

# **Chapter 3**

## **Learning About Crime Prevention from Aborted Crimes: Intrapersonal Comparisons of Committed and Aborted Robbery**

**Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard and Wim Bernasco**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter we demonstrate that a lot can be learned about crime and crime prevention by studying aborted crimes: crimes that were not committed despite being anticipated by the prospective offenders. Getting to know why offenders sometimes decide to call off a crime they have anticipated is an uncommon but potentially useful way to gain insights into why certain crime prevention measures may actually work. Our discussion of the potential of offender-based research is based on a study that included an intrapersonal comparison of committed and aborted robberies. Our aim in this chapter is twofold. The first aim is to report our findings about aborted robberies. The second aim is to elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of our research design, and thereby provide recommendations for future studies. We will use our study to answer the following three substantive questions:

1. What distinguished robberies that were aborted from robberies that were committed?
2. What mechanisms explain why some robberies get aborted and others do not?
3. What reasons do offenders provide for aborting robberies?

We draw on interviews with 104 incarcerated and non-incarcerated robbery offenders, in which we collected information about aborted and committed robberies both involving the same offender. In our analysis we use answers to both open

---

M.R. Lindegaard (✉)  
Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR),  
De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, Netherlands  
e-mail: [MLindegaard@nscr.nl](mailto:MLindegaard@nscr.nl)

W. Bernasco  
Department of Spatial Economics, Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime  
and Law Enforcement (NSCR), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

and closed questions about characteristics of the committed and aborted robberies and the situations in which they occurred. These answers include the reasons for aborting robbery that the offenders themselves provided during the interviews. Although not all findings are easily applicable in a situational crime prevention program, we believe that the method of analyzing aborted crime offers great potential for combatting crime, as it can potentially highlight situational factors that prevent crimes about to be committed.

## Counterfactual Strategy

Because experimental designs are seldom feasible in the study of crime, a good alternative counterfactual strategy is important for explaining crime. An appropriate counterfactual strategy seeks situations without crime that are similar to situations with crime. This attempt underlies a variety of criminological studies of conditions in which crime is decreasing or even absent, including the explanation of decreasing crime statistics (Tonry, 2014), periods of peace in gang conflicts (Vargas, 2014), de-escalating behavior during aggressive incidences in public drinking spaces (Levine, Taylor and Best 2011), nonviolent methods in drug market conflicts (Jacques, 2010), and desistance from crime over the life course (Maruna, 2001). Common to these studies is the wish to explain crime and criminal decision making by understanding conditions for non-criminal behavior. They obviously differ in terms of their unit of analysis: periods with high and with low crime figures, periods in the life course with and without criminal activities, and behavior during criminal and non-criminal events.

Where studies of criminal behavior over the life course tend to focus on differences in criminal behavior across various periods in the life of the same person (e.g., Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2005), studies of the effects of situational characteristics on criminal behavior tend to compare situational characteristics involving different persons; that is, they make between-person comparisons. For instance, in a study of drug market conflicts, Jacques (2010) aimed at explaining the variable conditions of violent and nonviolent retaliation without making intrapersonal comparisons. To identify the situational characteristics of lethal assaults, Ganpat, van der Leun, and Nieuwbeerta (2013) compared court case descriptions of lethal and nonlethal cases, each involving both different offenders and different victims. Levine, Taylor, and Best (2011) focused on explaining why conflicts in public drinking places sometimes escalated into physical aggression and sometimes de-escalated. Graham et al. (2006) observed conflicts in bars with the aim of understanding why some conflict situations ended up with physical aggression while others did not. While the aim of these four studies was to understand the situational circumstances for violent and nonviolent behavior, none of them compared behavior of the same person in different situations. This design may confound personal and situational characteristics, and is therefore not the most rigorous approach for assessing either personal or situational causes of criminal behavior.

In criminology only a handful of studies of situational characteristics used intrapersonal comparisons of criminal and non-criminal behavior. Phillips (2003)

applied a matched-case control, comparing violent and nonviolent management in two conflicts from the same period in the life of an individual. Lussier, Leclerc, Healey, and Proulx (2008) analyzed crime switching patterns over time of the same offender. Leclerc, Lussier, and Deslauriers-Varin (2014) analyzed offending strategies between different sexual offenses of the same offender. Hewitt and Beauregard (2013) compared different levels of aggression in a series of crime events involving the same offender. Bernasco, Ruiter, Bruinsma, Pauwels, and Weerman (2013) analyzed situational characteristics of moments of offending with moments of non-offending of the same persons. The study we address in this chapter aimed at explaining the effects of situational characteristics on the decision of an individual to either commit or abort an anticipated robbery.

Our counterfactual strategy thus included two elements. The first element was that the analysis did not compare a committed robbery with any other situation, but with a situation that in many aspects was quite similar: an anticipated robbery that was aborted. The second element was the intra-person comparison: we did not compare a committed robbery to any other aborted robbery, but to an aborted robbery involving the same individual.

## **The Present Study**

In our study of robberies, we compared three different types of robberies carried out by the same person: (1) robberies with threat, (2) robberies with physical violence, and (3) anticipated robberies that were aborted. Respondents were asked to describe the most recent robbery they committed for each category and to focus on robberies that took place within a 5-year period prior to the interview. In the present discussion, the first two types are joined and treated as “committed robberies” in order to compare their situational characteristics with the third type: robberies that were never committed. The definition of robbery was broad enough to include street robberies, commercial robberies, and home robberies.

### ***Aborted Robberies***

We defined aborted robberies as robberies that the respondent had anticipated committing but decided not to carry out. Our counterfactual case was therefore defined in relation to the decision-making process: respondents had a target on their mind, but for whatever reason they decided not to rob the particular target. The characteristic for an aborted robbery was that the potential victims were (and probably have always remained) unaware that they were about to get robbed. This rather broad definition of anticipated robberies included robberies that were planned well in advance, but got aborted seconds before they were supposed to take place. It also included robberies that were considered on the spot, but not carried out for some

reason. It also included anticipated robberies that were being discussed among friends at home, but had not yet been planned.

We interviewed 104 male respondents in the Netherlands who claimed that they had experiences with committing a robbery. A minority (28) was not incarcerated and was recruited via a snowball sample on the streets of Amsterdam. The other 76 were recruited in adult prisons (41) and juvenile facilities (35). Each interview focused on all three types of robbery situations. Since the non-incarcerated respondents found it difficult to concentrate as long as required to go through three types of robbery events, we decided to leave out, if necessary, aborted robberies among the non-incarcerated respondents. In practice that meant that we only succeeded getting information about aborted robberies from five non-incarcerated offenders. For the purpose of this chapter our sample is therefore 81 respondents.

All respondents who were asked to provide details about an aborted robbery were able to do so without hesitation. In fact, remembering robberies that they had anticipated but decided not to perpetrate seemed easier than recalling the ones that had been actually carried out. The amount of detail about the situation in which the robbery was supposed to have taken place varied largely depending on where in the decision-making process the respondent had decided not to carry out the robbery. In most cases there had not yet been established any contact with the victim. Our definition of aborted robberies therefore differed from “unsuccessful robberies,” where the offender did not manage to get away with any valuables. In our definition unsuccessful robberies were “committed robberies.” Aborted robberies were anticipated but had not yet been started.

## ***Recruitment***

The non-incarcerated respondents were recruited through a recruiter known to the third author. The recruiter earned 20 Euros per recruited respondent. The non-incarcerated respondents were paid 50 Euros for an interview. The incarcerated respondents were asked for participation face to face by the first author and were paid 30 Euros per interview. The response rate was 66.5 % (see Lindegaard, Bernasco, and Jacques, 2014 for details about non-response). The only criterion for participation was explained as “having experience with committing robberies.” Respondents were never asked to reveal their real names and were promised confidentiality. The research design and contents of the questionnaire and interview protocol were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the Law Faculty of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

## ***Sample and Interviews***

For the purpose of this chapter we describe 155 committed robberies and 81 aborted robberies. Robberies referred to were committed on the street, in shops and other types of retail businesses, and in private homes. Respondents were asked to

focus on the most recent robberies within the three categories of robberies (threat only; physical violence; aborted) and only on robberies committed within 5 years prior to the interview or to their incarceration. Interviews lasted between 20 min and 3 h depending on the number of robberies described by respondents, their willingness to discuss the robberies in details, and their ability to reflect on their experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Accounts of 30 robberies were cross-checked with media coverage descriptions and consensus was found in all cases. Official records were not consulted.

Even though the interviews were semi-structured, all interviews focused on the same key topics following the same order of attention. Focus was given to occurrences during the event rather than on the motivations of the offender. Each description of a robbery event started out with open questions where the respondent was asked to describe the robbery as if it was a movie unknown to the interviewer. This open description was followed by closed questions about specific situational characteristics that we specifically wanted to identify (for further reflection on content of interviews, establishment of rapport, and personal characteristics of the respondents, see Lindegaard et al., 2014).

## *Analysis*

To analyze the differences between committed and aborted robberies, we drew on answers to the closed questions, and used a case-control design in which 14 characteristics of an aborted robbery were compared to those of one or two robberies committed by the same offender. This design helped to assure that any differences discovered cannot be attributed to stable personal characteristics of the offender (because both cases involved the same offender) and must therefore be related to differences between situations. We estimated univariate and multivariate fixed-effect logit models to assess the effect of the characteristics on whether the robbery was committed or aborted. The 18 variables refer to where the robbery was supposed to take place (residence or not), when it was supposed to take place (during darkness or daylight), various aspects of planning (whether it was planned longer than a day, hour or minute, whether clothing, method, neighborhood, street, target, and time had been selected, whether tips had been provided), whether co-offenders were involved, whether multiple victims were involved, whether a victim was known to the offender, whether the victim was known to be a criminal, and whether the offender was under the influence of drugs including alcohol, cannabis, or hard drugs.

The description of mechanisms that might explain the decision of the offender to abort the robbery builds on hypotheses developed upon the completion of the interviews. It still needs verification through extensive analysis of all interview transcriptions. Our findings of the subjective reasons for why the respondent decided to abort the robbery are based on analysis of answers to the open question “what was the main reason that you did not commit this robbery?” We coded the answers into seven

different categories: presence of police, moral, bystanders, physical, fear of victim, co-offenders, and doubt. Although the description of mechanisms was tentative, the reasons provided by the respondents were representative for the sample but clearly suffered from the problem of being post-rationalizations of their decision-making process. We decided to present both types of findings because they illustrate some of the potential strengths and weaknesses of learning about crime by focusing on aborted crimes.

## Findings

### *Characteristics of Aborted Robberies*

Table 3.1 presents the result of the 18 univariate fixed effects logit models that link characteristics of potential robbery situation to their outcome, i.e., whether they were committed or aborted. Even in a univariate analysis, most of the characteristics did not seem to have any systematic and significant effect on whether the robbery is committed or aborted. The three exceptions were whether the robbery was committed in a home (more likely to be committed), whether it was planned long in advance (more likely to be aborted), and whether the victim was known to the offender (less likely to be committed).

Because the univariate regression models did not account for correlations between the situational characteristics of anticipated robberies, a multivariate model was required to tease out which were the major characteristics that determined the outcome. Using initially all 18 variables listed in Table 3.1, a multivariate model was determined that optimally described the situational characteristics that affected whether an anticipated robbery was committed or aborted. The results demonstrated that when the anticipated robbery was a home robbery ( $OR = 2.83$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ) it was more likely to be committed, and when it was planned more than 1 h in advance ( $0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) it was more likely to be aborted.

### *Suggested Mechanisms Potentially Explaining Aborted Robberies*

We analyzed descriptions of the decision-making process of both committed and aborted robberies in order to explain the two findings about aborted robberies: (1) home robberies were less likely to get aborted than commercial and street robberies; and (2) robberies that were planned for more than an hour were more likely to get aborted than robberies that were planned for less than an hour. We illustrate these suggestive mechanisms with quotes from the respondents.

**Table 3.1** Relations between committing (as opposed to aborting) and characteristics of anticipated robberies. Estimates of 18 separate univariate fixed effect logit models

Characteristics of anticipated robbery	Odds ratio	Robberies	Persons
Location is home	2.22*	198	79
Dark during robbery	1.66	182	73
Planning longer than 1 minute	1.35	202	81
Planned longer than 1 hour	0.44**	202	81
Planning longer than 1 day	1.02	202	81
Clothes chosen	1.28	202	81
Method chosen	1.62	202	81
Target chosen	0.78	202	81
Neighborhood chosen	0.74	199	80
Street chosen	0.78	199	80
Time chosen	1.45	195	78
Tip provided	1.35	200	80
Co-offender(s)	0.81	200	80
More victims	2.00	115	48
Known victim	0.34**	111	47
Criminal victims	1.49	202	81
Any drugs (including alcohol)	1.72	200	80
Alcohol	2.12	200	80
Cannabis (hash, marihuana)	1.00	200	80
Hard drugs (ecstasy, cocaine, heroin)	4.65	202	81

Source: Bernasco et al. (2013) (drug use variables inserted here)

\* =  $p < .10$ ; \*\* =  $p < .05$

### Illustration of Home Robberies

The descriptions by our respondents suggested that they were less likely to abort home robberies than from other kinds of robberies because (1) victims of home robberies were aware of being robbed as soon as contact was established with the offender, whereas with other kinds of robberies they could still withdraw after contact was established with the victim; and (2) they expected home robberies to be more messy than other types of robberies, meaning that “unexpected” occurrences—things that did not occur according to the plan—were a part of the package when going for a home robbery, whereas unexpected events in street robberies and commercial robberies were seen as a reason to abort.

Respondent 86 described a situation where he carried out a home robbery despite a whole range of unexpected events (victim came downstairs, he was naked, he refused to tell where the money was). Instead of considering backing off and giving up due to these events, he described using extensive physical aggression:

Respondent: yes, yes, and we were inside, everyone was silent, everyone was scared, lots of adrenaline, mainly for me, and they went searching. By the garden door they had like a curtain with beads or something and that made a noise. So that man came downstairs. He was all naked. I know it sounds weird but it really happened miss.

Interviewer: Yeah, right

Respondent: He came downstairs all naked. I stood next to a 'soldier' [gang member] and I looked at him [victim]. And I was like shit!

Interviewer: And he was really naked?

Respondent: He was naked!

Interviewer: Oh ...

Respondent: And I was, I was ... like I just had a blackout, you know. When I saw that naked man my first reaction was I walked up to him. I hit him eight times with a hammer. On his face miss! And he fell down on the ground but he kept trying to stand. That soldier, that soldier, he tried to help my two Dutch friends. Afterwards they told me, yes they were scared, they did nothing, they just stood there like statues. That's why he couldn't help me. So I had to struggle alone with that man. But I kept saying, like really aggressively: "Shut up, shut the fuck up! Where is the money?" Really quietly but very aggressively he replied: "I have nothing! I have nothing!" I hit him again with that hammer, on his back, on his head, towards his ear, and it felt as if my whole hand was covered by blood. I was completely covered by blood. But it wasn't really like that. And he... and I realized that my three friends found nothing. That soldier of mine, he picked up a box and we thought the money would be in there. So they left the house and I stayed with that ... I kept pushing that man towards the ground, pushing him down, right. And when I ... when I saw my last friend run out of the door I also left.

Respondent 67 explained why he carried out a home robbery that was unexpectedly difficult. According to him it was impossible to back off because the victims were already aware that they were getting robbed. Instead of leaving the place when they were faced with obstacles they took extraordinary risks, and eventually got caught:

So we started putting on gloves. The boy, young know the one I told you about who was specialized in opening doors, he was unable to do it. But I thought I could also do it. I had seen it on TV. So he tried, tried, tried. It was like a corridor apartment, right. And in corridor apartments, neighbors more quickly hear what's going on. And it was already three o'clock in the morning. We tried to open the door. It didn't work out, you know what I mean? But I thought: "Hey, we're already here. We already revealed who we are, right, we're not leaving with empty hands". So we tried to force it. Force it, you? And, those guys, they weren't afraid. We tried, and we had to make more noise, The boy said: "OK, at some point I'm going to push and then you have to break that door." So we kicked the door. People inside already heard everything for a long time. We try and try and we don't get that door open. The kitchen window was next to the door. We broke the kitchen window, and opened it, and we came inside like that. One boy had a gun, you know, I had a crowbar in my hand, and another one, the boy who could open doors said: "Hey, can I also have a crowbar in my hand?" So we went inside.

During street robberies respondents were more likely to deal with unexpected obstacles by aborting from robberies and looking for new targets. Respondent 58 described how he together with co-offenders kept changing the target after they had put their mind to doing a robbery:

Because you wait, you keep waiting, you keep waiting, and you think ... by every person you think: "OK, now?", "No, no, no, the next one, the next one, the next one". So you remain in a kind of tension, you remain in the tension, yes. That sucks! The tension really sucks! Because you fight against your own adrenaline. You also fight against your will! Because you want to do it now. And then someone [co-offender] says: "No, no, no, wait, wait, wait". So you get a little angry at the other one that says: "No, why not that one?" "No, no, no, wait a little, because there're two other people coming." "Yes, let's go! Let's go and get those two!" "No, no, no, wait, wait, wait." Then he says, "Yes, now, now!" I say, "Yes, yes, now I don't want it" And we just continue like that.



## Illustration of Planning Robberies

According to our respondents' descriptions, when robberies were planned more than an hour in advance, and something unexpected happened, they would rather abort than changing the target. Respondent 44 described how he, for weeks in advance together with co-offenders, had planned a robbery of a large compartment store in detail. One of the employees in the store had provided them with information and was going to open the safe for them while pretending to be unaware of the robbery. They were staying in a hotel outside the city and had rented a bus for transportation. When they arrived at the scene, there were police everywhere:

It was a large branch of HEMA [Dutch department store]. We drove there. And apparently other people also knew about it. There was a police car in front of the door, and all kinds of agents. Someone had probably informed them and they knew about it. And then we left.

Changing the target would require weeks of planning. Robberies that were planned for less than an hour were commonly referred as "going hunting," like described by respondent 58 above. "Going hunting" meant wanting to do a robbery without having identified the target yet. While being in a state of looking for opportunities, they were flexible about their targets and therefore less likely to abort from a robbery they anticipated. Long periods of anticipation, as for robberies planned more than an hour before the event, also seemed to create levels of doubt that were more difficult to overcome than robberies that were decided upon on the spot. Respondent 57 described how he was in doubt about a robbery he had planned for weeks. He would normally use drugs to suppress his doubt. In this particular case he had not used drugs and was looking for excuses to avoid committing the robbery:

At least I know we were sitting somewhere. With the three of us. I think it was the same two guys. And we were waiting. And eventually ... Yeah, I also didn't feel it like at all. I had also not used drugs, and I wanted to leave. And then I eventually ... I was also the driver of the car, so they depended on me, and then I think I called my sister. Then I said, you need to send me this SMS, then I changed the name to my mother's name, just like 'mom' in my phone. And then I made her send me a SMS: "You have to get home now. Something bad happened. I want you to come now." Then I used that phone to say: "Look, a SMS from my mother," I said, "I must go home, we have to leave." And then they immediately came along, because they agreed. They could see from the SMS like, "yes, I really have to go". Well, then we left [laughing].

Respondent 43 described how he was hanging out with his friends at home when deciding to go somewhere to rob someone. The period of "hunting" was very short for them. He claimed that they simply went to the local shopping street and grabbed the first person they met:

Respondent: I just told those guys: "We're robbing someone". We were talking and I grabbed the guy. I got his wallet, and ran away.

Interviewer: And you were just chilling out? Or what did you do, I mean, when you came up with the idea?

Respondent: We were smoking a joint, watching TV, like that.

Interviewer: So you think it was also related to like boredom?

Respondent: Yes, boredom  
Interviewer: ... that you had nothing to do. And did you just get the first possible person or how did that go?  
Respondent: Just someone, just someone random.  
Interviewer: Yeah?  
Respondent: Yes, it didn't matter who it was

*Subjective Reasons for Aborted Robberies*

When the respondents had described the situations of aborted robberies we asked them to provide the main reason for why they had aborted the robbery. This interpretation afterwards provided insights into reasons that were not asked in the closed questions. Where our findings of the comparison of the situational characteristics of committed and aborted robberies showed that the location of the robbery and the length of planning mattered for the likelihood to abort, the offenders provided a larger amount of characteristics that according to their memory had mattered for why they had aborted from committing an anticipated robbery. Despite our doubt about whether these reasons were merely post-rationalizations of the event than to the real considerations that made them decide to abort, we provide their answers because they might be useful to include in a more systematic fashion in future research about aborted events. We describe the reasons, divided into a limited number of categories, below: presence of police, moral concerns, bystanders, physical circumstances, fear of victim, co-offenders, and doubt. The number of times that the reasons were mentioned by the respondents is presented in Table 3.2.

**Presence of Police**

This category of reasons included perceptions that the risk of getting arrested during the robbery was too great. Respondent 31 described how they realized that they were being observed on cameras and therefore decided to abort the robbery:

We wanted to do it. First, we were planning to come by car. Then we would be fast, fast. Around the corner, there was a garage. There you could stop the car. But, yeah, when we

**Table 3.2** Subjective reasons for aborted robberies

Reasons aborted	#	%
Other	18	22.2
Police	17	21.0
Moral	13	16.0
Bystanders	9	11.1
Physical	10	12.3
Fear of victim	7	8.6
Co-offenders	7	8.6
Total	81	100.0

Source: Bernasco et al. (2013)

wanted to do it, it didn't work out because there were cameras around there. From the police station. The police station was behind the garage. We didn't expect that there would be so many cameras around. And then, yeah, then we eventually decided not to do it.

## Moral Concerns

This category included reasons related to moral concerns such as not wanting to rob people in the presence of children or not wanting to rob older people or women. Respondent 33 explained how he had aborted a robbery when he realized that the victims would be female:

Respondent: I don't want that, I didn't want that, no. You know, everything that has to do with women, even if it's a whore, it doesn't matter. It's a person, you know, it's a woman. Women you need to... I don't want to hurt them, man. Women are a bit sacred to me.

Interviewer: What was the main reason that you didn't want to do the robbery? That was

...

Respondent: Women, man.

Interviewer: Had to do it with the profession?

Respondent: Yes, also. OK, you know, we do ... Some prostitutes who have to work, you know, they get forced, and then you just steal their money. You make it a lot harder for them. No man! I just refused to do that!

## Bystanders

This category included reasons like there were too many bystanders or the bystanders were too dangerous. Respondent 42 explained how there were too many customers in the store they wanted to rob. According to him, the risk that one of them would play what was referred to as "hero" was too high:

Respondent: There were a lot of people and I thought like: No man, today is a busy day. I don't go.

Interviewer: Many customers?

Respondent: Yes, and I don't want customers to be there when I enter. Maybe someone will try to play the hero or something like that. Then I have to do something. And I'm not planning to get caught for murder, or for attempted murder, no man. I only come for the money. Not to hurt someone, you know what I mean?

## Physical

Reasons included in this category were circumstances that made it practically impossible to commit the robbery. For instance, that the victim was not present at the chosen time of the event or did not have the goods intended as prey. Practicalities such as not having the car necessary for the robbery, or as in the case of respondent 75 not having the computer that enabled them to turn off the alarm, were included in this category:

Respondent: we wanted to rob a bank, everything was arranged, all the stuff was in place, car, masks, guns, the grinder for the lockers, everything, but some things were not there.

The code of the ... like one of those devices that you can use to switch off the alarm, like a bypass kind of machine. And that wasn't there. But we anyway went there and then it was supposed to come and then we would do it the next day. Waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting and then we didn't do it.

Interviewer: And then what?

Respondent: Then we didn't do it, because it was too late, and the money was already there ... At that specific moment there would be enough.

Interviewer: So the money was gone?

Respondent: Yes

Interviewer: Ok. And why was that machine, that bypass machine not there?

Respondent: It had to get picked up in Germany and the one who was supposed to do it got arrested. We heard that later. They were doing a large investigation in Germany on those people. And they had ... that's why we didn't get it.

## **Fear of Victims**

In this category reasons related to being afraid of the victim were included. For example, doubt about their ability to convince the victim to cooperate was given as reason to abort. Respondent 37 described it in the following way:

Yes, let's say, yeah, you don't know what kind of, you don't know what kind of man it is. Imagine it's suddenly a kick boxer, or something like that. That you suddenly get beaten up there.

## **Co-offenders**

In this category reasons related to the behavior of the co-offenders were included. Typically the respondent described not being certain that the co-offender would do what they had agreed on. Respondent 33 explained that he realized that his co-offenders were too afraid to carry out the robbery and that made him decide not to do it anyway:

We didn't even check it out. We just left. Because the other guys, they were shitting in their pants. They were scared, you know. They got afraid. So then I already thought: I'm not going to do anything together with you.

## **Doubt**

This category included less specific reasons like not daring to do it anyway, not feeling like doing it, and the feeling that it took too long. Respondent 83 explained how he was looking for a suitable target but kept focusing on possible obstacles because he actually did not dare to do it:

Then you go hunting on the street, to see if you can find a person who is easy to rip off, who is easy to get, right. But, yeah, then you actually don't have the guts to do it anyway. [...]  
Then you sit and watch. Then you think ... actually I don't dare anyway.

## Discussion

This chapter reported on a study comparing committed and aborted robberies. Its purpose was to illustrate what can be learned from analyzing crimes that were anticipated but not carried out. Whereas our study did not have a direct crime prevention purpose, studies of aborted crimes potentially offer insights that could be beneficial for such purposes. By learning about why offenders abort anticipated crimes, we might get to know what kind of prevention measures could facilitate aborting anticipated crimes. We attempted to answer three questions, namely the following: (1) What distinguishes aborted from committed robberies? (2) What mechanisms explain why some get aborted and others not? (3) What reasons do offenders provide for aborting robberies?

We based our conclusions on interviews with 104 robbery offenders who reported on a total of 256 robbery situations, including 81 aborted robberies. Aborted robberies were operationalized as robberies that the respondent had anticipated committing but decided not to carry out: the respondent had a target on his mind but decided not to rob that particular target, leaving the potential victim unaware of the aborted robbery.

In the statistical analysis of situational characteristics of aborted crimes we carried out an intrapersonal comparison of committed and aborted robberies involving the same offender. Where few previous studies of situational characteristics of crime were based on intrapersonal comparisons, our study included such comparisons. The effects we found in terms of committed and aborted robberies were therefore unrelated to relatively stable personal characteristics, such as amount of robbery experience. One likely hypothesis about the way personal characteristics potentially could influence our findings is that offenders were more likely to abort from robberies in the beginning of their career due to lack of experiences, whereas they later were more likely to commit anticipated robberies because they became more professional. Since we know that the time span between the committed and aborted robberies reported in our study was short (respondents were asked to describe the most recent robbery for each category), it is unlikely that the personal characteristics of the respondent changed significantly between the committed and aborted robbery described.

In relation to the first question about situational characteristics of aborted crimes we found that two characteristics were significant for aborted crimes: (1) home robberies got aborted less often than street and commercial robberies; and (2) robberies planned for more than an hour were more likely to get aborted than robberies that were planned for shorter periods of time.

In relation to the second question about mechanisms that could explain the decision to abort the crime, we proposed that our respondents were less likely to abort from home robberies than other kinds of robberies for two reasons. First, victims of home robberies were aware of being robbed as soon as contact was established with the offender, and that made it difficult to withdraw. Second, offenders expected home robberies to include “unexpected” occurrences—things that did not occur

according to the plan. Unexpected events were seen as part of the package when going for a home robbery whereas with street and commercial robberies they were not seen as part of a script and therefore a reason to abort. Similar mechanisms seemed to be at stake with regard to the finding that long planned robberies were more likely to get aborted than shortly planned robberies: long planning was described as making the offender unable to deal with unexpected events. When robberies were planned for more than an hour, offenders described being unable to define alternative targets if things did not go as expected. Robberies that were described as a part of a "hunting process" were more likely to take place because the script for going hunting implied being flexible about the target from the start.

In relation to the third question about subjective reasons for why respondents had aborted an anticipated robbery, we found that several characteristics, not included as closed questions, were mentioned as important for the decision to abort: presence of police, moral concerns, presence of bystanders, physical circumstances, fear of victim, co-offenders, and doubt. Apart from the presence of bystanders, all these reasons were new to us. In our statistical comparison of aborted and committed robberies the presence of bystanders did not have a significant effect. When asking our respondents if any bystanders were present while focusing on specific robberies, they generally claimed to be so focused on getting the job done that they were unaware of whether anyone was present and possibly watching them. When being asked to reflect on the most important reason for the decision to abort bystanders were anyway mentioned by some of the respondents. Despite the fact that our sample for aborted robberies was limited (we analyzed 81 aborted robberies), analysis of the presence and behaviors of bystanders as potential prevention measures seems worthwhile to investigate in future research. Even though the subjective reasons provided by respondents potentially suffered from the problem of being post-rationalizations more than factors that influenced the actual decision-making process, the reasons might be relevant to include in future analysis of prevention measures.

The three types of insights offered in this chapter differ in terms of epistemological value. The statistical analysis of situational characteristics, significant for the decision to abort, is strong because of the intrapersonal comparison: we know that the tendencies to commit home robberies more often than street and commercial robberies and to abort from long planned robberies compared with shortly planned robberies are not the effect of personal preferences but of situational characteristics. The weak aspect of this type of analysis was the fact that we included a very limited amount of situational characteristics, leaving out factors that we were unaware of but nevertheless might be the most relevant for the decision-making process of offenders.

While our analysis of the mechanisms that might explain why offenders abort from anticipated robberies was limited in scope, an analysis of open descriptions by the offenders potentially helped explain findings of the statistical analysis while being inductively driven: it took the experiences of the respondents as a starting point for the focus of the analysis without uncritically reproducing their own explanations as significant reason for their behavior.

The analysis of the subjective reasons provided by the respondents clearly suffered from the last mentioned epistemological problem: what respondents claimed to be the most significant reason was reproduced in the analysis. The strength of this kind of data was that it was clearly inductively driven and thereby potentially interesting for the development of hypotheses. The weakness was that it was highly questionable whether the remembered reasons really guided the actual behavior in the situation itself. The open coding of the descriptions of the decision-making process of the aborted and committed robberies aimed at explaining the mechanisms does not suffer from similar problems of interpretation. Apart from the obvious time-consuming nature of such analysis, a possible issue lay in the interpretation of the person coding the data; such interpretation problems are, however, possible to check, control, and eventually minimize by using multiple coders (Miller, 2014).

The fact that we defined “robberies” and “aborted robberies” relatively broadly, including street, home, and commercial robberies, and defined “anticipated robbery” as everything from “discussing targets with friends at home” to “standing in front of the shop door of a robbery planned in detail” made the amount of possible significant differences so endless that little came out as significant in the analysis. Recommendations for future research aiming at comparing “events” with “non-events” therefore include defining both the event and the non-event more narrowly. Reasons for aborting home robberies might be so different from aborting street robberies that including them in the same analysis makes little sense. Similarly, reasons for not committing a robbery that was discussed with friends at home are likely quite different from the reasons not to do it when standing in full equipment in front of the retail shop door. In other words, future attempts to compare committed and aborted robberies should probably attempt to compare cases that are similar in many more aspects than just being anticipated robberies.

The most important conclusion to draw based on our chapter is that it is possible to gain relevant information about crimes that never took place by asking offenders to describe such incidents. Getting to know more about aborted crimes from the perspective of offenders is promising in terms of gaining better understanding about the usefulness of crime prevention measures. We hope that other researchers will make use of this approach for such purposes.

## References

- Bernasco, W., Ruiter, S., Bruinsma, G. J. N., Pauwels, L. F., & Weerman, F. M. (2013). Situational causes of offending: A fixed-effects analysis of space-time budget data. *Criminology*, 51(4), 895–926.
- Blokland, A. A. J., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2005). The effects of life circumstances on longitudinal trajectories of offending. *Criminology*, 43(4), 1203–1240.
- Ganpat, S. M., van der Leun, J., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2013). The influences of event characteristics and actors behaviour on the outcome of violent events. *British Journal of Criminology*, 53(4), 685–704.

- Graham, K., Tremblay, P. F., Wells, S., Parnanen, K., Purcell, J., & Jelley, J. (2006). Harm, intent, and the nature of aggressive behavior measuring naturally occurring aggression in barroom settings. *Assessment*, 13(3), 280–296.
- Hewitt, A., & Beauregard, E. (2013). Offending patterns of serial sex offenders: Escalation, de-escalation, and consistency of sexually intrusive and violent behaviours. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, 11(1), 57–80.
- Jacques, S. (2010). The necessary conditions for retaliation: Toward a theory of non-violent and violent forms in drug markets. *Justice Quarterly*, 27(2), 186–205.
- Leclerc, B., Lussier, P., & Deslauriers-Varin, N. (2014). Offending patterns over time: An examination of specialization, escalation and de-escalation in the commission of sexual offenses. In A. Blokland & P. Lussier (Eds.), *Sex offenders: A criminal career approach*. Oxford, UK: Wiley.
- Levine, M., Taylor, P. J., & Best, R. (2011). Third parties, violence, and conflict resolution: The role of group size and collective action in the microregulation of violence. *Psychological Science*, 22(3), 406–412.
- Lindegaard, M. R., Bernasco, W., & Jacques, S. (2014). Consequences of expected and observed victim resistance for offender violence during robbery events. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 52(1), 32–61.
- Lussier, P., Leclerc, B., Healey, J., & Proulx, J. (2008). Generality of deviance and predation: Crime switching and specialization patterns in persistent sexual offenders. In M. Delisi & P. Conis (Eds.), *Violent offenders: Theory, public policy and practice* (pp. 97–140). Boston, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Miller, J. (2014). Epistemology and rigor in criminological research: An explanatory journey. In S. Ruiter, W. Bernasco, & W. Huisman (Eds.), *Eenvoud en Verscheidenheid: Liber amicorum voor Henk Elffers* (pp. 491–502). Amsterdam: NSCR and VU University.
- Phillips, S. (2003). The social structure of vengeance: A test of black's model. *Criminology*, 41(3), 673–708.
- Tonry, M. (Ed.). (2014). *Why crime rates fall and why they don't* (Crime and justice, Vol. 43). Chicago, MI: University of Chicago Press.
- Vargas, R. (2014). Criminal group embeddedness and the adverse effects of arresting a gang's leader: A comparative case study. *Criminology*, 52(2), 143–168.