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0521617987 - Street Justice: Retaliation in the Criminal Underworld

Bruce A. Jacobs and Richard Wright

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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.

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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.

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Preface

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,

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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.