

# On Targets: Muggers Share Criminal Insight

**Editor's Note:** *This is Part 1 of a three-part series in Concealed Carry Magazine analyzing what muggers look for when targeting victims and what you can do to avoid becoming one.*

It had been a normal day for Lee Michaels as he drove from pickup league hockey to his townhome in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. The time was approximately 11:35 p.m. as he piloted his '99 Cadillac STS into the parking lot. As he neared the detached garage in front of his unit, he noticed a man riding a bike. Michaels briefly stopped to watch the man ride past him. He's got a blue jacket with red sleeves," he said. "And he kind of rides on. So I circle the parking lot once just to make sure he cleared and, you know, keep an eye on things."

Apart from taking these simple precautions, Michaels didn't worry about the man too much. Brooklyn Park is a bucolic place in the fall. Named by settlers after their hometown in Michigan, the city on the west bank of the Mississippi is a desirable bedroom community of Minneapolis and St. Paul. In 2020, the city was one of 111 Minnesota communities to earn the "Tree City USA" award. Professional-wrestler-turned-politician Jesse Ventura had served as its mayor in the early 1990s.

Michaels, at the time a 38-year-old production director for Clear Channel Radio, opened his garage door and pulled in. He put the car in reverse to light things up and closed it with his car still running. "I'm always thinking that if anybody jumps in behind me, I'm taking off," he said. Ten minutes went by as Michaels finished what he was listening to on the radio, downed what was left of his water and put away his hockey equipment. Only then did he step out of the garage through a side door.

As he stepped out, he noticed a man coming around the corner maybe 30 feet away. As he closed the distance on Michaels, he swung wide on the sidewalk and asked for change. It was then that Michaels realized it was the same man who had biked past his car. "So I immediately glanced behind me because there's about four more garage stalls behind me," he said. "And I'm thinking, 'Is there somebody behind me?' And there wasn't." Michaels turned back around and told the man that he had just come home from hockey and that he didn't have anything to give him. At that moment, another man stepped from around the same corner and aimed a semi-automatic handgun at Michaels.

"Well you're going to give me something," he said menacingly.

Immediately reaching into his pocket for his keys and wallet, Michaels laughed nervously as he handed over his valuables. “You got me, man,” he said. “Here you go. Have a good night.” The contents of his wallet included a \$20 bill and one card for a free Chipotle burrito. Disgusted, the gunman pushed the wallet back at Michaels and told him that he had to have more than that.

“Dude, it’s right here,” he stated. “You can see I’ve got nothing else. I just came from hockey.”

The gunman told Michaels that he was going to give more than that. He demanded that he get on his knees. *This is not going to be good*, Michaels thought as he complied with the order. He looked up at the bedroom windows of his townhouse and was dismayed to see that his wife had gone to bed before he’d come home. The man pushed the gun to his head and became irate. “I’m going to have to do you right now,” he said. “I’m going to f\*\*\*\*\* do you right now.” The first thought to go through Michaels’ mind was that his wife was going to find him, hours later, face down on the sidewalk, dead.

*Gosh, this is not a good situation*, he told himself.

## A Daunting Assignment

Like countless Americans before him, Michaels was the victim of a mugging, which is a form of robbery — itself legally defined as theft by way of threatened or actual force. Muggings are different from other forms of robbery in that their perpetrators target people (as opposed to banks or stores) and attack in public (as opposed to home invasions).

Because it is not recorded as a separate crime, it’s difficult to pin down how many muggings are committed in the U.S. in a given year. But according to FBI crime statistics, there were 81.6 robberies per 100,000 people in 2019, the most recent year for which data is available. This is significantly down from 133.1 robberies per 100,000 people 10 years prior in 2009.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the downward trend, muggings are still a pernicious problem — mainly in urban areas. Even our political elites are not immune. Former U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer was recently walking the streets of Oakland, [California](#), when she was shoved in the back and relieved of an expensive iPhone. “Why would you do this to a grandmother?” she shouted at the fleeing assailants according to a news story published by *The Independent*.<sup>2</sup>

In Fall 2020, the editors of *Concealed Carry Magazine* asked me to report and write a series of articles on muggings. Largely based on the results of a survey I was to administer to muggers currently incarcerated at prisons throughout the U.S., I was to analyze the data, look for trends and try to find meaningful insights into how readers can **avoid becoming victims themselves**. It was a tall order, especially given that prison officials are famously reluctant to deal with the press. Despite these initial misgivings, I said “yes” to the assignment and immediately got to work.

One of the first things I did was to open a P.O. Box in the City of Chico, California, which is several miles away from my small town in the Sierra Foothills. This was a safety precaution so as to not reveal my home address to any inmates with whom I would correspond via mail. The next order of business was to reach out to the departments of corrections for all 50 states, trying to obtain information on who was incarcerated for robbery. Most emails and calls went unanswered, while a representative from the **Idaho** Department of Corrections flat out said he “didn’t have the time” to deal with my request. And so it went for the next few months.

### Breakthrough in Oregon

My first breakthrough came the following spring when I got in touch with Nickie Basinger, a cheerful communications coordinator for **Oregon**’s Department of Corrections. After a brief email exchange, I had my hands on an Excel spreadsheet containing the names of more than 1,600 Oregon inmates convicted of robbery. Now knowing better what to ask for, I obtained similar lists from **Arizona**, **Pennsylvania** and **Florida**. I then used a **Montana**-based printing service to mail 3,200 surveys to inmates in various prisons in all four of those states.

Shortly after, I was informed by Executive Editor Kevin Michalowski that my Arizona surveys were being tossed in the garbage. He had been in touch with a sergeant for mail and property at the Arizona State Prison Complex Tucson, who told him the survey was deemed contraband. Only a handful of the 800 surveys sent to inmates in prisons in the Grand Canyon State had slipped through the cracks.

Similarly, most of the 800 surveys sent to inmates in prisons in the State of Florida had disappeared into the void without explanation. Only three completed Florida surveys made it back to my P.O. Box. After I sent out another batch of 800 surveys to shore up my results, I was left with 142 completed surveys by late summer — the vast majority coming from Oregon and Pennsylvania. The response rate was just over 3.5%.

This was not altogether horrible, considering that an untold number of surveys were sent to incarcerated robbers who hadn’t committed a mugging — robbery was as far

as I could narrow it down — that the survey was on paper (not online) and unincentivized, and that prisoners had to pay for their own stamps and writing materials.

As the results came in, I fed the survey data into an Excel spreadsheet. I was struck by how many of the inmates had scribbled notes in the margins or had included detailed, hand-written letters explaining their situations and how they came to be incarcerated. One even supplied a photo. There was only one crank who wrote, “F\*\*\* You Brood Bitch” and “We Hate Snitches!” across his uncompleted survey. The vast majority of respondents took the enterprise seriously.

Although I was initially skeptical that 142 responses would be enough, my wife Carroll — an assistant professor at California State University, Chico — assured me this wasn’t the case. With a Ph.D. in agricultural and resource economics, she was used to working with large data sets. And she said the number of responses was more than adequate for the “law of large numbers” to kick in, tamping down statistical noise and allowing for meaningful results to come from the data.

“And so with that number,” she said, “assuming that we got a decent random sampling — so that these aren’t somehow all concentrated in a specific group of people with some unusual characteristics — we have enough people that it’s most likely representative of the larger group of prisoners.” She tested this hypothesis by using a program called “Stata” — used for analyzing data sets — to isolate the results from Pennsylvania and Oregon (the two states that comprised the majority of the responses). While there were some differences between the states, none of those differences were statistically significant. “That boosts your expectation that your survey responses are valid,” she indicated, “and that your sample is large enough to have something that’s perhaps representative of other states and other populations of prisoners.”

## The Results

The survey itself was a simple, one-page affair, with questions on the front and instructions and a space for inmates to write down their contact information on the back.

Question No. 1 asked, “Which of the following behaviors or attributes would make you more likely to target a victim?” and then lists 23 specific behaviors — ranging from “wearing earbud headphones” to “walking with a cane.”

The four behaviors or attributes marked by more than 50% of respondents seem to indicate an appealing target and the right opportunity:

- The person is alone.
- The person is wearing an expensive watch.
- The person is walking on a dark street.
- The person is flashing cash.

Three behaviors or attributes that signal being unaware were selected by 30-50% of respondents:

- The person has his or her attention on a phone screen.
- The person appears to be a tourist not from here.
- The person appears to be drunk.

Fully 37% of respondents selected “the person is a man.” This tracked with several write-in answers, including:

- The person is involved in illegal activity.
- The person had disrespected me.
- The person had taken something of value from me or a loved one.

The behaviors least selected by respondents (11% of the time or less) included:

- The person is elderly.
- The person is a child.
- The person has a child with them.
- The person is walking very quickly.
- The person makes eye contact with me.
- The person has a cane.

Some of the more popular write-in answers included:

- The person is a known drug dealer.
- The person is known for having money.
- The person is using an ATM machine.
- The person looks scared and/or noncombative.

*The takeaway tracks with the famous advice of trainer John Farnham: “Don’t do stupid things in stupid places with stupid people.”*

Question No. 2 asked, “Which of the following scenarios would most likely cause you to end your robbery attempt?” and goes on to list eight separate scenarios. These range from “the person you are robbing has a gun” to “the person you are robbing calls 911.”

The most popular selection by far (62%) was “the person you are robbing has a gun.” The next most common selections (between 40-50%) included “the person you are robbing screams or yells,” “the person you are robbing calls 911,” and “other.”

Some of the more popular write-in answers included:

- Potential witnesses appear.
- Police arrive on the scene.
- There is bystander involvement.
- The victim appears to be trained/fights back.

In one of the more interesting write-in answers, the respondent indicated that he’d break off an attack if his victim “has a heart attack, stroke and/or seizure.”

*The takeaway here is that muggers clearly prefer unarmed or untrained victims and are loathe to draw a crowd or encounter the police.*

Question No. 3 asked, “If you decide to rob someone on the street, are you more concerned about getting caught by the police or getting shot by your intended victim?” The respondents were asked to circle one of the two options.

Sixty-five percent of respondents said they were more worried about getting caught, while 27% indicated they were more worried about being shot by a victim.

Questions No. 4 and No. 5 asked, “If a man or woman [respectively] you are trying to rob pulls a gun to defend himself or herself, do you believe he or she will use it?”

Interestingly, 75% of respondents circled “yes” for both men and women.

As one respondent put it, “I can tell how a person handles a firearm if he or she is trained.”

Questions No. 6 and No. 7 asked, “Would you try to disarm a man or woman [respectively] who pulls a gun on you in self-defense?”

Fifty-seven percent of respondents circled “yes” for a man. A slightly smaller number of respondents (54%) circled “yes” for a woman.

Question No. 8 asked, “Have you ever taken a gun away from someone who was trying to defend himself or herself as you tried to rob him or her?”

An impressive 41% of respondents circled “yes.”



Question No. 9 asked, “During a robbery attempt, would you be willing to kill or injure your intended victim if he or she does not comply?”

Nearly half of respondents (47%) circled “yes.”

One respondent described this mindset with the following: “If I feel like robbing someone, there is no turning back.”

*The takeaway from the first nine questions is that if you have a gun, you must be prepared to use it — and you must take proper measures to avoid being disarmed by your assailant.*

Question No. 10 asked, “What is the one thing that makes someone most attractive for a mugging?” with a blank space left for a write-in answer. Some of the more popular responses that weren’t covered in the write-in section for Question No. 1 included:

- The person is a “s\*\*\*-talker” or has a bad attitude.
- The person has luggage and is waiting for a taxi.
- The person is cashing in chips at a casino.
- The person is White/Caucasian.

By far the most popular responses, as in Question No. 1, were “wearing expensive clothing,” “flashing cash or other valuables” and “being alone.”

Question No. 11 asked, “What is the No. 1 deterrent that would make you avoid mugging a person?” (Or, as one respondent put it, “make me believe it’s gonna be too much work.”) Some of the more popular write-in answers included:

- The person exudes confidence.
- The person obviously has a gun.
- The person has an aggressive-looking dog.
- The person appears to be military.
- The person is with other people.
- The person is elderly/a woman/a child.
- The person is near a police station.
- The person looks like he or she has nothing.
- There is no clear path of escape.

Question No. 12 asked, “What would you personally recommend people do to avoid being mugged?” with a blank space left for a write-in answer. The results for this question will be published in the third installment of this series, which is focused on how to avoid becoming a victim.

## **Stata Results**

Some of the more interesting results came through the application of the program Stata, specifically tests, which allowed for isolating a specific question and then seeing how respondents who answered “yes” or “no” to that question filled out the rest of the survey. Here the statistically significant (with a 95% confidence level) differences came from how respondents answered question No. 9 (whether they’d be willing to injure or kill a victim). We’ll refer to respondents as “violent” or “nonviolent” based on this split.

For question No. 1 (“Which of the following would make you more likely to target a victim?”), 67% of violent respondents indicated an expensive watch, while only 47% of nonviolent respondents marked likewise.

A person having his or her hands in his or her pockets aroused the attention of 23% of violent respondents but only 8% of nonviolent respondents.

Seventy-six percent of violent respondents said that a person walking on a dark street would make them more likely to pounce, while only 48% of nonviolent respondents indicated the same.

Flashing cash was selected by 88% of violent respondents and 71% of nonviolent respondents.

In summary, flashing cash, wearing an expensive watch and walking down a dark street make you a target for not only a mugging but also one that could end in violence. Violent muggers also prefer a victim with hands in his or her pockets.

For Question No. 2 — “Which of the following would most likely cause you to end your robbery attempt?” — the split is also marked, mostly in that violent respondents were less likely to care about a victim’s attempts to fight back or run away.

While 81% of nonviolent respondents indicated that they were most likely to end a robbery attempt because a victim had a gun, only 42% of violent respondents indicated the same.

In addition, violent respondents were less worried about a victim attempting to run away (12% vs. 33%) or trying to fight back (15% vs. 34%).

The write-in answers for violent respondents were more determined and menacing on average:

- If I’m robbing you, you can’t do anything because I have control of the situation.



- I'm going to get what I want regardless of how brave [the victim thinks] he or she is.
- They gave me what I was after so I didn't have to hurt them.
- I'll still rob him or her regardless.

Contrast those answers with these responses from nonviolent respondents:

- The person tells me "no."
- I can tell the person is trained in using a firearm.
- [The victim] has the upper hand
- I had a change of heart.

For Question No. 3 ("If you decide to rob someone on the street, are you more concerned with being caught by the police or getting shot by your intended victim?"), 76% of violent respondents marked "police," while only 56% of nonviolent respondents marked the same. There was no statistically significant difference between violent and nonviolent respondents with regard to how they answered Question No. 4 — "If a man you are trying to rob pulls a gun to defend himself, do you believe he will use it?" — and No. 5 (if a woman does the same).

Fully 73% of violent respondents said that they would try to disarm a man in question No. 6, while only 41% of nonviolent respondents said the same. This is a stark difference of 32 percentage points. Furthermore, 66% of violent respondents said they would try to disarm a woman in question No. 7, while only 43% of nonviolent respondents indicated the same.

When it came to Question No. 8 — "Have you ever disarmed a victim who was trying to defend himself or herself with a gun?" — 60% of violent respondents said yes, while only 25% of nonviolent respondents said the same. This is an incredible difference of 35 percentage points.

"It does seem like you're dealing with two different types of folks," Carroll said. "One group of muggers, looking for money, where it's probably just a crime of opportunity. And then you have people who are probably out looking for trouble."

*The takeaway is that nonviolent muggers are likely easier to avoid by changing a few key behaviors (not flashing cash, being aware of your surroundings), while violent muggers are more dangerous and persistent adversaries.*

While none of the comparisons for Pennsylvania or Oregon were statistically significant, there were some minor differences that are worth noting. These may be related to demographic differences. Pennsylvania has a population of 13 million (according to 2020 census data), versus Oregon at a shade over 4.2 million. Pennsylvania has a robbery rate of 76.1 for every 100,000 residents, according to FBI crime statistics, while Oregon's rate is a mere 54 per 100,000. And approximately

14% of Pennsylvania residents have an active concealed carry permit, while only around 8% of Oregon residents have an active permit.<sup>3</sup>

For Question No. 2, 73% of Oregon respondents versus 57% of Pennsylvania respondents said they would be deterred by a victim with a gun.

Sixty-six percent of Pennsylvania respondents said they were more worried about being caught by the police in Question No. 3, while 59% of Oregon respondents said the same. And 25% of Pennsylvania respondents said they were more worried about being shot by their victims, while 32% of Oregon respondents said the same.

For question No. 8, 45% of Pennsylvania respondents said that they had taken a gun away from a victim in the past, while only 29% of Oregon respondents said the same. And for question No. 9, 43% of Pennsylvania respondents said they'd be willing to injure or kill a victim, while 57% of Oregon residents would be willing to take it to that level.

But to reiterate, the lack of statistically significant differences in the Pennsylvania and Oregon responses overall indicate that these two states could potentially model other states as well.

## Reflections on the Data

Having pored over the survey results, I wondered if the respondents took the time to answer truthfully or if they just circled and scribbled down nonsense as a time-killer. The way to test this is to see if one thing logically follows another. And for the most part, the responses did.

“With the different questions, we were able to look at the same sort of things from different angles,” Carroll indicated. “For example, it made sense that more people were willing to believe that somebody would use a weapon versus would try to disarm somebody. Because presumably if you’re going to bother disarming somebody, you have to believe that they’re actually going to use the weapon.”

Furthermore, among respondents who indicated that they were more concerned with being shot by their victims than being caught by police, 92% of them marked that they believed a man or woman actually would use a gun in self-defense. The logic apparently breaks down, however, with regard to respondents who said they would be willing to injure or kill a victim. More respondents said they would be willing to injure or kill than have disarmed victims in the past. (In terms of escalation of violence, disarming falls below injuring or killing.)

## Staring Down the Barrel of a 9mm

Leaving behind the survey results and getting back to the fate of Lee Michaels, we left him in the middle of the night — on his knees outside his garage — with a handgun pointed at his head. While in that position, he managed to turn around and catch a glimpse of both of his assailants. He took note of the unarmed man’s uncovered face as well as the gunman’s attire: He wore a skullcap pulled down over his face, a hoodie, dark jeans and tan boots. “Looking down the barrel of a 9mm,” Michaels said, “it looked like a howitzer at that point. But when he stands me up, I’m thinking, ‘OK, I know how I’m probably going to get out of this...’”

*Part 2 of this series will continue in the February/March issue of Concealed Carry Magazine.*

## Endnotes

**1** “2019 Crime in the United States: Robbery,” FBI.gov, Fall 2020, [https:// UCR.FBI.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/ crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/ robbery](https://UCR.FBI.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/robbery).

**2** Jade Bremner, “‘Why would you do this to a grandma?’: Former US senator mugged in California,” The Independent, July 27, 2021, [Independent. CO.UK/news/world/americas/crime/ us-senator-mugged-robbed-barbara-boxer-b1891338.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/crime/us-senator-mugged-robbed-barbara-boxer-b1891338.html).

**3** “Crime in the United States by State, 2019: Table 5,” FBI.gov, Fall 2020, [https://UCR. FBI.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime- in-the-u.s.-2019/topic- pages/tables/ table-5](https://UCR.FBI.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/tables/table-5); John R. Lott and Rujun Wang, “Concealed Carry Permit Holders Across the United States: 2020,” Crime Prevention Research Center, 2020 (Sept. 21, 2020), 20-21.

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