



Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

Federal Offenses and Offenders

Bank Robbery

Bank robbery is a potentially dangerous crime—offenses routinely involve a firearm and sometimes result in serious injury, kidnaping, or murder. It is an expensive crime—millions of dollars are stolen each year and much more is spent for private security and public law enforcement.¹ It is a flagrant crime—robberies are typically committed in full view of witnesses and are frequently recorded on videotape.

Even when violence is absent, bank robberies threaten innocent bystanders and the "victim impact" of the crime can be substantial. Bank employees and customers face grave threats, because as a group, bank robbers have extensive histories of prior arrests, convictions, drug abuse and antisocial behavior.

Unlike other crimes, bank robbery is always detected and almost always reported. According to FBI data for the years 1978 and 1979 combined, approximately two of every three reported bank robberies were cleared by arrest.² Investigations presented to U.S. Attorneys during 1979 more often than not resulted in prosecution in a Federal court (59%), and Federal prosecutions generally resulted in conviction (86%).³ Prison sentences

¹Estimates of loss vary between 25 and 47 million dollars per year in 1979. Source: *Uniform Crime Report* and unpublished semiannual tabulations provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

²"Cleared by arrest" means that evidence is sufficient to charge a suspect with a crime, although for technical reasons (generally relating to other existing outstanding charges), the offender may not in fact be charged.

³The rate of case acceptances at the Federal level understates the rate at which bank robbery cases are prosecuted because cases declined by the U.S.

August 1984

Rarely can one get a comprehensive look at the operation of a criminal justice system. Usually only a glimpse is available—of arrest, prosecution, sentencing or corrections. Earlier this year, a BJS bulletin provided a detailed analysis of drug law offenders and the processing of their cases through the Federal justice system. This bulletin provides a similarly detailed look at another serious crime, bank robbery.

Neither bulletin would have been possible without the availability of the integrated data base assembled by BJS from separate files provided by four

Federal justice agencies: the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, and the Bureau of Prisons. During the coming year, the BJS integrated Federal justice data base will be expanded to incorporate data from additional justice agencies and to reflect transactions over a longer period of time. Future BJS publications will address issues relevant to the Federal justice system utilizing this expanded data base.

Steven R. Schlesinger
Director

are lengthy—approximately 10 years on average.

Because the offense is pernicious and bank robbers frequently have extensive criminal records, such robbery has been of special concern to the Federal Government since the establishment in 1934 of programs providing Federal insurance for private deposits maintained in most of the nation's banks. Recently, the Attorney General's Task Force on Violent Crime has highlighted the problems associated with violent crimes including bank robbery. Additionally, the Law Enforcement Coordinating Committees were

Attorney may be referred to a local prosecutor. Bank robbery incidents investigated by the FBI are routinely presented to a U.S. Attorney.

created specifically to address the need for joint policies dealing with crimes, such as bank robbery, which fall within the jurisdiction of both Federal and State/local justice systems.

This bulletin summarizes statistical findings about Federal bank robberies. Data are derived from a recently established BJS integrated Federal justice data base that traces case processing from investigation through prosecution, adjudication, sentencing, and corrections. The integrated file focuses on criminal cases terminated in Federal District Courts during 1979, the most recent year for which reasonably complete correctional data could be expected to be available. Secondary analysis of other data sources was also conducted in order to provide a more

comprehensive review of bank robbery and robbers.⁴

Characteristics of bank robbery: An overview

Number of incidents. Prior to the 1960's, the FBI reported fewer than 500 bank robberies per year. This number jumped to over 2,300 bank robberies as of 1970. During the past decade, bank robberies have increased at a far higher rate (209%) than total robberies (42%). (Total robberies include bank and "nonbank" incidents at both the Federal and State level.) The number of incidents reported to the FBI remained relatively stable during the early 1970's, increasing gradually to slightly over 4,500 in 1976. A more dramatic change in the number of reported incidents occurred between 1978 (approximately 4,600) and 1979 (approximately 7,600)—an increase of approximately 65%. Minor increases occurred in 1980 and 1981 (about 8,000 incidents in each year) followed by a small decline (to about 7,000) in 1982. Bank robberies accounted for about 6% of all robberies of U.S. commercial establishments⁵ (and about 1.3% of all robberies) reported to Federal, State, and local authorities during 1982.⁶

Despite increases in the number of reported incidents, the number of bank robbery defendants against whom Federal cases were terminated, which peaked in 1976 (2,516 defendants) was significantly lower in 1979, (1,292 defendants); 1980 (1,329); 1981 (1,402) and 1982 (1,603).⁷

Nature of crime. According to presentence investigation reports, the majority of bank robberies appear to be unsophisticated and "unprofessional" crimes: 76% of bank robbers used no

⁴Other sources include a sample of 656 presentence investigation reports provided by the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts (defendants were convicted between 1975 and 1978 in eight Federal districts which were considered generally representative); records of 10,872 bank robbery investigations relating to cases that were reported to the FBI during 1978 and 1979; records of 2,800 interviews with bank robbers in 13 jurisdictions that were conducted under the auspices of the Pretrial Services Branch of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts between 1979 and 1982; and records for 7,610 offenders, (including 781 bank robbers) who were discharged during 1979, provided by the Bureau of Prisons.

⁵Robbery of a "commercial establishment" means robbery of a commercial house, service station, convenience store or bank. The term does not include street and residential robbery incidents.

⁶Source: Unpublished semiannual tabulations provided by the FBI and Uniform Crime Reports (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation 1970-1982).

⁷Not all incidents result in an arrest. Multiple incidents involving the same defendant may also be collapsed into one case against the defendant.

disguises despite the widespread use by banks of surveillance equipment; 86% never inspected the bank prior to the offense; and 95% had no long-range scheme to avoid apprehension and spend the money without being noticed.

Physical harm and economic loss. Records of FBI bank robbery investigations for the years 1978 and 1979 combined showed that slightly over 6% of all bank robberies involved actual violence: 3.6% involved discharge of a gun, and 2.4% involved other forms of violence, such as assaults. Injuries occurred in 2.1% of all robberies; death occurred in .4%. The 1982 Uniform Crime Report indicates that the average dollar loss was approximately \$3,300 per incident.⁸ Available data indicate that less than 20% of amounts stolen during 1979 were recovered.⁹ Of course, this statistic pertaining to dollar losses by banks does not reflect costs associated with physical and psychological trauma inflicted by bank robbers.

Characteristics of Federal bank robbers

Offender profile. Interviews conducted by the Pretrial Services Branch of the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts (commonly referred to as the PSA—Pretrial Services Administration) provide a profile of the typical bank robber prosecuted in Federal District Court. The typical bank robber is a young, male recidivist who is likely to be unemployed at the time of the crime and slightly more likely to be black than white. Ninety-six percent of the robbers were male. Thirty percent were steadily unemployed for the 2 years prior to their arrests. According to the integrated data, most had extensive criminal histories and had been incarcerated previously. Classified according to their most serious prior correctional status, 45% had served prior terms in excess of one year, another 12% had served jail terms of 1 year or less or had been committed under juvenile delinquency procedures. Another 23% had been previously sentenced to a term of probation.

Drug use. Drug use appears to be common among bank robbers, according to two different data sources. Presentence investigation data indicate that about one in three bank robbers was

⁸UCR data include records of bank robberies involving both federally insured and non-Federally insured banks. Records of FBI investigations involving only Federally insured banks indicate that the loss per incident of Federal bank robbery may be somewhat higher.

⁹Source: Unpublished semi-annual tabulations provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

classified as using opiates; 28% of all bank robbers were considered addicted. PSA interviews revealed that 20% of the suspects had been using opiates within 1 month prior to the interviews; 27% of all suspected bank robbers were considered to have been addicted at some time during the past 2 years.¹⁰

Since these statistics focus solely on opiates, they do not fully reflect the level of total drug use. Other data from the PSA records indicate that 35% of all bank robbers abused some type of drug; the FBI has estimated that as many as 42% of all bank robbers used drugs.¹¹

The presentence investigation reports revealed that 8% of the offenders were intoxicated with some drug (excluding alcohol) at the time of their offense. One-quarter of all the reports indicated that the offender intended to use the proceeds of the crime to support drug use.

Recidivism. As a group, bank robbers are highly recidivistic. In a sample of convicted bank robbers, about half were rearrested within 6 years of their release from Federal custody.¹² Those robbers with a history of heroin use were estimated to recidivate about 3 years sooner on average than those who did not have a history of heroin use.¹³

Comparison with other offenders. Bank robbers differ from other Federal offenders. In Table 1, Federal bank robbers are contrasted with Federal fraud, forgery and drug defendants.¹⁴ Bank robbers, as a group, are younger than

¹⁰Presentence investigations and pretrial services interviews rely on self-reports, although verification of the offender's responses with family, friends and drug abuse clinics is routine.

¹¹Comptroller General, Report to the Congress of the United States, Bank Robbery—The Federal Law Enforcement Role Should be Reduced (1978): 5.

¹²Deborah Buchner et al., Recidivism Among Convicted Federal Offenders (Washington, D.C.: INSLAW, Inc. 1980): IV-8. Buchner's data consisted of a 50% random sample of Federal prisoners with sentences in excess of 1 year who were released during the first six months of 1970 and a 14% random sample of all convicted offenders sentenced to terms of 1 year or less during 1970. Rearrest was determined by any arrest indicated on an FBI "rap" sheet.

¹³William Rhodes et al., Developing Criteria for Identifying Career Criminals (Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 1982): A22. Rhodes used the Buchner data to estimate the length of time until recidivism for all robbers (mostly bank robbers). The conclusion that drug users recidivate "about 3 years sooner on average" is based on regression analysis that adjusted for the limited 6-year follow-up period.

¹⁴Fraud is often a "white collar" crime. Forgery usually involves U.S. Treasury checks, but otherwise is an offense that is similar to crimes commonly seen in local courts. Federal drug charges generally involve middle and upper level drug dealing, rather

Table 1. Defendant characteristics: bank robbery, fraud, forgery and drugs

	Bank robbery	Fraud	Forgery	Drugs
Less than 26 years old	38%	7%	28%	27%
No college education	82	64	84	75
Unmarried	75	41	70	66
No dependents	50	30	33	41
Income \$10,000 or less*	95	57	85	78
Prior record	82	41	75	49

* Income from legitimate sources.
Source: Federal Pretrial Services Branch of the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts and BJS integrated Federal Justice Statistics data base; 1979.

fraud, forgery, and drug offenders. Accordingly, they tend also to be less well educated, less likely to be married, and to have lower incomes.

Despite being generally younger than other offenders, bank robbers tend to have more serious criminal histories than persons who commit fraud, forgery or drug offenses. The majority of bank robbers have lengthy histories of prior arrests, convictions, and incarcerations. This implies that bank robbers, if not caught and incarcerated, are likely to be "career criminals" with disproportionately high crime commission rates.

The Federal justice response: An overview

The public nature of bank robbery ensures that, unlike other types of Federal crimes, the vast majority of robberies will be reported to criminal

Table 2. Case attrition, 1979: bank robbery, fraud, forgery and drugs

	Bank robbery (2,832)	Fraud (13,664)	Forgery (5,916)	Drugs (11,578)
For every 100 matters received:				
Felony cases filed	59	45	51	66
Convictions	51	36	44	50
By trial	10	5	4	14
By plea	41	31	40	36
Incarcerations	47	14	22	36
Average sentence* (months)	122	16**	32	54

* Based on presentence investigation reports.
 ** Calculated on the basis of mail fraud and income tax fraud only. These constitute about 60% of all fraud cases filed in Federal courts.
Source: BJS integrated Federal Justice Statistics data base. (The data base does not include all incidents reported to the FBI in 1979.)

than use. These three offenses were selected for comparison with bank robbery because persons committing fraud and drug dealers are much different than robbers, while robbers and forgers have much in common.

justice officials. Moreover, the use of alarms, detection devices (such as surveillance cameras) and marked money substantially increases the likelihood that bank robbers will be identified and apprehended.

The data in Table 2 describe case attrition for bank robbery offenses within the Federal justice system and present comparable data for the processing of fraud, forgery and drug cases. Table 3 provides additional detail about case processing for these four offenses. All statistics are from the integrated data base, unless otherwise noted.

Investigations. The FBI established files on approximately 11,000 bank robbery investigations during 1978 and 1979.¹⁵ Of these, 69% were recorded as being cleared by arrest as of 1982.¹⁶ The data indicate that 36% were solved by the FBI alone, 25% by the joint efforts of the FBI and State/local police, and 40% by the State/local police acting alone.

These data reflect the high likelihood that bank robberies will result in arrest of the perpetrator. Although statistics are not available to allow a comparison among all Federal offenses, the data indicate that approximately one quarter of all robberies (including both bank and nonbank incidents at the Federal and State level), are cleared by arrest.¹⁷

Prosecution. Once presented to a U.S. Attorney, 59% of bank robbery investigations are accepted for Federal prosecution as felonies. All investigations do not result in separate cases since defendants may be involved in more than one incident. This filing rate is greater than the rate for fraud and forgery cases; it also exceeds the filing rate for four other high-volume offense types (larceny, embezzlement, illegal immigration and weapons offenses), and it is only somewhat lower than the filing rate for drug cases (66%).

Pretrial detention. Accused bank robbers are more likely to be detained pending trial than are offenders in seven other high volume offense types, including fraud, forgery and drugs. When bank robbers are released, it is almost always by money bond rather

than personal recognizance. Almost 18% of charged robbers spend at least 120 days in pretrial detention; another 18% spend between 91 and 120 days.

Pretrial violations. Bank robbers were accused of bail violations in 18% of all instances of release. About 42% of those bail violations were alleged felonies; half of these resulted in revocation of bail or issuance of a warrant. Fifteen percent of the violations were alleged misdemeanors, and 13% involved nonappearance for trial. The remaining violations related to traffic offenses and failure to observe other bail conditions.

Legal representation. Accused bank robbers are more likely than other Federal offenders to be represented by public defenders or appointed attorneys; bank robbery (77%), fraud (32%), forgery (67%), and drugs (34%).

Trial rates. Bank robbers go to trial more frequently than most other Federal defendants with the vast majority of trials resulting in conviction. Despite the high trial rate, however, most robbers are convicted by guilty plea.

Plea bargaining. Plea bargaining substantially reduces the level of the most serious ("top") charge for which bank robbers are convicted. Of those offenders convicted by trial rather than plea, 69% were convicted of a top charge carrying a 25-year maximum term, 29% of a top charge stipulating a 20-year maximum term, and only 2% of a top charge carrying a 10-year maximum term. On the basis of plea bargaining practices that were in existence during 1974-78, it has been estimated that only 27% (rather than 69%) of these offenders would have been convicted of an offense with a 25-year maximum if they had entered guilty pleas rather than standing trial. Similarly, 18% (rather than 2%) would have been convicted of a top charge with a 10-year maximum had they entered guilty pleas rather than going to trial.¹⁸

Sentence concessions following plea bargaining were also sizable, according to the integrated data. Offenders convicted by jury received longer sentences than offenders convicted by bench trial or guilty plea, holding constant the offender's age, sex and criminal record.

¹⁵Data describing investigations during 1978 and 1979 were analyzed together because most cases terminated during 1979, and hence appearing in the integrated data, resulted from investigations during these two years.

¹⁶The GAO reported a higher solution rate—83%—for a random sample of 238 bank robbery investigations that were closed during 1977.

¹⁷Uniform Crime Report, 1981:

¹⁸William Rhodes and Catherine Conly, "Federal Sentencing Guidelines" in *Courts and Judges*, J. Cramer, ed. (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981). These comparisons were inferred from a regression analysis of 656 presentence investigation reports.

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Public-use tapes of BJS data sets and other criminal justice data are available from the Criminal Justice Archive and Information Network, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106, (313/764-5199).

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Bulletin

Table 3. Case processing statistics: bank robbery, fraud, forgery and drugs

	Bank robbery	Fraud	Forgery	Drugs
Matters filed as felonies	59%	45%	51%	66%
Defendants detained prior to trial	68	5	12	18
Defendants held for 6 days or more	83	9	22	33
Defendants represented by public defender or CJA attorney*	77	32	67	34
Convictions	86	80	86	76
Filed cases disposed of within 90 days	48	48	56	35
Convicted defendants incarcerated	92	39	50	72
Incarcerated offenders sentenced to more than 1 year	96	45	60	76

* A CJA attorney is appointed by the court under the Criminal Justice Act.

Source: BJS Integrated Federal Justice Statistics data base; 1979.

Workload. Assistant U.S. Attorneys spend an average of five hours reviewing each bank robbery case prior to filing in Federal court. After filing, the work time of assistant U.S. Attorneys varies with the case's disposition. Dismissals and guilty pleas require an average of 15 hours each. Trials require more time—about 60 hours; most trials are by jury.

Bank robbery cases require less prosecutor time than most other Federal cases. Mail fraud (29 hours for guilty pleas) and other fraud (27 hours for guilty pleas) require considerably more time; forgery (7.6 hours for guilty pleas) requires much less. Of course, bank robbery cases more frequently result in trials, a fact that increases the attorney time expenditures on the typical robbery case relative to other case types.

Bank robbery cases do not require as much judge time as many other Federal cases, including most serious drug cases, fraud, false claims and state-

ments, and felony tax fraud. Bank robbery cases do require somewhat more judge time than other high-volume case types, such as marijuana sales, mail fraud and forgery.¹⁹

Sentences. Bank robbers typically receive sentences that are harsher than those received by offenders convicted of other high-volume offense types. Although almost 40% of all bank robbers received sentences exceeding 10 years, only 5% or fewer of every other high-volume offender group received sentences of this length. At the other extreme, only 8% of all convicted bank robbers were sentenced to probation, compared to 61% for fraud, 28% for drugs and 50% for forgery.

Sentence length varied with the magnitude of the offense and the of-

¹⁹Statistics for U.S. Attorneys are from W. Rhodes and J. Hausner, *Case Weights for U.S. Attorney Offices* (Washington, D.C.: INS LAW, 1983). Statistics for judge workload are from S. Flanders, *1979 Federal District Court Time Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Judicial Center, 1980).

Table 4. Sentences and time served in months by offenders released from Federal custody (1980)

	Sentence range (months)					
	1-6	7-12	13-36	37-60	61-120	120+
Bank robbery						
Average sentence	5.6	7.0	31.0	57.5	94.9	215.5
Average time served	4.8	5.6	21.9	34.2	44.4	59.7
Average percent of time served	83.6%	80.0%	71.1%	59.2%	47.0%	33.8%
Number of observations	11	1	25	63	338	343
Fraud						
Average sentence	4.5	11.7	27.2	55.4	91.5	180.0
Average time served	3.5	7.8	14.9	20.2	30.9	38.2
Average percent of time served	80.5%	66.3%	57.0%	37.2%	34.2%	21.2%
Number of observations	190	74	198	64	32	3
Forgery						
Average sentence	5.1	11.9	28.8	53.5	84.2	180.0
Average time served	4.2	8.3	17.3	26.6	31.7	72.8
Average percent of time served	82.8%	70.0%	61.8%	50.4%	38.3%	40.4%
Number of observations	34	21	114	55	41	3
Drugs						
Average sentence	5.2	11.8	28.4	54.4	89.2	197.9
Average time served	4.1	8.1	16.3	25.8	32.9	60.0
Average percent of time served	81.0%	68.9%	58.6%	47.6%	36.1%	32.9%
Number of observations	259	127	572	434	467	125

Source: Federal Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Information System. Figures may vary somewhat from calculations developed by the Parole Commission reflecting differences in the data base.

fender's record.²⁰ Not surprisingly, sentence length increased with the maximum sentence that could be imposed for the top charge in the conviction. As the offender's participation or involvement in an organized crime group increased, so too did the sentence he received. Robbers who stole less than \$500 received lighter sentences than their counterparts who stole more.

Time served. The actual length of prison time served is determined by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the Federal Parole Commission, subject to the procedures established by Federal statutes and by the judicially imposed sentence. The integrated data could not be used to estimate time served because most bank robbers who were convicted in 1979 were still in prison during 1982 when the integrated file was constructed. Consequently, calculations were based on data from the Inmate Information System of the Bureau of Prisons.²¹

Table 4, which is based on BOP data, illustrates that the average length of time served varies with the sentence imposed. Offenders who receive relatively short sentences tend to serve higher proportions of their terms than do offenders who receive relatively long sentences. This pattern is partly attributable to the larger monthly good time credits earned by offenders serving longer terms and the fact that offenders sentenced to terms of less than one year are routinely ineligible for parole.

Table 4 allows time served by bank robbers to be compared with time served by other Federal offenders. Over the middle sentence ranges it appears that robbers typically serve a larger proportion of their terms than do people convicted of forgery, fraud, and drug charges. These differences appear to be attributable to the practices of

²⁰W. Rhodes and C. Conly, *An Analysis of Federal Sentencing* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 1981). Conclusions were based on an analysis of 656 presentence investigation reports.

²¹According to BOP, these data are approximately 70 percent complete. (Shorter sentences, which typically result in an offender's assignment to a community corrections facility, are frequently not included in the data base). This is expected to inflate calculations of actual time served and deflate measures of the percentage of time served because the percentage of time served decreases with sentence length. Time served was computed by calculating the time period between the release date and the date the term began, adding any credits for time spent in pretrial detention, and subtracting any inoperative time. The release date was often unavailable, but the data indicated whether the inmate was transferred to a community corrections facility in preparation for final release. BOP officials confirmed that transitional time in a community correction facility averages 90 days, so the release date was assumed to equal the transfer date plus 90 days when only the transfer date was known.

the Parole Commission, since parole guidelines explicitly take the offense into account in prescribing release dates. No comparisons are possible over the lowest and highest sentencing ranges because of the small number of robbers who receive short terms and the small number of nonrobbers who receive long terms.

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Robbers with extensive criminal histories and those whose backgrounds show social instability tend to serve longer terms than bank robbers with modest histories and more stable backgrounds.²² For example, offenders who previously served terms in excess of 1 year serve a current term that is about 22 months greater than that served by robbers with no prior convictions. Likewise, time served increases with the maximum penalty allowed for the most serious conviction charge; and offenders who robbed multiple banks and who injured or kidnaped victims serve additional time.

Methodology

Data in this report were derived mainly from the BJS integrated Federal justice file. Four Federal criminal justice agencies provided six separate computerized data bases for integration into the file. The Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys provided a computerized file on all cases handled by U.S. Attor-

²²Rhodes and Conly, An Analysis of Federal Sentencing.

neys in 94 Federal districts. The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts furnished three data sets: the master file of all criminal cases processed in Federal district courts, the computerized pretrial release interview data maintained by the Pretrial Services Branch for interviews conducted in 13 Federal districts, and the computerized file containing data on all probationers and parolees under the supervision of Federal probation officers. The Bureau of Prisons provided data on incarcerated Federal offenders. The Federal Bureau of Investigation supplied records for bank robbery investigations.

The process of integrating disparate data files is called "matching and merging." As the name implies, two steps are involved. After each of two files is searched for an offender's record, these two files are "matched" and then "merged" into a third file. Federal records matched at rates that were higher than expected and were suitable for statistical analysis.

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