Incentives for

Adolescent Theft Behavior

The bulk of subsequent analysis centers on the citation and discussion of 21 incentives for theft. The concept of “incentive” serves both at the basis for the theoretical treatment of motivation for theft and as the basis of the measurement unit used to provide quantitative information as to the relative weight and prevalence of various incentives. The chapter will include: 1) Citation of 21 theft-incentives grouped under four major orders of incentive; 2) Presentation of the frequency of each of four major orders of incentive; 3) Separate discussion of each major incentive category, and its included incentives. The presentation will involve a general discussion of the nature of each incentive (e.g., “general utility” as motive for theft), and illustrations of operation of this kind of incentive in the present study data; 4) Data on the relation of theft-incentive patterning to subcultural characteristics of age, sex, social status and ethnic status (e.g., is “courage-demonstration” a more cogent incentive for lower than higher status gang members?); 5) General discussion, based on empirical findings, of the role of various incentives in “normal lower status male adolescent” theft, of the nature and role of inhibitives, and the dynamics of the incentive-inhibitive balance.

The basic population of events used for the quantitative incentive analysis is the same as the “incident” population used for analysis of frequency, participation,
target distribution, etc., in “Theft Behavior in City Gangs,” Klein, *Juvenile Gangs in Context*, 1967. This population comprises, for present purposes, 182 acts of theft engaged in by intensive-contact study-group members. Each incident was coded according to which incentive or group of incentives figured in the act of theft under consideration. Coding was based on as much knowledge as was available of larger context of each theft incident.

Chart 1.12 lists 21 incentives, grouped under four major orders of incentive. The four major orders are: 1) Acquisitional; 2) Demonstrational; 3) Experiential; 4) Justificational. Brief definitions follow.
“Acquisitional” incentives figure into acts when acquiring object for useful purpose is involved. “Demonstrational” incentive applies when engagement in an act is intended to demonstrate possession of, control over, some personal state, quality, or condition (e.g., competence, anger, allegiance). “Experiential” incentives occur when engagement in an act results in the experiencing of some emotional reaction or state (e.g., excitement). “Justificational” incentives result when the act is intended to achieve or correct some condition seen by actor as “deserved.” Citation of these four major orders of incentive provides a preliminary, generalized answer to
the question “Why do they steal?” The answer is—to get something, to show something, to experience something, to correct something—in a variety of combinations.

Table 1.12 shows the frequency of four major orders of incentive for 182 theft incidents. Demonstrational incentives are clearly most common, figuring in almost all thefts, comprising almost 2/3 of all incentives. Experiential, Acquisitional incentives are next, and Justificational incentives least common. The following section includes a detailed discussion of six Acquisitional incentives, their nature, relative frequency within the category, distribution according to subcultural characteristics, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Incentive Category</th>
<th>Number of Incentives</th>
<th>Percent All Incentives</th>
<th>Number of Thefts with this Category of Incentive</th>
<th>Percent Thefts with this Category of Incentive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrational</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>96.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisitional</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justificational</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Acquisitional Incentives for Theft

The most obvious answer to the question of why people steal is that they want or need something, are unable or unwilling to obtain it through legitimate means, and so proceed to take it without authorization. It is this rather straightforward kind of explanation which underlies the notion that it is the poor who do the most stealing. In recent years, however, the adequacy of this order of
explanation has been challenged quite vigorously by several schools of thought—principally those of psychology, psychodynamic psychiatry, and psychologically-oriented sociology. A major tenet of these positions, already discussed in connection with the analysis of theft objects, is that an adequate understanding of theft must go far beyond considerations of the direct or obvious utility of stolen objects, and focus instead on more intangible and symbolic reasons for theft.

Cars, from this point of view, are primarily status symbols or symbols of masculinity, and only incidentally modes of transportation; food is stolen primarily because it represents maternal nurturance and only incidentally because one wants to eat; a baseball bat is stolen because it represents manhood and only incidentally because a bat is needed in order to play baseball. One result of these emphases has been virtually to reverse the thrust of the direct utility explanation; the idea that people usually steal to get what they need or can use has been transformed, in some quarters, to the idea that people seldom steal to get what they need or can use.

The cogency of non-“utilitarian” motives for theft is in no way denied in the present approach; in fact, as shown in Chart 1.12, the majority of postulated theft incentives are designated as “demonstrational”—conveying the idea that a major reason for Midcity gangs theft was to “show” something. Table 1.12 shows that about 15% of analyzed thefts were considered not to involve “acquisitional” incentives to any significant degree. However, the fact that 85% of analyzed thefts did involve acquisitional incentives strengthens evidence already presented that utilitarian purposes did figure most importantly in Midcity gang theft.

The term “acquisitional” is used here to characterize acts in which the acquisition of an object or objects to serve some necessary or useful purpose was at least one reason for stealing. Examples of such thefts by Midcity gang members—some of which have already been cited—were stealing luncheon meat for picnic sandwiches, bathing suits for bathing, gifts for Christmas presents, and money for train tickets for a group outing.
Table 2.12 cites six types of “acquisitional” incentive ranked by frequency. Distinctions among types are based on a kind of “utility” served by the involved articles. Objects may be immediately necessary (plasma for a dying person), necessary for extended periods (warm clothing in winter), useful or convenient over extended periods (a camera), of general or non-specific utility (money), or of value by virtue of representing a loved or admired person or other entity (a widow’s photograph of her deceased husband).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incentive</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent of Acquisitional Incentives</th>
<th>Rank All Incentives</th>
<th>Percent of All Incentives</th>
<th>Percent of All Thefts with This Incentive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Facilitative Utility</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Utility</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Facilitative Utility</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representational Utility</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Necessity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Necessity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As implied in prior discussion, those aspects of motivation for theft which involve the acquisition of articles or other resources for particular uses are essentially the same kind of incentives which underlie the acquisition of material resources in general, and do not, therefore, require special consideration under the rubric of theft. Why people seek and acquire material resources which are useful or

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350 The nature and function of acquisitional incentives for theft have already been considered, in part, in connection with the discussion of the utility of theft objects. The present discussion will recapitulate briefly those parts of the discussion of “utility” which are relevant to the consideration of theft incentives.
necessary to them is essentially a problem of economic analysis, and beyond the province of this work. What calls for explanation here is not why group members had need of or use for material resources, but why they chose as often as they did to acquire them through violative means. For present purposes it is taken as a given that when one is hungry there is an incentive to acquire food; when one wants to travel there is an incentive to obtain transportation; when one wishes to appear well-dressed there is an incentive to acquire attractive clothes; when one wishes to play baseball there is an incentive to acquire bats, balls, and gloves. Group members did in fact wish to eat, travel, and play baseball. As shown in the analysis of theft objects, most of the articles stolen by group members were needed for, or served to facilitate, the conduct of their major life activities—courtship, recreational activity, athletics, dances, parties, and so on.

Table 2.12 shows that acquisitional incentives figured in 86.4% of all thefts, with three of the six incentives (immediate facilitative utility, general utility, extended facilitative utility) accounting for 87.3% of all acquisitional incentives and figuring in 70% of all thefts. The following sections will present brief discussions of each of the 6 acquisitional incentives, in general terms and as exemplified in study-group thefts.

**Immediate Necessity**

Immediate necessity may constitute an incentive for theft in cases where there is an acute or urgent need for an object or resource, and where the means for legitimate acquisition is not available. Writers of fiction tend to devote disproportionate attention to this incentive and, as already mentioned, immediate necessity may be claimed as justifying theft either by those who steal or by those in sympathy with them. Examples would be theft of food for a starving child, of medicine for a dying person, of warm clothing for a freezing person. Each of these

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351 On frequency of “purchase” acquisitions: Cite fact of underreporting of purchase acquisition; most known thefts recorded, only selected purchases. Even so, a lot more purchase than theft; minimum of 277 purchase events.
examples involves necessity of a life-or-death variety. A theft undertaken on the basis of this type of incentive is fairly well “explained” on these grounds alone, and does not require the positing of multiple incentives. No theft involving this incentive was recorded for Midcity gang members.

There is, however, a second type of necessity which might be described as “conditional” or “contingent.” Here necessity does not arise directly from life or death considerations, but from involvement in a situation which requires the acquisition of particular resources as a necessary condition of its execution. An example would be theft of civilian clothing by an escaping war prisoner. The act of escape itself is not dictated by vital necessity, but once undertaken, replacing the prison uniform by less conspicuous attire becomes necessary to effectuate the undertaking.

Four Midcity gang thefts were adjudged to involve “immediate necessity”—(0.5% of all thefts) all of the “conditional” type. Two instances paralleled the prisoner escape example. Members of the Senior Bandits escaped from rural correctional institutions, and stole cars in nearby towns in order to effect their return to Midcity. Another “immediate necessity” auto theft also involved the Senior Bandits. Two of the boys were out drinking with a member of the Junior Bandits who became so drunk that he passed out. With police active in the area, the older boys decided they had to get their companion home so as to avoid arrest, and stole not one but two cars in order to affect this end. In neither of these instances was the undertaking vitally necessary, but once the course of action had been decided upon, it became almost impossible of attainment without immediate transportation, and automobile theft resulted.

*Extended Necessity*

A second kind of necessity which may serve as an incentive for theft is “extended necessity.” The direct utility of immediate necessity items is generally, although not always, of relatively short duration. The necessary medicine is
consumed, the necessary food eaten. The utility of necessary resources may also extend over longer periods of time; such resources are also, evidently, not immediately consumable. Examples would be winter clothing, shoes, blankets. Extended necessity may also be of the “contingent” variety; for example, having accepted a job beyond walking distance from his home, a person might steal a bicycle in order to get to and from work, in the absence of other available modes of transportation. No theft committed by Project group members was adjudged to involve extended necessity as an incentive. This may have been due to the absence of sufficiently detailed evidence on the intended utility of certain theft objects. In one instance several members of the Senior Bandits combined forces to equip a fellow group member with a winter outfit, including an overcoat and shoes. However, in discussing this theft, group members stressed the fact that their new aim was to provide their companion with a total ensemble which was new and stylish, and to this end they selected high quality clothing from expensive stores. Although the utility of the stolen items was quite evidently extended, the degree of necessity involved was questionable; if necessity alone had been the dominant incentive, considerations of quality and stylishness would have played a less prominent part.

**Immediate Facilitative Utility**

“Facilitative” utility may be an incentive for theft when the material object or other resource is used to make possible or facilitate the conduct of a particular activity (cards; card game) or general enterprise (camera; photography). The term “facilitative” is used here to make the distinction between utility of the “vital necessity” type just described and utility which derives from involvement in activities and enterprises which are not directly “necessary.” The demarcation between “necessity” and “non-necessity” is not always easy to make; this engages the kinds of considerations cited in the discussion of “contingent” necessity; an enterprise may not in itself serve vitally necessary purposes, but once undertaken
demands certain adjuncts as necessary conditions of its execution. Items or resources may be stolen to facilitate or make possible a particular activity and may be consumed in the course of the activity (fruit for a picnic); may be stolen to facilitate a particular activity and be useful beyond that activity (phonograph records for record hop), and may be stolen not in the context of a particular activity but for more general purposes of extended utility (camera for photography). The first two types are considered here as involving “immediate” facilitative utility; the third as involving extended “utility.”

Theft was utilized or considered as a mode of obtaining useful objects for virtually every customary activity engaged in by Midcity gang members. Group members stole or proposed for theft football shoes for football, baseball gloves for baseball, basketballs for basketball, bathing suits for swimming, cigarettes and refreshments for recreation and consumption, autos for amusement park excursions, household furnishings for gang clubrooms, liquor and phonograph records for parties, wood and gasoline for celebration bonfires, comic books and magazines for recreational reading. Most thefts in this category occurred within the context of a particular enterprise and stolen items were used directly for immediate purposes. Since group members were actively involved in a wide range of recreational and other activities whose conduct required the use of particular material objects, it is not surprising that immediate facilitative utility was the most common type of acquisitional theft incentive, figuring in 38.3% of all thefts, and ranking 7.5th (6.8%) among the 21 incentives.

**Extended Facilitative Utility**

The utility of some of the objects stolen for immediate facilitative purposes extended beyond the event in connection with which they were initially stolen. Records stolen for a particular party could also be played following the party; a baseball glove stolen specifically for participation in the first game of the season could be used throughout the baseball season; sparkplugs stolen to make possible a
particular excursion would remain in the car throughout their useful life. Objects which were “consumed” in the course of an activity, such as refreshments or cigarettes, could obviously serve purposes of “immediate” utility only; other “durable” objects which served purposes of immediate utility could maintain their usefulness over extended time periods. An additional number of extended utility items were stolen not in the context of particular activities, but more specifically for purposes of extended utility. Wrist watches, cigarette lighters, and fountain pens are examples of such items. Since most “facilitative utility” items were consumed in the course of the activity, extended facilitative utility figured in a relatively smaller proportion of thefts; extended facilitative utility ranked 4\textsuperscript{th} among the 6 incentives (15.5\% of acquisitional incentives), 11\textsuperscript{th} among all incentives (3.12\%), and figured in 17.5\% of all thefts.

**General Utility**

In the earliest human societies men acquired through fairly direct acquisitional methods those economic commodities necessary to the maintenance of life and life activities. Food was hunted and gathered; shelter was found or constructed from naturally available materials; tools and implements were fabricated from available materials by tribal craftsmen. In modern European society modes of acquiring needed economic resources are far less direct. Given an incredible variety of useful or necessary products and a vast and ramified division of labor, most of the objects needed to maintain life are obtained by their consumers through a process of exchange whose principal instrument is a universal and general exchange medium—money.

Project-group members, as has been shown, were able to acquire many of the goods and some of the services needed to maintain their life pattern through fairly direct acquisitional means. However, despite the rather impressive range and variety of material resources which group members were able to acquire by direct methods, the conduct of life in modern urban society is manifestly impossible.
without money. As shown in the analysis of theft objects, money was in fact the item most frequently stolen by Project group members.

As will be discussed shortly, there are a range of modes of resource acquisition available to adolescent residents of lower class communities. One mode, favored by most adult residents of middle class communities, involves seeking, gaining, and maintaining employment, performing specified services, receiving monetary compensation for such services, and using earned money to acquire needed economic resources. Project group members—both employed and non-employed—frequently utilized alternative methods for obtaining money. The most direct of these was to ascertain the location of a sum of money, gain access to it, and take it. A less direct method—closely resembling the approved “get job, get paid, spend pay” mode, but managing to bypass the “job” part of the sequence, was to steal objects intended for conversion into money. While this particular method was rather infrequently employed by Project gang members, certain kinds of objects, such as watches, accessories, and small appliances, were stolen not for purposes of direct facilitative utility but for conversion into money for general use. Both of these practices—the direct theft of money and the theft of objects to be sold for money—are here considered a “general utility” incentive for theft. The term “general” is used because it is possible, when identifiable objects were stolen, to ascertain the uses to which they were put—but where money or objects tend to be converted into money were stolen, such determination was difficult.

General utility as an incentive for theft ranked 9th of 21 theft incentives, comprising 5.2% of all theft incentives and figuring in 29.2% of all thefts. Groups ranged from 10% to 33% in the proportion of their thefts which involved general utility. At least four general patterns regarding theft for general utility purposes may be distinguished. The first is the “big-haul” pattern with extensive planning preceding a large scale operation which may net a substantial sum. Banks and other large commercial enterprises are usual targets. The Brinks robbery is a classic example. Second, general utility theft may be conducted on a fairly regular
basis, as one relatively dependent source of income, involving moderate sums, and usually centering around one particular genre of theft or modus operandi. Third, general utility theft may involve occasional irregular stealing from small local facilities, such as filling stations, grocery stores, and taverns. Fourth, general utility theft of a variety of types may be undertaken on ad hoc basis, to obtain small sums for particular immediate purposes. Most of the general utility theft engaged in by Midcity gang members was of the second type—the “routine income” type. No good example of the first type was recorded, although it was practiced by adults in Midcity. Thefts of the third type were not uncommon, and a few instances of the fourth type were noted.

The best type of theft for “pure” routine income purposes (with “pure” one-incentive thefts, as already cited, being very rare among Midcity gangs) is one which provides the maximum possibility of dependable income along with the minimum of risk—either of being caught by the police or suffering retaliation by the victim. Five principal types of routine income theft—listed roughly in order of increasing risk—were practiced by Midcity gang members. These were the church poor-box theft, the purse snatch or pocketbook grab, the open stand money theft, theft of articles from parked cars, and cab driver thefts.352

Routine rifling of church poor-boxes was recorded only among white Catholic boys. A Junior Outlaw who observed that one of his fellow group members always seemed to have plenty of ready cash, although he had no job, remarked “He’s got some kind of racket going, and I want to get out of it.” Shortly thereafter both boys were in fact engaged in weekly poor-box theft as a joint enterprise. Church poor-box theft was close to an ideal form of routine-income theft, since it could be practiced quite regularly (the Junior Outlaw poor-box thieves visited the churches every Sunday) and entailed little real risk. Even if caught by a priest, there was little

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352 As “routine” thefts, each of these types was carried on for extended periods of time, as a “series” of thefts. For the event-tabulation purposes of the previous chapter, most of these “serious” thefts were counted as a single theft. This means first that the number of all types was undercounted, and second that the actual number of thefts was acquisitional utility as an incentive was somewhat underrepresented.
likelihood that responsibility for handling the culprits would be handed over to the police; it would be more likely seen as a church responsibility. One possible drawback to this type of theft lay in the possibility of adverse reactions by other gang members; since earning prestige from one’s fellows was a major incentive for theft, the evident merit of poor-box theft from the viewpoint of acquisitional utility could be substantially weakened if gang members defined participation in such theft as lessening one’s prestige. There was in fact some expressed disapproval of this practice by members of the more lawfully-oriented faction of the Junior Outlaws, but no one went so far as to translate this disapproval into a report to the church or other authorities. On the other hand, members of the less lawfully-oriented faction saw this form of theft primarily as a “good hustle,” and did not engage the issue of its moral acceptability.

The purse-snatch was the most common type of routine-income theft, in that it was utilized by more youngsters and with greater frequency than any of the other types. This was a relatively dependable income source, since there were always women with purses walking through parks and on relatively isolated streets. Risk was relatively low, since a boy could grab a purse and dash away almost before the victim could realize what had happened, let alone being in a position to identify the thief. Although practiced by both white and Negro groups, the purse-snatch was clearly more common among the Negroes. As mentioned in the discussion of theft targets, there was a slight undercurrent of sentiment that females were not as appropriate as males as targets of theft, since the demonstration of courage was not as effectively achieved through robbery of lone females; however, the evident advantage of pocketbook theft as a routine income source outweighed this rather weakly-developed current of potentially inhibitive sentiment.

A specialty of the Senior Bandits was the newsstand theft. During one period the boys engaged in a fairly extended and regular series of thefts from attended newsstands in subway stations. One boy would distract the stand attendant while several others grabbed the money, which was generally in an open box near the
counter, and dash off to mix with the subway crowds. Risk of apprehension for these thefts was low, since the vendor could not easily leave his booth to pursue the thieves, and escape into the subway crowds was easy. Although several of the Senior Bandit newsstand thefts were reported in the newspapers, none of the boys were ever arrested for these thefts.

Theft of articles from parked cars has the advantage of being fairly dependable as a routine income source, since people frequently left parked cars with briefcases, clothing, and other items in them, but entailed a greater degree of risk than previously mentioned routine-income thefts. As cited in the discussion of theft targets, few cars parked in Midcity contained items of value; the car-item thieves thus had to go to other sections of the city—generally the downtown commercial districts—to find the objects of theft. Once outside of Midcity the risk of detention and apprehension increased—Midcity residents in other Port City districts were more visible than at home; police coverage was likely to be fairly intensive; the likelihood of being caught by a local and relatively broad-minded policeman was lower. Systematic parked-car theft thus required a considerable degree of foresight, planning, and the utilization of precautionary measures. A three-person car-theft ring directed by one of the Kings was responsible for most of the routine car-item theft engaged in by the study-group members; the ring’s modus operandi will be described as part of the discussion of the demonstrational incentive “collective task-execution competence.”

The riskiest form of routine income theft was the cab driver hold-up. This type also was generally executed by a three-person group. The boys would enter a cab as customers, ask to be driven to a relatively isolated place, threaten the driver with a knife, and take his money, watch, and jewelry. The risk in this operation derived from the fact that the cab drivers, who were often vigorous males not unaccustomed to coping with demanding situations, could resist and possibly injure the thieves, as well as from the possibility that the angry driver would go at once to the police station, describe the boys, and set in motion a police search which could
have a fair chance of success. In fact, for both of the last two types of “organized” theft—car-item and cab driver theft—arrests were not made once but several times.

Two additional types of routine income theft engaged in by Midcity adolescents were drunk-rolling and pick-pocketing. Both of these types, however, were sufficiently rare as to fall outside the category of “conventional” Midcity gang theft. Rolling of drunks (called “Jackrolling” in some other locations) involves the relatively low-risk act of taking the belongings of unconscious or semi-conscious intoxicates. There was some reference to this practice in a kind of “what we used to do in the old days” vein, but no actual instances were recorded during the study period. There was some sentiment to the effect that this type of theft was not considered particularly appropriate. One of the Kings was arrested on a pickpocketing charge shortly after the close of the study period, but no other instance was recorded. The rarity of certain types of “logical” routine-income thefts among Midcity gangs, along with the conventional patterning of those types which were practiced, shows that this conflict of theft for purposes of general utility was not random or fortuitous, but was governed by a well-developed set of rules which delineated the procedures of common types of theft, graded as more or less appropriate a variety of possible types, and assigned greater and lesser prestige to the successful execution of various types.

An additional feature of general utility theft should be noted. The acquisition of merchandise to be sold on the market is one activity in a legitimate commercial sequence which includes manufacturing, distributing, wholesaling, and retailing. The process of marketing saleable goods, however obtained, involves certain necessary commercial procedures. As already mentioned, Midcity gang members did not have ready access to an apparatus for marketing stolen goods and thus had to utilize whatever means were available for converting theft objects into money. For example, every Project worker was approached at least once, and some several times, as a customer for stolen goods. The experience of one of the Senior Bandits
illustrates the role of general utility theft as one component of a sequence of economic behavior which combines illegitimate and legitimate elements.

The youngster had acquired, by theft, about half a dozen television sets. With no access to a “fencing” system, he decided to sell them himself. He first approached a number of neighborhood adults on a rather casual basis, but was unable to move any of the sets at the prices he was asking. He took stock of his sales picture and decided on three new policies; he would lower prices, offer credit terms, and engage in door-to-door selling. In this way the boy succeeded in selling all of his sets. His customers, however, proved less than conscientious in meeting their credit obligations, and he found himself involved in a collection operation. The series of events consequent of the theft of the television sets occupied a good part of the boy’s time for most of one summer.

The process of marketing the stolen merchandise engaged qualities of initiative, enterprise, and ingenuity similar to those required for success in legitimate commercial practice. The boy’s experience in sales, pricing, delivery and credit, as well as the risks of business enterprise, provided him with a kind of training for commercial activity similar to that offered to middle class youngsters through organizations such as “Junior Achievement.”

Representational Utility

The term “representational” is used here to refer to objects whose value does not derive in any direct way from necessity or practical utility, but because they are perceived to represent a person or class or persons who are regarded with some special emotion or set of emotions. The emotions may be love, admiration, respect, fear, or some combination of these. Examples of such “representational” objects are the baby curls kept by the mother after her son’s first haircut; the glove or handkerchief obtained from a young lady by her suitor; the buttons ripped from the clothing of a teenage singing star by his fans; the enemy helmet taken as a war trophy.
The representational object figures in many forms of magic and magical belief. Locks of hair or articles of clothing of a desired lover are used in love charms; pictures or statuettes are used in attempts to injure or otherwise bewitch an intended victim; possession of the weapon of an esteemed warrior is felt to impart his courage to the new owner. The common feature of these diverse forms of magic is the conception that the representational object is the person or group it represents, and that what happens to it will happen to them. If the object is possessed, the represented person is or will be possessed; if it is harmed, they will be harmed; the powers or qualities of the represented person will pass to the one who possesses his belongings.

The acquisition of an object with representational utility was at least one incentive for theft in about one-tenth of all thefts. About a quarter of these thefts involved photographs with “sentimental” value. Another theft involved the autographed photograph of an entertainment celebrity, and several others were of athletic equipment belonging to admired athletes. A few were of the love-token variety, with girls’ scarves or kerchiefs stolen by actual or potential admirers. One boy about to depart for the Navy arranged to have a friend steal a batch of phonograph records from the local settlement house so that he could have some fond memento of home to take away with him.

What was perhaps the most dramatic example of representational utility theft involved the theft of a worker’s car. During a farewell party given the Outlaw worker the night before he was to depart for another city, his car was stolen and slightly damaged by a member of the Marauders, the Senior Outlaws’ older brother.

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353 It should be noted that the term “representational” as defined here refers to an area of meaning considerably more restricted than that usually implied by the term “symbolic.” It is quite evident that the “representational” utility of an object derives from what it symbolizes rather than what it may be used for. However, by restricting the things which objects may represent to a designated and specific class of persons, this type of definition does not open the door to the unrestrained and speculative use of “symbolic” analysis which permits almost anything to symbolize almost anything else. The concept of “representational utility” as defined here does not, for example, permit the kind of symbolism analysis which posits that baseball bats represent penises, cars represent wombs, and soda pop represents mother’s milk.
group. The meaning of this act was quite clear to the boys themselves, who told the worker—“It means, don’t leave Midcity.” By stealing the worker’s car, the boys were attempting to keep him for themselves in both a realistic and symbolic way; realistic in that without his car he could not travel to the new city; symbolic in that taking possession of and slightly harming the worker’s car had the symbolic force of taking and harming him. This theft thus involved at least two incentives—the acquisitional incentive of representational utility, and the demonstrational incentive of anger demonstration. This latter incentive will be discussed under demonstrational incentives.

Theft as an Alternative Mode of Income Acquisition

Despite the prevalence of theft in Midcity gangs, there were no fulltime thieves among the adolescents who comprised them. No one in Midcity, adolescent or adult, depended on theft as an exclusive source of income. In common with those adults in Midcity who did engage in theft, members of Midcity gangs availed themselves of a variety of means for obtaining economic resources. The attitude of Midcity residents—especially those in the lower status levels—toward the acquisition of those economic resources which were necessary to the maintenance of their lives and ways of life might be characterized as opportunistic, flexible, adaptive, inventive and versatile.\(^{354}\)

Modes of income acquisition which were available to the adult population included the following: “Legitimate” employment—full-time or part-time; “steady” or sporadic; as employee, employer, or “self-employed” worker; receipt of public welfare funds—consistently or intermittently; from one source or several sources; as major or minor income source; gambling—full-time or part-time; consistently or sporadically; as major or minor income source; pimping—full-time or part-time;

\(^{354}\) The set of social and economic conditions which formed the context of this particular orientation to economic resources as well as differences among social classes in patterns of resource acquisition and related attitudes, will be discussed in later chapters.
large-scale (15-30 girls) or small scale (1-3); consistently or sporadically; bookmaking—full-time or part-time; numbers running or taking; peddling of information on illegal activities to legal authorities; selling of narcotics; payment for failure to perform official duties (pay-off to policemen for overlooking bookmaking; to health inspector for overlooking sanitary code violations); appropriation of money or commodities from one’s place of employment.

Most of these income sources were quite conventional, in that they were employed with some frequency by substantial portions of the population. Other modes were somewhat less conventional, in that they were either employed quite rarely in Midcity (although not necessarily in other parts of Port City or other cities) or were utilized by relatively few community residents. These included various small-scale “hustles” or “rackets” such as various confidence schemes, payment in money or kind for purchasing liquor for minors, junking\(^{355}\) (selling collected scrap or other discarded items), seeking legal compensation as an accident victim, payment for not inflicting threatened physical violence or property damage\(^ {356}\), lending money at illegal rates, posing for obscene pictures (rare but occasional), payment for sexual interaction with homosexuals—possibly accompanied by minor extortion\(^ {357}\), begging and panhandling.\(^ {358}\) There was no evidence of either moonshining or bootlegging.

Most income from gambling-connected occupations (bookmaking, numbers taking) was of the wage-earning rather than the entrepreneurial type; incumbents of higher echelon positions in the gambling syndicates resided in other districts.

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\(^{355}\) This type of resource acquisition, cited by Thrasher as a major source of revenue in Chicago corner gangs of the 1920’s, was virtually unknown in Midcity. Thrasher, op. cit., 149-53, passim.

\(^{356}\) The “protection” racket, a favorite activity of police and detective story writers, was rare in Midcity. A few instances of attempts to extort money from 7 to 10 year olds by 10 to 12 year olds were recorded, but this income mode was not practiced by adolescent gang members, and was practiced rarely and on a small scale by adults.

\(^{357}\) See chapter on male sex and mating.

\(^{358}\) Begging, either as a full-time income source or part time occupation was not practiced in Midcity, outside of occasional solicitations of the “give me a nickel mister” variety by five to ten year olds. Panhandling was also rare; Port City’s skid row inhabitants seldom entered Midcity. The classic tramp, railroad bum, or bindle stiff was not in evidence.
The above citations do not represent an exhaustive enumeration of all possible types of resource-acquisition modes in Midcity, but are cited to give some idea of a range and variety of income sources available to community residents. Two characteristics of these modes should be noted; they varied as to their “steadiness” or regularity, and they varied in their degree of legitimacy. A particular income resource could be utilized on a regular basis and for extended periods (full-time, “regular” job); on a part-time regular basis, or intermittently, depending on a variety of considerations related to need and opportunity. This meant that people could utilize varying combinations of income-modes to form a variety of resource-acquisition patterns. Holding two nominally full-time jobs (“moonlighting”) was one such pattern;\footnote{359 See corrections chapter for an example. This type was not particularly common.} engaging in one full-time and one irregular part-time pursuit another; engaging in several sporadic part-time pursuits a third. For young mothers, especially those without dependable in residence male breadwinners, a common pattern was the three-way combination of public welfare, part-time employment, and contributions from the fathers of the children.\footnote{360 See female sex and mating chapter.}

These several modes of income-acquisition also varied in the extent to which their conduct violated legal statutes. Some of the above-cited modes were entirely legitimate, others entirely illegitimate, others partly illegitimate. Here again a variety of combinations was possible. One could pursue “legitimate” occupations only; one could at the same time or sequentially be involved in legitimate and illegitimate occupations (gas station attendant and numbers runner), one could engage in an occupation which was largely legitimate but with illegitimate features (pawnbrokers engaged in “fencing” of stolen articles), or one with mostly illegitimate but some legitimate features (key-making shop as a front for a booking operation).

Given, then, an economic-resource acquisition system with the characteristics of versatility, adaptivity, and flexibility—allowing for a wide range of patterns in
regard to consistency and intermittency, with a well-established role for the part-time hustle or the use-as-needed supplementary income-source, and allowing for a variety of combinations of legitimate and illegitimate pursuits—it is not difficult to see how theft could be conceived of, and utilized as, one alternative mode of obtaining economic resources. The practice of theft for purposes of acquisitional utility, then, while employed more extensively by adolescents than by adults, was not at all discordant with the spirit or practice of the system of income acquisition prevalent in the adult community. Thus, by practicing theft as one mode of resource-acquisition during adolescence along with various non-violative modes, members of Midcity gangs were in fact gaining valuable training for a mode of adult economic behavior which they had a high likelihood of assuming.

Sentiments expressed by Project group members concerning theft as a practice, as well as their actual pattern of theft practice, made it clear that members of all groups conceived of theft as one definitely appropriate method of obtaining economic resources.\(^{361}\) For example, during a discussion of the ethics of theft a member of the Junior Bandits made the statement—“Maybe college people and social workers and people like that are different, but the people around here, when they get a chance to steal a buck...they’re gonna take it!”

However, given the shared definition of the general appropriateness of theft, (“for the people around here”), the several groups differed in their conception of how appropriate theft was under different circumstances. Particularly instructive were differences between higher status (lower class II) and lower status (lower class III) in regard to conceptions—the appropriateness of theft relative to other alternative resource-acquisition modes, and the kinds of circumstances under which theft was perceived to be appropriate as a resource-acquisition mode. For the lower-status “Bandit” groups, the appropriateness of “theft” relative to “legitimate work” among alternative modes of resource-acquisition was clearly greater than for the higher status “Outlaw” and “King” groups. The Senior Bandits in particular maintained

\(^{361}\) 59% of all expressed sentiments reflected some order of support for theft as a practice.
that theft and legitimate work were at least of equal validity; when this definition was challenged, however, they sometimes responded by insisting that theft was in fact a superior method.

A social worker who periodically put pressure on the boys to obtain legitimate employment encountered several group members “hanging out” on their corner at 10 a.m. on a weekday morning. When he asked them “What are you guys doing loafing around here in the middle of the morning? Why aren’t you working?”—one of the boys replied—“We are workin’. We work all the time. We’re workin’ as thieves!” To demonstrate that they were not merely paying lip-service to their professional ideals, the Senior Bandits did in fact increase their participation in theft when the validity of their conception was challenged. During one period when they were being subjected to pressure to go out and find legitimate jobs—accompanied by a challenge, both direct and implied, to the “legitimacy” of theft as an appropriate mode of behavior—the group responded by increasing its theft frequency to the rate of one theft per day for an entire month (July, 1954)—a record unequalled by themselves or any other study group previously or afterwards.

The Junior Bandits, the Senior Bandit’s younger brother group (lower class III), also engaged in heated debates with their worker as to the appropriateness of theft as a general acquisitional mode. Active in athletics and in need of football, baseball, and basketball equipment, group members maintained that the proper and sensible method of obtaining these goods was to steal them. The Junior Bandits’ worker disapproval of this plan, did not, however, produce the kind of response exhibited by the Senior Bandits, and the worker had some success in persuading group members to consider alternative resource-acquisition methods. With his help and supervision the group put on a number of cake sales and spaghetti dinners to raise money with which to purchase most of their athletic equipment, and stole only a relatively small part of what was needed. This reluctant use of legitimate acquisitional means for this particular purpose, had, however, little effect on the group’s overall theft frequency. As already shown, their monthly
theft rate was higher than that of any other groups—even that of those arch theft enthusiasts, the Senior Bandits. For the higher status groups, the relative merit of theft and legitimate work was not raised as an explicit issue—each mode being conceived as appropriate to its time and place rather than being seen as directly competing modes.

There were also differences among the groups in conceptions of the range of circumstances under which theft was appropriate, and the appropriate uses to which stolen goods should be put. Higher status groups saw theft as appropriate to a more limited range of circumstances, and the range of appropriate usage of stolen goods as more constricted. An illustrative issue concerns the use of stolen goods as gifts. Members of lower status groups saw theft as a perfectly appropriate method of obtaining articles to be given as gifts, and in fact, engaged in increased stealing during those holidays for which gift-giving was customary. The practice of “Christmas shoplifting,” so named was prevalent and referred to openly. Mother’s Day was another occasion for increased theft, especially since most of the boys felt that it was most important to furnish direct evidence of affection to one’s mother. It was quite obvious to mothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles who received such gifts for Christmas, birthdays, or weddings that they had been stolen. There could be little doubt as to the origin of an expensive kitchen appliance given by an unemployed 17 year old boy. Those adults who might have felt some inclination to censure the practice of theft by their children were, however, more pleased to be remembered by gifts than displeased by the knowledge that theft had occurred, and no instance of parental censure of such theft was recorded. It would appear, then, that the prevailing conception among the lower status boys was that illegitimately obtained items could be used for all purposes to which legitimately obtained items could be put.

Among the higher status boys, in contrast, definitions as to the proper uses of stolen goods were considerably less unequivocal. At one point the Junior Outlaws were planning to give a dinner in honor of the well-loved motherly woman who ran
the corner store on “their” corner. It was most important that the value of the gifts be commensurate with the love and respect in which they held the storekeeper, and the pooled financial resources of the group produced a woefully inadequate sum. Theft was at once proposed as an appropriate method of obtaining either the money for the gift or the gift itself. Members of the more lawfully-oriented faction of the group, however, challenged the fitness of the proposal. After an extended debate, the group decided, quite reluctantly, that it was not appropriate to steal a gift which was to be presented to the guest of honor at a public banquet.

**Acquisitional Theft and Subcultural Characteristics**

Were there differences among groups of different subcultural characteristics in the patterning of acquisitional incentives for theft? As already shown in Table 2.12, acquisitional incentives figured in 86.4% of all thefts, with six incentives appearing in the following order: 1. Immediate facilitative utility, 38.3% of all thefts; 2. General utility, 29.2%; 3. Extended facilitative utility, 17.5%; 4. Symbolic value, 9.7%; 5. Immediate necessity, 2.6%; 6. Extended necessity, 0.0%. The relative frequency of acquisitional incentives for each of the seven groups was similar to the all-group rankings, except that for the older white male groups, general utility rather than immediate facilitative utility was the top ranking incentive. Thus, in respect to the relative frequency of the six acquisitional incentives, groups of different ages, sex, and social statuses were quite similar. However, if the question is asked—“What proportion of all thefts committed by each of the Project groups involved each of the six acquisitional incentives?” clear differences appear among groups of different subcultural characteristics. Table 3.12 shows the percentage of each of four acquisitional incentives (those figuring in 10% or more of all thefts) for the seven Project groups.
Each of the four incentives showed a somewhat different relationship to the various subcultural characteristics of the groups. The prevalence of immediate facilitative utility as an incentive for theft bore no regular relation to group subcultural characteristics. It would appear instead that engagement in theft for purposes of obtaining immediate useful resources was more closely related to the particular patterns of activity pursued by different groups. Groups more heavily involved in outings and picnics, for example, would be likely to steal more food and refreshments. If the groups are ranked according to the volume of their recreational activity, a fair correspondence emerges between the frequency with which groups engaged in athletic and recreational activity and their involvement in immediate facilitative theft.  

Rho of monthly frequency of athletic and recreational activity and prevalence of immediate facilitative theft incentives = .68, N=7. This finding is consonant with the principle of “participational participation.”
General utility, extended facilitation, and symbolic utility as incentives for theft slowed regular relationships to subcultural characteristics. Extended facilitation and symbolic utility were related to social status. The proportion of thefts with extended facilitative utility as an incentive was higher for each of the 3 lower status groups (Molls, Junior Bandits, Senior Bandits) than for any of the higher status groups. Items with extended facilitative utility such as shoes or clothes are evidently of greater monetary value than short-term consumption items such as snacks and refreshments. This is the first available evidence that items stolen by lower status groups tended to be of higher economic value. Since for the lower status youngsters theft was more of a serious business and figured more importantly as a mode of economic acquisition, it would follow that their thefts would be directed to more “serious” economic ends. In addition, there was less likelihood that extended utility items would be furnished by parents in the case of lower status groups, a factor conducive to greater reliance on theft as one mode of obtaining such items. The distribution of representational utility as a theft incentive similarly relates to social status as well as ethnic factors. The five white groups ranked above the two Negro; among the white groups about twice as many thefts by higher status youngsters involved “representational” components (Lower Class II, 16.7%; Lower Class III, 8.9%). This would support the evidence based on the distribution of extended utility thefts that theft served more serious economic purposes for the lower status groups and that “representational” incentives for theft—while still considerably less prevalent than “utility” incentives—were relatively more common among the higher status groups.

The frequency of general utility thefts, on the other hand, was more closely related to age differences than to social status. All older groups showed higher proportions of general utility thefts than youngsters. This would indicate that as group members of both social status levels approached the age when monetary density”. This principle posits that opportunities for violative behavior increase as frequency of participation in a given activity sphere increases.
income became an increasingly important concern, the proportion of their life effort devoted to income acquisition of all types, including theft, increased. Older groups thus did more stealing for income-producing purposes. Within the two age groups, however, the lower status group members in each instance showed greater use of utility theft than did the higher.363

363 Editor’s Note: This chapter is incomplete. Subsequent sections, comprising about 75 pages in rough draft form, deal with the following topics:

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