurisdictions. Meanwhile, motor vehicle theft has significantly increased,

¹¹This insight is admittedly anecdotal, coming from the first author’s field-based experience with active offenders.

whereas other noncontact crimes such as burglary (both residential and nonresidential), larceny, and drug offenses have all decreased (Rosenfeld & Lopez 2021).

Lacking official data measuring the annual prevalence of carjacking, we do not know whether or how well carjacking and motor vehicle theft track one another over time. Motives for committing these crimes overlap and therefore appear to be substitutable offenses—what you can accomplish in carjacking can also be fulfilled through motor vehicle theft—but carjacking requires a willingness for violence that motor vehicle theft does not. The two crimes also have similar etiologies insofar as they attract younger offenders. Their mutual rise may be due to greater involvement by youth, or it may be due to displacement to other forms of violent and property crime, such that a limited supply of available robbery targets caused street/commercial robbers to pursue carjacking, whereas protected residences due to lockdowns and fewer commercial establishments open for business caused burglars, shoplifters, and other larcenists to switch to motor vehicle theft.

The challenge of recent but significant crime trends is the delay in scientific understanding when systematic data are lacking. Media sources provide much of what we know about carjacking's dramatic increase. But even if carjacking were categorized separately from robbery in official crime statistics, lags would still plague reporting and analysis in the absence of major changes to the manner in which valid and reliable crime indicators are compiled and disseminated (see, for example, Rosenfeld 2007). The same is true for NIBRS, which, like NCVS, permits analysts to isolate carjackings from other types of robbery incidents (imperfect as this procedure may be) but suffers from limited geographic and demographic coverage.¹² A recent National Academies of Sciences report underscores the need for modernizing crime measurement tools to identify data trends earlier, more accurately, and with greater granularity (Natl. Acad. Sci. 2018).

That granularity should also come from more, larger, and ongoing qualitative studies of active offenders—ideally, through ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic methods. Such studies could use a mediated ethnographic approach (Jacobs 2006) that leverages embedded fieldworkers with connections to the criminal underworld to provide real-time data. Wright & Decker's (1994, 1997) work with both active burglars and robbers showed the promise of this approach. Such designs can provide critical insights into the structure, process, and contingent forms of offending not necessarily tapped by quantitative data, which can in turn lead to refinements in quantitative data collection and measurement instruments (Maruna 2010).

Granular data from active offenders also promise to improve understanding of the black box of offender decision-making (Topalli et al. 2020). Much of what we know about the target selection and crime commission strategies of carjackers comes from a few authors in a few settings. Although these studies provide unparalleled depth of understanding, wider replicability is needed. Small, nonrandom, convenience samples should not be a deterrent to research, although that certainly depends on the nature of the research question. The parameters of the active offender population are unknown and not reasonably knowable (Glassner & Carpenter 1985), and generalizability applies more to conduct than to people. As Topalli et al. (2020, p. 204) explain:

When active offender research is carried out as a qualitative exercise, the external validity of the study is enhanced because the data obtained offer a better approximation of how offenders actually think and behave. Generalizability is to criminal behavior, not a population. Inductive analysis of the resultant data ensures the development of accurate and worthwhile theories and models of offending.

¹²Although the issue of geographic coverage should resolve itself once the FBI retires the UCR Summary System and fully implements NIBRS, the fact remains that there still will not be a direct measure of carjacking in any national crime statistics, limiting analytic rigor and overall confidence in measurement validity.

The point is that good data should not be the enemy of perfect data, and targeted samples can assist policy makers in developing timely responses. With regard to carjacking in particular, targeted samples would, paradoxically, benefit from the crime's atypicality relative to its rate of occurrence. Using force or threat of force to seize a vehicle from someone else makes up "less than one half of 1% (0.3%) of the estimated total of Part I crimes committed in the United States in a given year, making carjacking slightly less rare than homicide" (Jacobs & Cherbonneau 2019b, p. 45). Atypicality dramatically lowers the size of the sampling frame along with the number of respondents that require selection to represent it.¹³ Although efforts to find the right respondents may be considerable (hence the importance of using embedded fieldworkers) and inquiry with the ones selected exacting, the trade-off is worth it. Some of the most thought-provoking findings in all of social science are "obtained, not using statistical inference on large samples, but on small-N designs in which a large number of observations are made on a relatively small number of . . . participants" (Smith & Little 2018, p. 2084). Readers readily recognize that several of criminology's foundational studies—Shaw's (1930) *Jack-Roller* and Sutherland's (1937) *Professional Thief*, to name just two—are based on samples of one in which researchers smash the metaphorical atom (see Topalli et al. 2020). Saturation of key analytic themes can come in as few as 12 interviews (Guest et al. 2006). The decision-making research referenced in this very review demonstrates the value of granular data collected from a relatively small number of well-placed respondents who provide unrivaled insights into crime's structure and process.

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¹³We do not assume specialization in offending but simply point out that offenders-as-generalists infrequently commit carjacking, which would seem to permit surgical sampling with the help of embedded fieldworkers.

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