



Confessions of a Dying Thief: Understanding Criminal Careers and Illegal Enterprise (New Lines in Criminology)

By Darrell J. Steffensmeier, Jeffery T. Ulmer

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***Recipient of the American Society of Criminology's 2006 Michael J. Hindelang Award for a book, published within the past three calendar years, that is "the most outstanding contribution to research in criminology."**

***Nominated for the 2007 Outstanding Book Award of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.**

Sam Goodman, was a long-time thief, fence, and quasi-legitimate businessman. He had a criminal career that spanned fifty years, beginning in his mid-teens and ending with his death when he was in his mid-sixties. *Confessions of a Dying Thief* is an in-depth ethnographic study of Sam and his world based on continuous contact with him for many years, on multiple interviews with his network of associates in crime and business, and on a series of interviews with him shortly before he died.

The book updates and greatly expands the case study of Sam Goodman's fencing activity found in Steffensmeier's award-winning 1986 book *The Fence: In the Shadow of Two Worlds*. It combines Sam's colorful narrative accounts with substantive commentary by the authors to provide a more nuanced portrayal of criminal careers, illegal enterprise, and the broad landscape comprising the entity called "crime." To more fully understand pathways into and out of crime as well as the social organization of illegal enterprise, the authors propose an integrative learning-opportunity-commitment framework that combines differential association/social learning theory and an extended conceptualization of criminal opportunity with a three-fold theory of commitment to crime. This framework offers an integrated and more complete way of understanding mechanisms that underlie criminal offending and criminal careers. It also recognizes the complexity and scope of the criminal landscape and its embeddedness in the fabric of the larger society, including its criminal justice system.

Sam's illness and death are a sobering backdrop throughout the whole book. However, *Confessions* is not just a dying thief's intimate confessions. Rather, it is a rare and penetrating journey into the dynamics of criminal careers and the social organization of criminal enterprise, as experienced by a veteran thief and fence and his network of key associates.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Confessions of a Dying Thief* completes one of the best case studies in criminology literature. It provides a fascinating, if sobering, first-hand account of one man's criminal career and much material for criminological theorizing. Students and scholars alike will find it a valuable resource."

—Steven E. Barkan, *Contemporary Sociology*

"American criminology was born through a merger of theory and multiple methods that addressed the ecology of crime, the learning of criminal behavior, and the careers of law-breakers. The 'case study' was central to that development, filling in the qualitative personal details that illustrated the general theories that would continue to endure into the twenty-first century. Steffensmeier and Ulmer's *Confessions of a Dying Thief* should be added to the classic case studies that manage to bridge the gap between general ideas in sociological criminology and experiences of real individuals in a complex social world."

—Gary Jensen, Professor and Chair of Sociology, Vanderbilt University

"*Confessions of a Dying Thief: Understanding Criminal Careers and Illegal Enterprise* by Darrell Steffensmeier and Jeffery T. Ulmer is an ethnographic tour de force and will become an instant classic. An update of Steffensmeier's *The Fence: In the Shadow of Two Worlds*, *Confessions* takes us into nearly three decades of a life history... a case study of Sam Goodman, a fence and professional thief. The authors skillfully relate these accounts to theory and method. This truly unique life course relationship between subject and researcher makes for a very informative and good read. It also contributes to criminological literature on career criminals on a very personal basis."

—Frank E. Hagan, director, Graduate Program in the Administration of Justice, Mercyhurst College

"Steffensmeier and Ulmer combine rich description and criminological imagination to illuminate the social organization of offending and the complexity of criminal careers. This important contribution offers both a fascinating tour of the underworld and revised understandings of crime across the life course. *Confessions of a Dying Thief* is a "must read" for criminologists and ideal for use in the classroom."

—Francis T. Cullen, University of Cincinnati

About the Author

Jeffery T. Ulmer is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Crime, Law, and Justice at Pennsylvania State University.

Darrell J. Steffensmeier is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Crime, Law, and Justice at Pennsylvania State University.

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