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Armed Robbery: Final Report: Newspaper publicity and bank robberies

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NEWSPAPER PUBLICITY
AND BANK ROBBERIES
Armed Robbery Final Report

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Executive Brief

This study employs a simple time-series design to examine whether newspaper publicity resulting from successful bank robberies leads to copycat increases of bank and other robberies during the following week. It makes use of police records of robberies in New South Wales and newspaper stories for 1987 to 1989 from the two tabloids published daily in Sydney. No evidence of any copycat effect was found. Moreover, there was little evidence that the newspapers concerned were paying undue attention to bank robbery. Finally, it appears that the rate at which bank robbers are arrested has little effect on the rate of robberies for at least a month afterwards.

¹ This study was co-sponsored by the National Police Research Unit, the Australian Bankers' Association and the Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice. It was directed by Dr Gerry McGrath, Dr John Marsden and Professor Ronald Clarke (who drafted this report). Thanks are due to the NSW Police, in particular Ch. Supt. Keith Askew, Sgt. Graham Clark and Mike Conaghan for their considerable assistance. Much help in data collection and analysis was provided by Caroline Cass, Maureen Donohue, Lorraine Green and Lucy McGrath.





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Introduction

The banking industry has long been concerned about the reporting of bank robberies in newspapers and on television, which it sees as sensationalist, selective and insensitive to the trauma suffered by staff and customers (cf. Griffiths, 1989). In particular, the banks believe (as expressed in a recent paper by John Marsden) that 'media reports stimulate copycat crimes; arrests are rarely highlighted in the press and the press focus upon the more extreme and more successful robberies provides a misleading impression of glamour and daring'. Apart from glamorising bank robbery and misrepresenting the costs and risks faced by robbers, it is believed that media coverage spreads information on bank defences and on successful strategies for attacking banks.

Despite their prevalence, these beliefs are only poorly supported by hard evidence. Griffiths (1989), manager of the security research program for the ANZ bank, gives examples of some sensationalist newspaper headlines and provides some anecdotal accounts of how bank robbers may have been influenced by the media², but no systematic research linking the reporting of bank robberies to the commission of further offences exists in Australia or elsewhere. If such research did exist, there would be important policy implications for the media including the need to avoid glamorising robbery and to cover more adequately the arrest and sentencing of robbers.

The need for such research was one reason for undertaking the study of robberies reported below. Another derives from an earlier NPRU-sponsored study conducted in 1989 (Clarke, 1989), which found that bank robberies were positively correlated with

robberies of other targets, such as chemist shops, petrol service stations and milk bars. In other words, as bank robberies increased so did those of other targets and vice versa. This may be because both bank and other robberies are influenced by similar factors such as levels of unemployment and the economic cycle as suggested by Marsden (1989). Another possible explanation, however, is that the publicity surrounding bank robberies results in imitative robberies of other targets. In other words, lesser fry might imitate as best they can the activities of higher status criminals. If confirmed, this again would have implications not only for the media, but also for police management. In particular, it would suggest that concentration of police resources on bank robberies has 'spill over' benefits beyond the banking sphere.

² For example (p. 73): 'An article from the Mercury of 8 December 1987 which reported certain Criminal Court Proceedings stated that the attitudes of a man who committed two armed robberies in Launceston in 1987 were influenced by television and video images.'

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE COPYCAT PHENOMENON

Previous research on the copycat phenomenon is of limited relevance, because most of it deals with violence studied in the laboratory. For example, subjects' aggressiveness has been monitored following the viewing of aggressive or violent behaviour in a film. Although there is consensus that mass media violence can elicit aggression in this setting, researchers disagree on whether one can extrapolate these results from the laboratory to the world beyond.

A second kind of research involved case studies of the imitation of bizarre, usually violent crimes, by people who appear to have seen these reported in the newspapers or television. One such case related to an incident in the Chicago area when seven people died after ingesting Tylenol capsules that had been contaminated with cyanide. Shortly after, poisons of various forms began to appear in other brand name analgesic capsules, mouth wash and eye drops (cf Grabosky and Wilson, 1989). However, one study of 58 incidents of allegedly movie-inspired violence, including a number of incidents involving imitation of the Russian roulette scenes in 'The Deer Hunter', concluded that no clear evidence of causal links could be found (Milavsky, undated).

Perhaps the best research relating to the copycat phenomenon utilises what are called 'time-series' designs. These examine media effects as they occur in ordinary life by seeing whether particular events on television are related to fluctuations in the crime statistics recorded by the police and other agencies. Unfortunately, very few such studies appear to have been conducted. By far the most comprehensive has dealt with suicide and has been undertaken by David Phillips (1986). He has reported that suicides increase after reported suicides of famous people and after fictional suicides have occurred in daytime television soap operas. He has also reported that homicides increase after professional boxing matches and decrease after executions. In several studies, the changes in the social statistics are reported as occurring after a specific short length of time - for instance, exactly three days. However, his times-series work has attracted criticism and a number of researchers have been unable to replicate his findings.

To summarise, the existing research on copycat crime is quite limited. Most has involved mild forms of aggression in a laboratory setting. Case studies have not produced consistent evidence of a causal link between media depictions of unusual or bizarre crimes and apparent imitations. Moreover, any imitation that occurs might depend on the unusual amount of attention attracted by these crimes. Time-series designs have been mostly restricted to suicide and it is unclear how far the findings can be generalised to everyday crimes such as bank robbery.



Methodology of the Present Study

THE STUDY IN OUTLINE

The main purpose of the present study is to correlate police data concerning bank and other armed robberies with newspaper stories relating to robberies during the same period. It uses a simple time-series design to determine whether the publicity accorded to 'successful' bank robberies leads to copycat increases of bank and other robberies in the following week. The analysis, conducted using data from NSW, takes account of the distribution of bank robberies by day of week. A three-year time frame is used, 1987 to 1989. During this period 5268 robberies were recorded by the NSW police, 631 (12%) of which were bank robberies.

At the same time, the analysis examines the somewhat separate question of whether the arrest of bank robbers results in a perceptible decline in such robberies for a brief period thereafter (see the Annex).

LIMITATIONS

Because of the much greater difficulties of obtaining the data, the study does not encompass TV reports of bank robberies. Nor does it study word of mouth communication about bank robberies within the criminal community. Since it is confined to a three-year period, it will not be able to detect any longer-term cumulative effects of electronic or print media reporting of robbery.

DATA

Three sets of data were collected for three years, 1987 to 1989, as follows:

- (1) Daily counts of all armed robberies and all bank robberies were extracted from computerised records maintained by the NSW Police Armed Hold-up Squad.³
- (2) The following details were recorded for all bank robberies: date, bank, address, number of offenders, amount stolen, weapons, and offence classification.⁴
- (3) All newspaper stories on armed robberies were extracted from the Telegraph and Mirror. These are the two tabloid papers published in Sydney (respectively morning and evening) which, because of the relatively low reading age demanded, are more likely to appeal to the criminal fraternity.

³ Some definitional and recording differences result in discrepancies between the Armed Hold-up Unit's data on robbery and those contained in the official NSW Police Department statistics. However, a detailed internal study by the Strategic Intelligence Unit has recently shown that the Armed Hold-up Unit data are broadly accurate and reliable.

⁴ Details of bank robberies taking place roughly between mid-April and mid-June 1987 were not recorded during a period when the Armed Hold-up Unit was being re-organised.



ANALYSIS

The analysis falls into three stages:

1. Content of newspaper coverage. The newspaper stories were coded as follows: date, page, size of story (square inches), and nature of story. This latter category was coded as follows: successful bank robbery, unsuccessful bank robbery, successful payroll robbery, robbers arrested (after the event), general stories on bank robbery or robbers, robberies occurring outside NSW, others not classified elsewhere. For 'successful bank robberies' and 'successful payroll robberies' it was noted whether amounts stolen were mentioned.
2. Copycat effect of reported bank robberies. Given the large number of bank robberies, effects are only likely to be detected within a week of the newspaper report.⁵ Numbers of robberies were therefore compared for two 7-day periods immediately before⁶ and after the date of any newspaper story reporting a 'successful' robbery (imitation would be expected only when the robbery was portrayed as successful). In order to control for the daily variation in robberies (with more occurring on Thursday and Friday than on other days of the week), the before and after periods had to be strictly comparable. Accordingly, for stories in the Telegraph (the morning paper) these periods were: (i) the 7 days before the report, and (ii) the 7 days after the report (including the day of the report). In the case of the Mirror (the afternoon paper) the after period was defined as the 7 days after the date of the report and the before period as the 7 days up to and including the day of the report. (The small difference in definition is due to the fact that the morning paper is more likely to influence behaviour on the day of the report than the afternoon paper). The fact that bank robberies have declined during the three years of the study should affect the comparison only marginally.

Since the preliminary analysis of the newspaper reports showed many related to payroll robberies, the analysis described immediately above was repeated for these. It was also repeated for any high value bank robberies (\$15,000 and over), most of which seem not to be reported in the newspapers, to see if there is an imitative effect mediated not by newspaper publicity, but by word-of-mouth communication.

⁵ This is also consistent with the Phillips' suicide research where he found the imitative effect to be strongest during the first week after the publicity.

⁶ The bank robbery giving rise to the story was excluded from the counts of robberies in the before period.

Results

CONTENT OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

The content analysis in Table 1 of the stories on bank robbery (and payroll robbery) suggests that the Telegraph favours stories about payroll robberies, while the Mirror reports more stories about bank robbery. Perhaps the most striking fact is that coverage of bank robberies in either paper is sparse. Including two stories about unsuccessful bank robberies, only 49 separate bank robberies were reported in the two papers - 7.8% of the 631 bank robberies committed in the period. Only 2 bank robberies were covered in both papers. Only two of the stories made the front page and many were very brief; for example, nearly 40% (19 out of 49) were three square inches or less.

Table 1: Content of bank robbery and related stories in the Mirror and Telegraph 1987-1989

	Telegraph	Mirror	Telegraph and Mirror
Successful Bank Robbery	20	29	49
Successful Payroll Robbery	23	12	35
Unsuccessful Bank Robbery	1	1	2
Robber Arrested Later	10	15	25
Feature Stories about Robberies or Robbers	26	24	50
Totals	80	81	161

Of the 46 'high value' (i.e. \$15,000 plus) bank robberies committed, only 7 (15%) were covered and in only one of these was the amount reported. Specific amounts stolen were mentioned in exactly half the cases, though these amounts frequently did not match those recorded by the police. This is in marked contrast to stories of successful payroll robberies where generally very large amounts (average just over \$75,000) were reported stolen in all but 3 of the 35 cases.

A further curiosity of the newspaper coverage of bank robberies is that, despite the fact that most bank robberies occur on Thursday and Friday, those occurring earlier in the week have a greater chance of being reported. Thus, there were many more stories printed on Tuesday and Wednesday (20) than on Friday and Saturday (9).

COPYCAT EFFECT OF REPORTED BANK ROBBERIES

Table 2 shows the number of robberies occurring before and after newspaper stories about successful bank robberies. Contrary to the copycat hypothesis, there are more robberies and bank robberies in the seven days before the newspaper reports than in the seven days after, though the differences are small and not statistically significant.

Table 2: Number of robberies in NSW related to newspaper stories (N=49) of successful bank robberies

	Average Number of Robberies	
	7 Days Before Story	7 Days After Story
Bank Robberies	4.3	4.7
All Armed Robberies	35.0	32.0

Similarly, there was no evidence of any copycat effect from the newspaper reporting of successful payroll robberies (an average of 34 robberies in the seven days before the story and 36 in the seven days after) or from the commission of high value bank robberies (an average of 35 robberies in the seven days before the robbery and 33 in the seven days after); or following the 38 unusually long stories (an average of 35 robberies in both before and after periods). All these differences between before and after periods are too small to be of any significance.



Conclusions

The results of this research provide no support for the idea that newspaper reports of successful bank robberies stimulate copycat robberies of banks or other targets. The numbers of robberies in the week following a newspaper account of a successful bank or payroll robbery were no different from the numbers in the week before the report. The lack of support for Clarke's (1989) suggestion that publicity for bank robberies might lead to imitative robberies of other premises lends weight to the alternative explanation for the association between these two kinds of robbery, i.e. that both are subject to similar societal influences such as the level of unemployment (Marsden, 1989).

The present findings also provide little support for the idea that the newspapers pay undue attention to bank robberies;⁷ on the contrary, their coverage of bank robberies was remarkably sparse. Less than 10 percent of all robberies occurring in New South Wales during 1987 to 1989 were reported in Sydney's two daily tabloid newspapers. Less than 5 percent of these stories make the front page and 40 percent were so brief (three square inches or less) as to be barely noticeable. While the arrests of robbers are rarely reported (each paper carrying one such report every two or three months) and features on robbery are relatively frequent (one every couple of months), this does not seem unduly out of line with the public interest in such matters.

It is unclear whether the sparse coverage of bank robberies is due to lack of interest by the newspapers or to voluntary restraint exercised by editors aware of possible copycat dangers.

More likely than either of these possibilities, perhaps, is that the banks' policies of providing very limited information about robberies (amounts stolen etc.) are achieving the desired result; the newspaper men have very little to write about. Whatever the reason, all this suggests that, in general, the banks may have little reason to be seriously concerned about the nature of the newspaper coverage of robberies. This does not mean, however, that they should not continue to watch the situation carefully.

The question remains as to why these results are so divergent from widely held beliefs about the media's treatment of bank robbery and its role in exacerbating the problem. The media are, of course, convenient whipping boys and, no doubt, there have been occasional sensationalist stories, which have offended the sensibilities of the banks. There may also have been some instances where unusual *modus operandi* has been imitated. This would be sufficient to generate belief in the malevolent effects of newspaper reporting. On the other hand, it should be remembered that the present negative results derive from a study of only one State and two newspapers and the situation may be different elsewhere. It is also possible that television coverage and its effect on robberies may be different from that of the newspapers. Further, there may be longer-term and subtler effects of newspaper coverage that could not be detected

⁷ On the other hand, the coverage of payroll robberies, especially the frequent reporting of large amounts stolen, is cause for some concern.

in the present study. For example, it would be surprising if some robbers were not encouraged to pursue the idea of robbing banks from the knowledge that other people had recently done this. However, such knowledge may be communicated by the barest report of a bank robbery and no-one suggests that these should be censored.

In conclusion, these results need to be seen in wider criminological context. Many views about crime survive without supporting research and, as mentioned above, the research on copycat crime has so far failed to provide strong support for the idea that the media play an important part in exacerbating crime.



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ANNEX: Relationship Between Bank Robbery and Arrests

Bank robberies can show quite marked peaks and troughs over time and it is sometimes argued that these primarily reflect police activity in arresting and prosecuting robbers. In order to examine this suggestion, daily counts of all arrests for armed robbery were extracted from the NSW Armed Hold-up Unit records. Details included number of offences and whether these included bank robberies. The analysis relied upon simple correlational or graphical methods in order to relate offences cleared by arrests to possible declines in subsequent numbers of bank robberies (see Table 3).

Figure 1 suggests a close monthly relationship between numbers of bank robberies cleared by arrest and the numbers of bank robberies committed ($r=0.61$). What cannot be determined from the graph is the direction of the relationship: i.e. whether arrests result in a decline of bank robberies or whether a decline in bank robberies leads to a decline in arrests. That it is the latter is suggested by two facts: the clear-up rate for robberies (i.e. the proportion solved) is generally little affected by the number committed; the correlation between the number of robberies cleared by arrest and the number of bank robberies in the following month is small, but positive ($r=0.31$) rather than negative as should have been the case if arrests were leading to few robberies. This suggests that, for at least the fairly brief time span of one month examined in the present analysis, patterns of arrests do not account for rises and falls in bank robbery and that some other explanation must be found.



FIGURE 1: Bank Robberies and Robberies Cleared by Arrests, 1987-1989, New South Wales

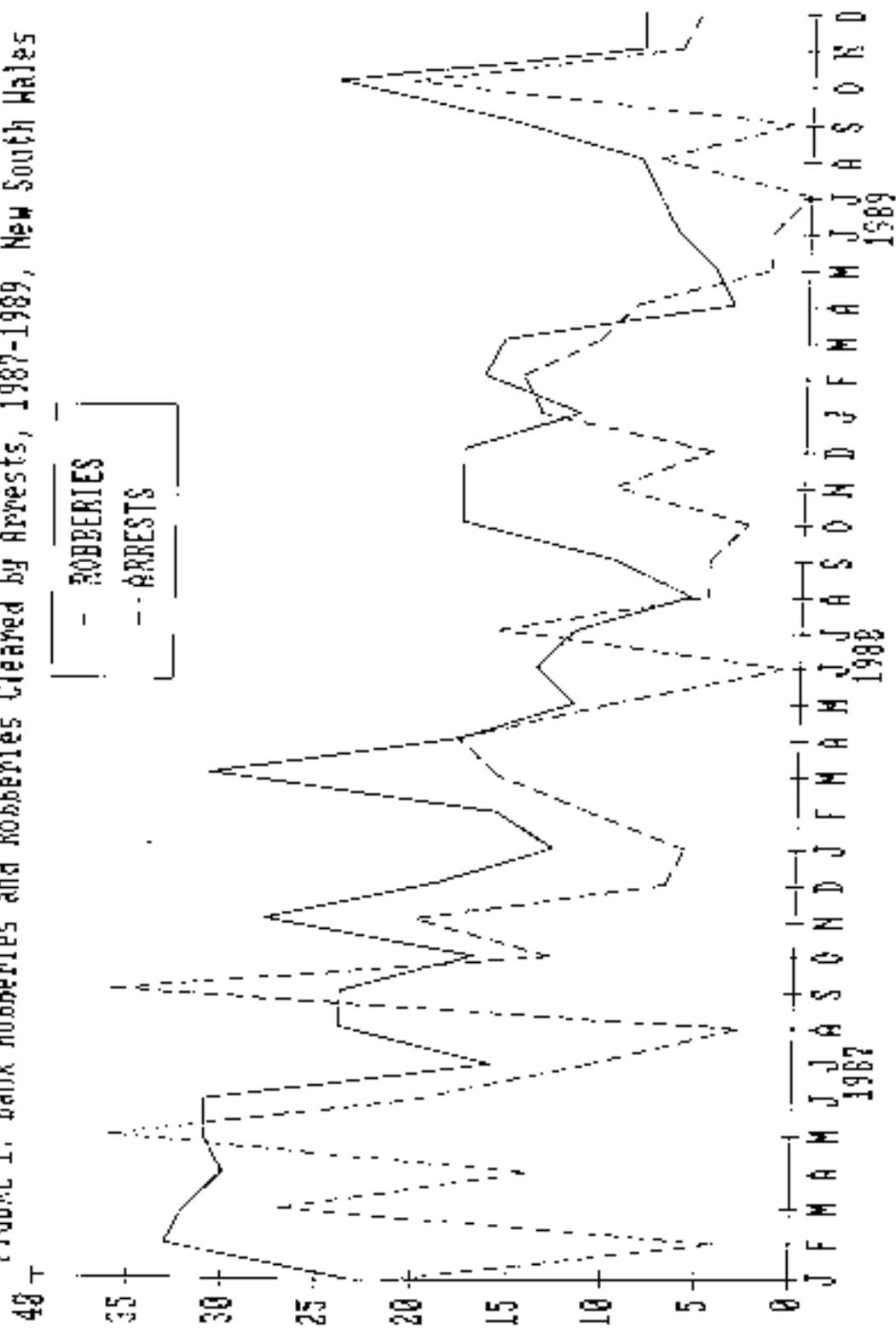


Table 3: Monthly counts of bank robberies and robberies cleared by arrest, NSW, 1987-1989

	Number of bank robberies	Bank robberies cleared by arrests	Number of robberies
1987			
J	23	21	125
F	33	4	123
M	32	27	113
A	30	14	135
M	31	36	161
J	31	20	183
J	16	11	181
A	24	3	170
S	24	36	169
O	17	13	142
N	28	20	121
D	19	7	199
1988			
J	13	6	117
F	16	11	143
M	31	16	148
A	18	18	180
M	12	10	128
J	14	1	145
J	12	16	175
A	6	5	163
S	10	5	146
O	18	3	133
N	18	10	140
D	18	5	146
1989			
J	12	14	144
F	17	15	125
M	16	11	121
A	4	9	171
M	5	2	135
J	7	2	157
J	8	0	132
A	9	8	123
S	16	1	131
O	25	21	153
N	9	7	135
D	9	6	155
Totals	631	414	5268

