

# Man Behind the Mask: Meet the Muggers

**Editor's Note:** *This is Part 2 of a three-part series analyzing what muggers look for when targeting victims and what you can do to avoid becoming one. [Read Part 1.](#)*

When we left Lee Michaels, he was on his knees outside of his townhouse in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, with a gun pointed at his head. Thankfully, Michaels escaped the terrifying encounter — the details of which we'll explore further in the last installment of this series — and the police were able to track down and arrest one of his assailants, Casey Leon Holt, who plea-bargained and was sent northwest of the Twin Cities to the Minnesota Correctional Facility St. Cloud for aggravated robbery. Holt did his time there and was eventually released, having never paid the \$450 in restitution he owes Michaels.

The prison system — where so many muggers eventually end up — is where we found and initially contacted all of our survey respondents. And it was through a survey returned from Avon Park Correctional Institution in Polk County, Florida, that I first came into contact with Christopher Gilbert.

There was something about his response that captured my notice. Perhaps it was how he carefully printed his answers with a red pen, how he organized his thoughts or how he emphasized his tips on how to avoid becoming a victim with earnest exclamation points. At any rate, I wrote back and asked if he would be interested in an in-person interview. He quickly responded and said that he was amenable.

One Thursday morning in early October, I drove from my hotel in Sebring, Florida, to the prison, which is roughly an hour and 45 minutes inland from Tampa. It was warm and muggy despite being fall. The countryside along Florida 64 rolled gently and featured stands of pine trees, live oaks draped with moss and the occasional citrus grove. My imagination ran to the alligators that lurked unseen in the countless swamps and small lakes.

The road ended at a United States Air Force bombing range, and the campus of the Avon Park Correctional Institution lay just beyond — low-slung buildings surrounded by fences topped with concertina wire, much like any other modern prison facility. It must have been a shift change, because correctional officers streamed through the gate and into the parking lot.

After I was admitted through the gate and ushered into one of the buildings, I was struck by the seemingly casual atmosphere. Inmates, correctional officers and staffers milled around together and went about their business with an easy familiarity. (It was

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later explained to me that I was in a a lower-security portion of the prison, which itself is known for its vocational opportunities and re-entry programs.) I was taken to a conference room where Gilbert was seated across a table.

His hair was buzz cut and graying at the temples. He had deep-set eyes and a weathered face and wore a loose, blue short-sleeved shirt with a pocket over a white undershirt. His bare forearms were heavily tattooed. He was 43 years old, about to celebrate his birthday on Halloween. He addressed me during the interview as “sir.”

Gilbert explained that he grew up in a crime-ridden section of Allentown, Pennsylvania, a city of 120,000 people north of Philadelphia that has suffered mightily from deindustrialization. Both his parents were 16 when he was conceived. And because his father initially denied paternity, he was raised by his mother.

“She didn’t have a lot of time to really invest in me,” Gilbert said. “She was living her own childhood at the time that I was coming up. So I was very rebellious. I was with babysitters a lot — and other people who would watch me while my mom went out and did her thing.”

He first met his father, who had moved to Florida, when he was 7 years old. He started making the trip down south every summer to be with him. Because of his age, his father felt more like an older brother, and Gilbert quickly

got caught up in his debauchery.

“He was a partier,” Gilbert stated. “A womanizer. So I was around a lot of drugs and alcohol. It was all commonplace to me. And that’s what I began to associate Florida with. Kind of like a lawless, laid-back, no-rules lifestyle.”

Gilbert moved in with his father full time around the age of 12. He tried playing football but mostly hung around with a collection of drug users and burnouts. He started doing “pretty crazy stuff,” like stealing cars, breaking and entering, and taking copious amounts of drugs. He got into a physical altercation with his father after being caught stealing his money and went home to Pennsylvania with a bloody nose and split lip.

He continued his criminal ways in the Keystone State and soon entered the juvenile system, cycling in and out of the system until his late teens, when he was driven to Pittsburgh International Airport and told by authorities to go to Florida and not come back. He grew homesick, however, and quickly returned.

Back in Pennsylvania, he fell in with a criminal gang that two of his friends had joined in his absence. He shaved his head, attended the requisite bible study sessions, and participated in education and recruitment drives.

“This was a concerning thing with my family,” he recalled. “They knew what I was getting involved in. But to me, I was just looking for brotherhood.”

When one of the gang’s leaders, Mark Thomas, was arrested by federal agents for conspiracy to commit bank robbery, Gilbert and his associates came up with an ill-conceived plan to break him out of custody. The plan was to stop and take control of the van in which Thomas was being transported to the federal courthouse in Allentown for a scheduled appearance.

Gilbert was caught and sentenced to seven years in the Pennsylvania prison system. He turned 19 in the county jail, went to prison, and served 22 months before he was paroled and moved back to Florida, where he continued to break the law and move in and out of the prison system there.

He went to see a pain management doctor in the fall of 2011 because of three herniated discs in his lower back. He was prescribed a “boatload” of opioid narcotics, which soon became a habit. He quickly went from taking the pills orally to crushing and snorting them to extracting the opioids in water and injecting the solution.

“They see my track marks and kicked me out of the doctor,” Gilbert said. “So now I had a habit that was hundreds of dollars a day worth of pills.”

In order to continue his habit, he committed robbery, started pawning items and even stole from his girlfriend, whom he describes as being the “best thing” that has ever happened to him.

“It went from being high to being normal,” Gilbert said of the opioids’ effect. “And when I didn’t have the pill, it was the most important thing to me than anything else in my life. It meant more to me than eating, than where I slept, than the people who were around me that I loved. My physical well-being was totally dependent on whether or not I had my pill.”

He said he quickly went into what he calls “f\*\*\*-it mode” and launched headfirst into the crime spree that led to his 2014 arrest and subsequent imprisonment at the Avon Park Correctional Institution.

After being kicked out of his girlfriend’s house, Gilbert found himself on the street, where he obtained a replica Smith & Wesson M&P. At first, he used it to fend off

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would be attackers and protect his stash of pills. But eventually he used it to rob a gas station. During the getaway, he dropped his mask, which police used to obtain his DNA and issue an arrest warrant.

He went on to extort his girlfriend and then rob a Village Inn and a Circle K convenience store with his fake pistol. After that, there was a “lull,” but he soon ran out of pills and cash and grew desperate. That’s when he found himself at a T.J. Maxx in a busy section of Tampa in broad daylight, pondering his next move.

“So I’m prowling around the store,” Gilbert recalled, “looking for somebody that I can snatch and grab and mug, essentially. And I see a woman walking around in the store with jewelry on. Very thick gold necklace. Bracelets.”

He considered jumping the woman in the store but thought better of it. He followed her out to the parking lot and made his move as she was getting into her car.

“This is in a plaza where there are people shopping,” Gilbert said. “And right as she goes to start unlocking her vehicle, I walk up to her and act like I’m security from the store. But she starts kind of like saying something to me in Spanish. And so I just grabbed her necklace and tried to yank it off her neck.”

The necklace was so thick, however, that it wouldn’t come loose. His hand was practically caught. To make matters worse, the woman began screaming at the top of her lungs. Soon there was a small crowd of onlookers. He tried telling them that he was store security to keep them at bay.

Gilbert let go of the necklace, ran away through a store and managed to escape despite the police pursuing him with dogs and helicopters.

He committed a bank robbery next — he passed a note to the teller — and then laid low in a “drug house” for two weeks before the police caught wind of his location. A SWAT team raided the house with “flash grenades, the whole nine yards,” and he was taken into custody.

“Mugging wasn’t my forte,” Gilbert said, looking back. “But it wasn’t off the table. It was definitely something that I did and was willing to do again if the opportunity presented itself. And I did have a certain thought process behind how I would look at people and assess them.”

He said that in addition to conspicuous displays of wealth, he was looking for the path of least resistance. Someone who looked physically weak and wasn’t going to assert himself or herself. “You’re most likely not going to rob some big dude that looks, you

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know, physically capable of resisting you in some way,” Gilbert said. “Or harming you and turning the tables on you.”

He said that being shot by one of his victims was an ever-present worry, particularly because of Florida’s “stand your ground” statute ... and because he thinks that private citizens likely aren’t as well-trained as police and they’re more likely to get jumpy and shoot prematurely out of sheer panic.

“At least that’s my thought process behind it,” Gilbert explained. “But even still, with my desperation, I put my drug before any risk. And that’s why I’m in prison right now.”

With 36 months left on his sentence, he spends his time training a dog from a local shelter through a program called “Heel Together Academy.” Before I left the prison grounds, he showed me the pit bull mix that he was socializing prior to her being adopted. Out of Gilbert’s earshot, one of the correctional officers told me that the program had completely changed his attitude for the better.

When asked why he wanted to tell his story to *Concealed Carry Magazine* without getting anything in return, Gilbert said he hoped doing so might stop a future mugging or help give readers the upper hand in the event of a mugging — and because up until the point where he was most recently arrested, all he had done was take from other people.

“So this is just a small way of giving back,” he confessed.

## **Chad Goehring**

While Christopher Gilbert was the only inmate I interviewed in person, I corresponded with many more through the mail after receiving their initial survey responses.

Chad Goehring invited me to come see him at Snake River Correctional Institution in Eastern Oregon, but the COVID-19 pandemic and a particularly feckless public information officer blocked my path. However, I learned quite a bit about his story after trading letters for several months.

Originally from Corvallis, Oregon, Goehring is 33 years old and has been incarcerated for the past seven years. Unlike many of the inmates with whom I dealt as part of this project, he grew up in what he described as a “loving” home.

“I later found out that my whole family were alcoholics and/or drug addicts,” he said. “But they all made sure that I knew I was loved. I pretty much got whatever I wanted when I wanted it. Even though we lived paycheck to paycheck and were technically poor.”

His path to mugging started with marijuana at the age of 12, Goehring said. That led to drinking at 14 and then methamphetamines at 16. (He would get high with his own grandmother, who used meth to blunt the pain of cancer.) He said that meth was everywhere in the trailer park in which he grew up.

“If I didn’t know any better,” he said, “I’d swear to this day that shit grew on trees back there.”

As Goehring grew older, he developed “quite the tolerance,” and his grandmother could no longer afford to keep him high. He tried to sell but ended up smoking the entire supply fronted to him.

“So, at this point, I was a 17-year-old meth addict,” he said, “who dropped out of high school with no work skills and a \$100-a-day habit and no way to pay for it.”

Goehring said, “F\*\*\* it” and mugged a known drug dealer who used to hang around his trailer park. He took his meth and everything of value in his pockets.

“I loved every second of it,” he recalled. “I fell in love with the feeling of power and control. And I didn’t stop robbing people until I went to prison the first time in April 2006.”

Goehring said he started feeling invincible after several successful muggings and robberies. He normally targeted drug dealers under the cover of night, as he thought they wouldn’t call the police. And while he never had to use a weapon, he said he would have if he felt his life was in danger.

“I made it a point to be sober when I did this type of thing,” he said. “So I could think clearly and not hurt anybody on accident.”

The average take was anywhere from \$300 to \$500, though Goehring said he once nabbed \$40,000 in cash, 12 pounds of meth and 3.5 pounds of heroin. He was 22 years old at the time and split the take with three associates. He said he was “hooked” after that.

When he used to mug people on the street, he prioritized victims who were timid or intoxicated, who had their hands full or who were wearing headphones — “so I could get the jump on them and control the situation as much as possible,” Goehring stated.

He was arrested and went to prison for 34 months. He tried to clean up his act after his release but fell in with old friends and robbed a drug dealer at a 7-Eleven. (“A common spot for tweakers to show up at 2 to 3 a.m.,” he said.) This dealer did call the police, and Goehring’s arrest on Thanksgiving Day in 2014 landed him in Snake River. His earliest possible release date is spring of 2023.

“It’s cool though,” Goehring said. “I’m actually glad I got caught and got the amount of time I got. If I didn’t come to prison, I was on track to really hurt someone. The universe works in mysterious ways.

## **Phillip Root**

Philip Root, 42, is currently an inmate at State Correctional Institution Mercer in Western Pennsylvania. There he spends his time as a “block representative,” helping newcomers adjust to prison life. He also works out and reads to pass the hours. He’s been “down” for going on seven years and has three more years until his minimum sentence is reached.

He said he grew up in and out of foster homes, dealt with abuse and was introduced to drugs early in life. By the time he was 18 years old, he was addicted to crack cocaine, and he began mugging to support his habit. There were innocent victims, but he mostly targeted people around his hometown of Sharon, Pennsylvania, who were associated with the drug life.

“A very close friend died from an overdose in front of me,” Root stated. “So I have a cold heart when it comes to that.”

He said he never targeted women — though he did look for weaker men — and that in all of his muggings, he never had to hurt anyone. If someone resisted too much, he simply ran away.

Root said he mugged 19 different people, nabbing anywhere from \$15 to \$8,000 at a time. At first, he hid his face with a skull cap or winter hat. But, later on, he no longer cared about hiding his identity. He said he worried more about being arrested than being shot.

“To me, being shot is part of the job,” he said. “But prison takes away my freedom. Being shot is a physical fear. Being in prison is mentally and emotionally fearful.”

muggers/

Root said he never had a pistol pulled on him, mainly because he never gave anyone the chance.

“I took control of the situation right away,” he said. “I used the threat of violence.”

When asked why he wanted to tell his story to *Concealed Carry Magazine*, Root said that once he got to prison and off of drugs, his conscience caught up with him.

“Most people blame society or their upbringing,” he said. “But I don’t blame no one. Yes, I did have a very bad childhood. And, yes, the system failed me by putting me in foster homes that were abusive. But I chose to start drugs. And I let it take over my life.”

## Joseph White

Joseph White, 29, is currently incarcerated at State Correctional Institution Albion in Western Pennsylvania. Originally from Erie, Pennsylvania, he said his mom was a drug addict and gave him up for adoption when he was 3 years old. His adoptive parents were strict, but, all in all, things were “OK.”

He said he first mugged someone when he was 13 years old and had run away from home. He saw an opportunity and took it. He kept mugging people with knives and BB guns, graduating to a 9mm pistol when he grew older.

White mugged between 15 and 20 people, he said, and the majority of those attempts were successful. He wore dark clothing and usually tried to cover his face. Sometimes he was high; sometimes he was sober. He didn’t really have a reputation on the streets and was a loner for the most part. He sometimes he was sober.

He didn’t really have a reputation on the streets and was a loner for the most part. He would walk or drive around Erie and look for opportunities.

“I would never try to rob a group of more than two people,” White said. “I would hang around ATM machines and try to catch people coming out of bars, normally.”

The most money he ever got was \$3,500, though sometimes he came away with nothing. He was more afraid of a victim pulling a gun than being caught by the police.

“Because I did not want to get shot and die,” White admitted. “If I got caught by the police, I would still have my life.”



His luck came to an end when he was recorded by a surveillance camera and the footage was broadcast by a TV news station. This led to his arrest and current imprisonment. After 10 years and three months behind bars, he has seven months left before he's eligible for parole. He currently works as a cook in the kitchen.

"I wake up at 4:30 a.m. and go to work until 5 p.m.," he said. "I go out to the yard for an hour, shower, read a couple of "chapters from a book, go to sleep, then wake up and do it again."

He urged readers to consider the mindset of a mugger, roaming the streets and looking to strip victims of their cash and valuables.

"There is a good chance they are going to be under the influence of something and are at a low point in their life," he said. "They obviously feel that they have nothing to lose."

## **Daniel Duran**

Daniel Duran, 61, is currently an inmate at snake river correctional institution in Eastern Oregon. He said he has very little memory of his childhood but that he was an adrenaline junkie, angry at the world and very arrogant. And while he was never arrested for any of the muggings "he committed, he has been convicted of armed robbery three times, among other things.

"I've been in prison on the installment plan since 1984," Duran said. "Manslaughter, burglaries, armed robberies (state and federal), just to name a few. I'm currently serving 70 months for another robbery."

While he used a weapon during some of his 22 muggings, he said he didn't need to if his presentation was correct. "Presentation is how you look, talk and act during the course of a mugging or robbery," Duran said.

He would go to thrift stores and buy clothing that he would discard after a mugging. He experimented with headbands, sunglasses, fake tattoos and even a Band-Aid on the bridge of his nose. And he always made a point of committing the crime in a different town than where he lived.

"Never shit in your own yard," he said.

Duran said he was always sober when he "worked," because drugs and alcohol made him too slow. And depending on the area, he could net anywhere from \$40 to \$500

per mugging. He said he always acted alone because it's easier to split the money that way. He worried about being shot, particularly by a woman.

“A woman isn't as level-headed as a man,” he stated. “A man will naturally try to size you up before things get critical. That's all the time I need. But a woman is a lot different.”

Not all of Duran's muggings were successful. A few went “really bad,” but he said he can't discuss the “incredibly crazy circumstances.”

He spends his time at Snake River going to school and working in a call center. He said it's important to stay focused — physically, mentally and spiritually — during the “down time.” He said he's participating in this series because of his grandmother, who was mugged 16 times in Denver.

“She started putting all her cash in her bra and kept only \$3 in her purse,” Duran said. “She would throw her purse down on the ground and flee. I'm doing it for her.”

## **Different Men, Similar Stories**

While these were only a few of the survey participants' stories, there were several common denominators: namely, rotten childhoods, drug addiction and desperation. And most of them at least gave lip service to being contrite for their actions. Many were likely sincere.

Now that we've gotten to know some of the muggers, we'll take a closer look at how readers can avoid becoming victims in the third and final installment — and finally learn how Lee Michaels managed to free himself from his frightening encounter. Stay tuned.”

## **About The Author: Dorsey Kindler**

Dorsey Kindler writes enterprise series for *Concealed Carry Magazine*. He's covered tough topics for gun owners, including the legal use of marijuana and self-defense for truck drivers.