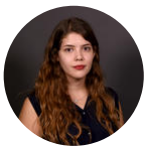


Women take lead role in bank robberies as need for weapons, accomplices wanes



The women caught on surveillance cameras during several bank heists throughout Broward County are part of the growing number of women robbing banks, a crime usually committed by men.



By **Rebeca Piccardo**

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Use of handwritten notes make bank robberies more suitable for women

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Sporting a pair of large sunglasses to partially cover her face, a woman walked up to a teller at a Fort Lauderdale bank and demanded money.

Days later, another woman — her hair tucked into a denim shirt and a ballcap concealing her eyes — held up a bank in Pompano Beach. The next day, another woman hit up a Miramar credit union.



The weapon of choice each time? A piece of paper.

The women caught on surveillance cameras during several June bank heists throughout Broward County are part of the growing number of women robbing banks, a crime usually committed by men.

Nationwide, about 7.5 percent of all bank robberies in 2015 were committed by women. That's up from about 6 percent in 2005 — a 25 percent increase, according to the most recent Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics. FBI figures don't show a breakdown of local trends by state; the bureau would not comment on local trends while court cases are pending.

Experts say more women are targeting banks because the nature of crime has changed. Bank robberies were once meticulous operations, carried out by a team of masked gunmen and a getaway driver. Now it's not as dangerous — robbers can get a payday without taking hostages or using violence.

"You don't have to brandish a gun — you don't have to even have a gun," said Darrell Steffensmeier, liberal arts research professor of sociology and criminology at Penn State University. "You can just pass them the note. That's huge."

Two of the three women suspected in the June robberies have been arrested.

Ashley Cambridge, 27, of Hollywood, is accused of robbing a Space Coast Credit Union branch in Miramar on June 16 and stealing cash from a SunTrust Bank branch in Fort Lauderdale on June 21. She was arrested just hours after the second robbery. Cambridge is scheduled for trial in August in federal court in West Palm Beach.

Quayatta Johnson, 27, of Pompano Beach, is accused of robbing a SunTrust Bank in Pompano Beach on June 15. She told several people she knew she was wanted, but evaded capture until she was arrested July 3, according to investigators.

A woman in sunglasses who took money from a Chase Bank in Fort Lauderdale on June 10 is still being sought.

From accomplice to initiator

Rosemary Erickson, a forensic sociologist and nationwide expert on crime prevention, said takeover robberies — when a group walks in with guns drawn and tells everyone to hit the floor — are no longer the norm.

"We had actual professional bank robbers," she said.

Now robbers blend in with customers and reveal their intentions only when they approach the teller.

"It isn't the big deal that it was when you had several lives threatened at once during a takeover robbery," Erickson said.

The tactic of committing a robbery with a handwritten note makes the crime more suitable for women.

"I think [the trend] will continue increasing ... because of the nonviolent nature of the note-passing robbery," Erickson said, and over time, a woman's role has evolved from working as an accomplice or sidekick to "running the show."

"Women have been involved in bank robberies but virtually always as the getaway driver, and their partners were usually a boyfriend or someone they had some relationship with," Erickson said. "Now women are taking their own initiative and taking their own accomplices."

In September 2015, FBI agents caught serial bank robber Ashley Carrington just hours after a holdup at a Capital Bank in Lighthouse Point. She had male accomplices in that robbery but had previously robbed three banks in Palm Beach County on her own.

Carrington, 21, of Riviera Beach, was still serving three years of federal probation for a 2014 robbery conviction when she passed a note to a teller at Capital Bank saying, "You have 30 secs to empty all draws no pack/no dye," and told her, "Give me all of it."

At first, the teller gave Carrington money that included bait bills — used to help track bank robbers — from the top drawer and activated a silent alarm. Carrington repeated, "Give me all of it," and the teller handed over the rest of the money.

At the same time, one of her accomplices demanded money from another teller. The other man was the getaway driver. The trio got away with more than \$19,000 stuffed into a white plastic garbage bag, the FBI said.

Carrington previously served a 12-month federal prison sentence at the Palm Beach County jail for the 2014 robberies in Lake Park, Palm Beach Gardens and Lantana.

According to the public defender on the case, Carrington was suicidal and homeless in the period before the 2014 robberies.

Now Carrington is serving her sentence at the Federal Correctional Institution in Tallahassee. She is scheduled for release in December 2019.

'Robbing for Pampers'

Women who turn to robbing banks are often in a desperate financial situation, Erickson said. They don't do it because of greed or for fun.

"They are more likely to be robbing for personal financial needs. Being homeless, or single and alone, especially if they have children ... they are literally robbing for Pampers," Erickson said. "Men, on the other hand, have typically done it for the money or just the thrill of it.

When Ashley Cambridge, a mother of two children, confessed to the robberies in Miramar and Fort Lauderdale, she told agents she spent some of the money on her family, rent and other expenses.

She identified herself to investigators on crime scene photographs by circling the robber, writing "me" and signing the photographs, agents said.

During the robberies, she wore a wig and a ballcap but no gloves. Both times, she handed tellers notes written on bank slips that began, "Don't try anything stupid."

Cambridge took a total of \$4,220 in the two robberies, agents said.

Quayatta Johnson, who was released from state prison in April 2013 after serving time for fraud, grand theft and burglary charges, ran into some financial problems.

She told agents she had been unemployed and supported herself by selling drugs for the last three years, according to court records. She said she needed money because a customer did not pay her for drugs she had given them on credit.

During the robbery at a SunTrust bank in Pompano Beach, the robber passed a note that said, "No fake money, no police," and got away with \$1,205, agents said.

"I believe that she said that she spent it paying her bills that she owed," FBI Special Agent Justin Carsten testified in court.

Tattoos often a giveaway

Cambridge and Johnson were caught after agents found fingerprints on the pieces of paper they left at the scene of the crime.

Agents also compared each woman's mugshot with surveillance images from the robberies.

Although Cambridge wore a wig as a disguise, investigators said, the robber they identified as Johnson simply wore a hat and tucked her hair into the back of her shirt.

After surveillance video images of the robber were shown by local media, tipsters called authorities and identified Johnson, agents said. One of the photographs clearly shows stars tattooed on Johnson's neck.

"Tattoos have given away a lot of people," Erickson said. With the advances in technology and surveillance systems, "bank robbers are much more likely to get caught than in other robberies," she said.

Johnson was indicted July 14 on a federal bank robbery charge. The maximum punishment is 20 years in federal prison, though prosecutors estimated that, if convicted, she would face about four years in prison. A judge ordered her held without bond after finding she was a flight risk and a danger to the community.

She pleaded not guilty during a federal court hearing July 19.

"It's not a crime you'd want to pick," Steffensmeier said. "The rewards are not that big and the chances of getting caught are very, very high."

Staff writer Paula McMahon contributed to this report.

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