Street Justice

Street Justice: Retaliation in the Criminal Underworld is the first systematic exploration of the phenomenon of modern-day retaliation to be written from the perspective of currently active criminals who have experienced it firsthand – as offenders, victims, or both.

Retaliation lies at the heart of much of the violence that plagues inner-city neighborhoods across the United States. Street criminals, who live in a dangerous world, realistically cannot rely on the criminal justice system to protect them from attacks by fellow lawbreakers. They are on their own when it comes to dealing with crimes perpetrated against them, and they often use retaliation as a mechanism for deterring and responding to victimization.

Against this background, Bruce Jacobs and Richard Wright draw extensively on their candid interviews with active street criminals to shine a penetrating spotlight on the structure, process, and forms of retaliation in the real-world setting of urban America – a way of life that up to now has been poorly understood.

Bruce A. Jacobs is the author of two previous books, Dealing Crack and Robbing Drug Dealers, and is the author or co-author of approximately twenty journal articles and book chapters. He is also the editor of Investigating Deviance and the recipient of competitive grant funding from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.

Richard Wright is the co-author of four previous books, including Armed Robbers in Action and Burglars on the Job, which won the 1994–1995 Outstanding Scholarship in Crime and Delinquency Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems. He is also the co-editor of the Sage Handbook of Fieldwork and author or co-author of approximately fifty journal articles and book chapters. He has been the recipient of competitive grant awards from the National Institute of Justice, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, National Consortium on Violence Research, Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Icelandic Research Council.
Cambridge Studies in Criminology

Editors

Alfred Blumstein, H. John Heinz School of Public Policy and Management, Carnegie Mellon University
David Farrington, Institute of Criminology, Cambridge University

Other books in the series:

*Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*, by Scott Decker and Barrik Van Winkle
*Delinquency and Crime: Current Theories*, edited by J. David Hawkins
*Mean Streets: Youth Crime and Homelessness*, by John Hagan and Bill McCarthy
*The Framework of Judicial Sentencing: A Study in Legal Decision Making*, by Austin Lovegrove
*The Criminal Recidivism Process*, by Edward Zamble and Vernon L. Quinsey
*Violence and Childhood in the Inner City*, by Joan McCord
*Schools and Delinquency*, by Denise C. Gottfredson
*The Crime Drop in America*, edited by Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman
*Delinquent-Prone Communities*, by Don Weatherburn and Bronwyn Lind
*White Collar Crime and Criminal Careers*, by David Weisburd and Elin Warring, with Ellen F. Chayet
*Sex Difference in Antisocial Behavior: Conduct Disorder, Delinquency, and Violence in the Dunedin Longitudinal Study*, by Terrie Moffitt, Avshalom Caspi, Michael Rutter, and Phil A. Silva

continued after the Index
STREET JUSTICE
RETALIATION IN THE CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD

Bruce A. Jacobs
University of Texas–Dallas

Richard Wright
University of Missouri–St. Louis
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>page ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Background and Methods</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Retaliatory Ethic</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 A Typology of Criminal Retaliation</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Gender and Retaliation (with Christopher Mullins)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Imperfect Retaliation</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Retaliation in Perspective</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

Contrary to popular belief, academic scholarship is not a lonely enterprise; at least we have not found it to be so. Throughout the writing of this book, we received help, advice, and support from numerous friends and colleagues. We would like especially to thank Eric Baumer, Robert Faulkner, Janet Lauritsen, Bridgette Mack, Rick Rosenfeld, and Volkan Topalli for their wise and patient counsel. Whatever its shortcomings, our book is much better for their constructive comments and criticisms.

Allison Deutsch compiled the index with the sensitivity and insight that have become her hallmarks as a scholar.

The research on which this book is based was funded by a grant from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. We are required to state that the points of view or opinions expressed herein are ours and do not necessarily reflect those of the Foundation, though the research that gave rise to our views would not have been possible without its financial backing. It took guts to fund such a controversial piece of work, and we are grateful to the Foundation for its support.

Finally, Ronald Cohen edited our manuscript with consummate skill, helping us bring to life the hidden world of street justice. The bonus for us is that he did so with patience, tact, and respect for our work. For that, we owe him a special debt of gratitude.
Admit it. When someone wrongs you, you want to get back at them. Despite Biblical injunctions to turn the other cheek, most of us are reluctant to do so. The urge to get even is so ingrained in the popular imagination that it has spawned a whole genre of Hollywood movies in which a peace-loving hero is driven to avenge the harm done to a loved one in an explosion of pent-up rage. Think of old classics like Death Wish, Billy Jack, or The Outlaw Josie Wales. Such films were popular because they tapped into a deep-seated human desire to see the good deliver justice to the bad, vanquishing evil once and for all.

The real world of retaliation, however, is seldom as neat and clean as Hollywood would have us believe. It often is difficult to distinguish the good guy from the bad guy in disputes that take place beyond the reach of formal law. Short of death, few such conflicts are ever really settled for good, with each new strike generating a counter-strike in a deepening cycle of instability and violence. Indeed, formal law emerged in part to ameliorate the chaos engendered by retaliation, by replacing informal dispute resolution with a more institutionalized mechanism of social control.

Street criminals, however, cannot realistically rely on formal law to settle their disputes. Despite being especially vulnerable to being preyed on, it is difficult for them to stake a legitimate claim to victim status. Even if the police were willing to believe that street criminals had been victimized – which seems unlikely – strong cultural proscriptions not to cooperate with authorities militate against offenders making an official crime report. Practically speaking,
then, street criminals must themselves assume primary responsibility for righting perceived wrongs committed against them.

Despite its preeminent role in regulating disputes between and among street criminals, retaliation has received scant attention from criminological researchers. Existing studies explore retaliation only tangentially, with little or no consideration of its situational and contextual dynamics. Even when retaliation is examined in its own right, the circumstances in which payback is enacted typically receive less attention than the factors that mediate the availability of law. As a result, the structure, process, and forms of retaliation in the real-world setting of urban American street crime remain poorly understood.

This book explores the face of modern-day retaliation on the streets of St. Louis, Missouri, from the perspective of currently active criminals who have experienced it firsthand, as offenders, victims, or both. Chapter One introduces the subject of criminal retaliation, explains why it is important within and beyond criminology, and outlines the research that will inform subsequent chapters. Chapter Two explores the retaliatory ethic among street criminals and the vocabulary of motive that offenders adopt to justify its role as the preferred mode of extra-legal social control. The specter of counter-retaliation, and how grievants perceive and manage this threat, also will be considered. Chapter Three examines the structure, process, and contingent forms of retaliation, offering a typology to organize the data. Chapter Four considers the ways in which gender shapes the context and dynamics of retaliatory events for both male and female street criminals. Chapter Five investigates the phenomenon of “imperfect” retaliation – acts of reprisal committed against parties not responsible for the instigating affront. The reasons for imperfect retaliation and their implications for crime displacement beyond the law will be explored specifically. Chapter Six addresses conceptual issues in retaliation and pays special attention to the role of criminal reprisal in the spread and containment of urban violence.

Throughout the book, and especially in the last chapter, we endeavor to be sensitive to the policy implications of our data.