

WHY DO THEY DO IT?

PABLO ESCOBAR



In December 1993, Pablo Escobar was killed by security forces in his hometown of Medellín, Colombia. Escobar started his criminal career by selling tombstones he stole from a cemetery and sanded flat. His first arrest was in 1974 for stealing a car. He soon became known to fellow associates and enemies as intelligent, ambitious, a fast learner, having a knack for business, and possessing an unforgiving memory. He later engaged in the practice of kidnapping individuals from wealthy families and seeking ransom from their family members. However, these criminal endeavors apparently did not get him the riches he desired, so he switched to the drug business.¹⁸⁴ Ironically, Escobar did not enjoy taking cocaine or other hard drugs. His drug of choice was marijuana, which he was known to smoke on a consistent basis. Persons who knew him closely called him a “pothead.”

In 1976, he had earned a reputation as an established drug smuggler. He also had a reputation for killing people and blowing up neighborhoods, shopping centers, and a jetliner. Escobar’s innovations in the drug-smuggling business introduced new ways of transporting drugs that had not been common before, including soaking designer jeans in a liquid form of cocaine. Furthermore, he was likely the first to use submarines to carry large shipments of cocaine up the Pacific coastline, now a common practice.¹⁸⁵ However, he was considered by some as a type of Robin Hood. He built houses for the poor, paved roads, constructed sports stadiums, and gave employment opportunities to thousands. This is why 20,000 local citizens showed up for his funeral.

Escobar also enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle. His favorite estate was a 7,000-acre ranch in Colombia, valued at an estimated \$63 million. He imported various exotic animals such as giraffes, camels, bison, llamas, cockatoos, and a kangaroo. He is known to have actually burned \$2 million just to stay warm when he was “on the lam” from U.S. authorities. Later, he wanted to give the impression that he was a legitimate businessman; so he owned his own radio station and many times was accompanied by Roman Catholic priests. At the peak of Escobar’s criminal activities, he and others associated with the Medellín cartel produced 60% of the cocaine in Colombia; this was about 80% of the U.S. market. In fact, Forbes magazine listed him as one of the world’s richest people.

In 1991, after a massive manhunt, Escobar negotiated his surrender. The terms included his presiding over his drug business while incarcerated. He had cellular phones, computers, and meetings in board rooms. His living conditions were quite comfortable, with a waterbed, rugs, curtains, a stereo system, and a 60-inch television. He was soon concerned that his enemies would try to bomb the jail; officials built him a bomb shelter.

In 1992, the details of his luxurious incarceration were revealed and the government decided to transport him to a regular jail. During transport, however, he escaped. Escobar began targeting suspected traitors and rivals. When his cartel diminished, the government began to search for him, which resulted in his shooting death in December 1993.¹⁸⁶

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Why did Escobar engage in this criminal activity?
2. Why did the government and some of the Colombian citizens support Escobar and his activities?
3. How would you deter someone from wanting to engage in this type of criminal activity?