Parole in Transition and Armed Robbery

— Roger Hood and Stephen Shute:
  Parole in Transition; Evaluating the impact and effects of changes in the parole system
— Shona Morrison and Ian O’Donnell:
  Armed Robbery, a study in London ‘Occasional Papers’ 13 and 15 of the University of Oxford Centre for Criminological Research.

First of all the particular format of the publications deserves some attention. They (and indeed the whole series) may best be described as research monographs presenting and summarizing the empirical data in a straightforward manner. Within the structure of several chapters, the outcomes of the studies are reported in some three hundred short, numbered paragraphs. Most are relatively self-contained statements of ‘empirical facts’.

This particular method of communicating the results of criminological research has some obvious advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand it allows the presentation of a wealth of research data in a concise format. In fact many of the paragraphs represent core elements selected from distribution tables and cross tabulations. Most of the relevant and all of the important information that has been produced by the research can efficiently be reported in this manner. On the other hand this method also has some inevitable disadvantages. The method hardly allows for the construction of a coherent unifying, heuristic (theoretical) or policy context to put the ‘empirical facts’ in some integrative perspective. The reports present a lot of probably valuable ingredients from which criminologists and (judicial) policymakers (professional) could make their own choice to prepare the meal they want.

In the wake of the introduction of a new parole system in the UK, ‘Parole in Transition’ deals with a review of parole procedures, results and experiences under the old system. For this purpose meetings of the ‘Parole Board’, deciding on individual cases were observed. Long-term prisoners and prison officers were interviewed about
their experiences and perceptions of the old system and their expectations for the new parole system.

Throughout the report comparisons are made between the effects of the old system and the estimated outcomes of the new procedures and criteria for granting parole. Officially some net increase of the proportion of prisoners on parole is expected. This is the result of granting earlier parole for the larger group of 'non high-risk' cases and less (later) parole for the 'high-risk' inmates. Procedures under the new system will be made simpler, more objective and more transparent, especially for the inmates.

All available data sources employed lead to the conclusion that under the old parole system decisions were based on scanty information. Prisoners feel that they are judged by (parole) officials who have no or only scarce knowledge of their case. Interestingly most prison officers have the same perception. It seems remarkable that decisions made by the Parole Board on individual cases took less than five minutes on average.

The publication on armed robbery has a twofold objective. First to provide a better understanding of the nature of these offences, with special attention being given to the role of firearms. The researchers want to ascertain the actual dangers and threats when, allegedly, firearms are reported to have played a role in the robbery. Secondly the publication explores the offenders' reasoning and rationality behind the planning and execution of the armed robbery. The kinds of weapons chosen and the actual way of employing the (alleged) weapon is used as a basis for a typification of offences and offenders.

Research data are derived from three sources, 1134 police files on reported incidents, the criminal records of 214 convicted armed robbers and interviews with 88 detained robbers.

One of the core results of this study may be the realization that the grave physical dangers implied in this type of offence materialize in relatively few cases. In 7 percent of all incidents studied some physical harm resulted from the offence, in less than a half percent of all cases physical harm was caused by gun fire. Obviously armed robbery is primarily an offence of threat and intimidation, (fire)arms only being used (to strike or shoot) if the offender fails to effectively control the victim.

Firearms that were reportedly present during the act are of very different kinds. The study differentiates between actual firearms, replica firearms and subterfuge firearms. Not unexpectedly the study shows a strong discrepancy between the nature of 'firearms' as perceived by the witnesses and as reported by the offenders themselves. Whereas in some 85 percent of the cases witnesses believed that a real firearm was employed, the offenders reported this to be true in 41 percent of the cases. In about a quarter of all cases only the appropriate gestures were made in the absence of a real or replica firearm.

The study reveals some interesting relations between the choice of weapons, the intent of the offenders and the nature of the offences. Most strikingly the vast majority of offenders not possessing a real firearm during the act, reported that they actually favoured