

U.S. NEWS

Bank Robberies No Longer Pay

By JACK NICAS

The recent surge in cybercrime comes with a silver lining: Bank robberies are plummeting, as criminals seem to wise up to the fact that heists just don't pay like they used to.

Bank holdups have been nearly cut in half over the past decade—to 5.1 robberies per 100 U.S. banks in 2011. Though the nationwide crime rate is dropping, the decline in bank robberies far exceeds the decline in other crimes, according to Federal Bureau of Investigation data. Preliminary 2012 figures released last week show the lowest tally in decades: 3,870 bank robberies, down from more than 5,000 a year earlier.

Bank-security experts and former FBI agents attribute the decline to stepped-up security and tougher sentencing for bank robbers. Many also say that more recently, sophisticated criminals are recognizing bank robbery as a high-risk, low-reward crime and are migrating online.

"Clearly, as more and more transactions become electronic, more bank crimes become electronic," said Doug Johnson, vice president of risk management at the American Bankers Association.

Though electronic bank crimes have taken far more money than physical robberies in recent years, the shift has resulted in less violence. In 2011, bank robberies left 88 injured and 13 dead—roughly 40% lower than both statistics for 2003, the earliest FBI figures available.

In the 1930s, notorious bandits including John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde helped make bank robberies a piece of Americana, and for de-

cadecades the high-profile crime remained one of the FBI's top priorities, partly because, as in the likely apocryphal quote attributed to bank robber Willie Sutton, "that's where the money is."

The crime hit its peak in 1991, with nearly 9,400 robberies, and is still favored by some. Last month, after a bank robbery in Elgin, Ill., police arrested Jeremy Evans of nearby Carol Stream, who the FBI believes is the so-called Ray-Bandit. He is linked to 17 bank robberies in seven states while sporting a pair of Ray-Ban-style sunglasses.

Increasingly, though, transactions have migrated to automated teller machines and online—and criminals have followed them.

Bill Rehder, who investigated bank robberies for the FBI for 31 years, said the decline began in the 1990s, when banks began bolstering security at branches, including bulletproof barriers in front of tellers and vestibules that locked criminals inside.

Wells Fargo said that after it installed "bandit barriers" in more than 100 California branches in the 1990s, robberies there fell more than 70%.

Also helping are federal sentencing guidelines for convicted bank robbers introduced in 1987, which allow judges to add years for a criminal history or use of a weapon, security experts said.

In the early 1980s, a former Los Angeles antiques dealer named Eddie Dodson single-handedly robbed 64 banks, before pleading guilty to eight robberies and serving 10 years in prison. After his release, he robbed eight more banks, said Mr. Rehder, the FBI agent who helped catch

him—twice.

Compare that with the case of Harold Walden, a teenager convicted in 1992 of robbing five banks who is serving a 73-year prison sentence. "Once you're caught now, you're going to get hammered," Mr. Rehder said. "That acts not only as a deterrent, but it also locks these [serial robbers] up for a long time."

Some security experts say that more recently, younger and more sophisticated criminals have targeted banks and their customers online instead of in branches. Bank robbers "have realized there's a more lucrative and less risky option," said retired FBI agent Jeff Lanza, a public speaker on risk management.

Since 2001, complaints of Internet crime have risen fivefold, to 314,000 in 2011, according to the FBI. The American Bankers Association estimates criminals netted \$1.8 billion in check and debit-card fraud in 2010.

Meanwhile, the FBI said bank robbers took \$29.5 million, or \$7,600 per heist, in 2012. In 1997, they looted \$107 million, or \$12,400 per crime.

Bank robberies are still federal jurisdiction, but the FBI now leaves more investigations of them to local law enforcement. A federal judge has ordered Mr. Evans, suspected of being the Ray-Bandit, to be held, but he hasn't been indicted. His lawyer declined to comment.

Le rapine in banca non convengono più

