



Looking at Crime From the Street Level



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Looking at Crime From the Street Level: Plenary Papers of the 1999 Conference on Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation— Enhancing Policy and Practice Through Research, Volume 1

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The Professional Conference Series of the National Institute of Justice supports a variety of live researcher-practitioner exchanges, such as conferences, workshops, and planning and development meetings, and provides similar support to the criminal justice field. Foremost among these forums is the Annual Conference on Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation. The Research Forum publication series was designed to share information from this and other forums with a larger audience.

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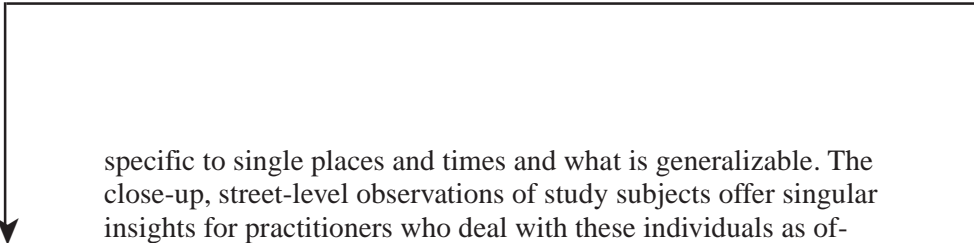
Foreword

This year's annual conference on criminal justice research and evaluation is a milestone of sorts. Some 30 years ago, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice noted with alacrity that the revolution of scientific discovery had "largely bypassed the problems of crime and crime control." The method of objective analysis that had been used with stunning success to raise living standards, help people live healthier lives, and explore the heavens had unaccountably failed to be applied to one of the era's most pressing problems. To the great good fortune of succeeding generations, the Commission in its wisdom recommended creation of a Federal research agency dedicated to the scientific study of crime and criminal justice, with the aim of informing and aiding the work of practitioners.

The National Institute of Justice, the agency established by Congress to carry out that mission, has for the past three decades been seeing the returns on that investment multiply. Criminology has become a respected field of scholarly inquiry, and we have built an impressive body of knowledge that has helped us better understand criminal behavior and the justice system. More important, the results of scholarly inquiries have been and are being applied to the day-to-day operations of law enforcement, corrections, the courts, and other elements of the justice system.

In the conference, which revisited the Commission with the theme "Enhancing Policy and Practice Through Research," we saw how the investment continues to yield returns. The plenary sessions in particular emphasized praxis—research put to the service of real-world situations. Because of the distinctiveness of this year's plenary panels, we decided to publish them in three separate volumes: viewing crime from the street level, addressing school violence through research-based policy developed through an interdisciplinary approach, and understanding the involvement of women and girls in the criminal justice system.

Sudhir Venkatesh and Richard Curtis bring the ethnographer's perspective to the analysis of street crime, analyzing, respectively, the financial activity of gangs and recent trends in drug dealing. Their method, distinct from that of conventional quantitative social science, calls for intensive observation over long periods and involves the quest for what is



specific to single places and times and what is generalizable. The close-up, street-level observations of study subjects offer singular insights for practitioners who deal with these individuals as offenders. In this panel, we also benefited from the perspective of Charles Ramsey, Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department, Washington, D.C. His indication that drug trafficking and gang crime persist in his jurisdiction despite the overall drop in crime offers proof of the ethnographer's caution against facile generalization.

This year marks the first time the program offices of the Office of Justice Programs (OJP)—the Corrections Program Office, the Drug Courts Program Office, the Executive Office for Weed and Seed, and the Violence Against Women Office—have joined the OJP bureaus as conference sponsors. Because these offices work so closely with the practitioner community, I feel their sponsorship is an added expression of their commitment to research. I think they would endorse Chief Ramsey's succinct assessment of the role of research in affecting crime levels in the years to come as bringing to light findings useful for fashioning real-world solutions. "The best way to predict the future," the Chief said, "is to help create it."

Those who wish to read more can find abstracts of the conference sessions on the World Wide Web at <http://www.ilj.org>.

Jeremy Travis
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The Financial Activity of a Modern American Street Gang

Sudhir Venkatesh, Columbia University

The street gang has been a part of the social life of American cities for more than 150 years. In the mid-1970s, through a dramatic transformation known as corporatization, street gangs became systematically involved in underground income-generating activities such as drug distribution and extortion.¹ The effects of corporate gang activity, including increased violence and decreased safety of public spaces, are unmistakable and have received significant attention in the popular and social scientific communities. However, only a handful of studies on the financial activities of the corporate street gang have been conducted.² Although their findings are valuable, these studies have provided minimal quantitative information on the financial dealings of the gang or the earnings of its individual members.

The ethnographic approach

Quantitatively oriented researchers generally have experienced great difficulty in procuring information about the financial activities of gangs and other underground entrepreneurs. The time necessary to gain the trust of informants and to protect one's role as a researcher makes a "quick-and-dirty" survey interview difficult to carry out. In this context, participant-observation techniques—sometimes called ethnography—have served as a powerful social scientific tool in researching marginal groups. Classic ethnographic objects of study have included street gangs, victims of crime and natural disaster, and the homeless.

Ethnographers use close-up observations of, and lengthy discussions with, gang members to provide answers that statistical surveys cannot capture. Ethnographic studies may be distinguished by their interest in the meaning of a given lifestyle for the participants—for example, why individuals join gangs has been an issue of great concern.

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sometimes called ethnography—have served
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researching marginal groups.*

By “hanging out” with people for extended periods of time, ethnographers have been able to acquire information on gang activity outside not only the public eye but also the gaze of many researchers. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the conceptual and theoretical insight into gang activity is produced by ethnographic studies. Information produced by qualitatively oriented ethnographers also has been valuable for survey researchers in constructing questionnaires and interview protocols.

The particular value of ethnography in street gang studies resonates with the larger use of ethnography in the social sciences. Ethnography has been useful in giving “voice to the voiceless”—in making information publicly known about people, groups, and social processes that are ignored, marginalized, or silenced by the state and media. Ethnography also has served as a means to provide a more complex, richer portrait than can be produced using only quantitative data.

The qualitative information produced by ethnographers is no panacea, however. It is the view of one person (the ethnographer) and is, therefore, subject to his or her biases. Because of time and monetary constraints, ethnographers can study only a small group of people; thus, they are often forced to draw conclusions about gangs in general based on their knowledge of one or two gangs.

Thus, ethnographic information has not been particularly well integrated into social science policy—how can national policy be based on the observations of only one person observing one or two gangs in only one context?

“Quantitative ethnography”

In this study of the financial activity of a street gang, ethnographic research techniques were used to obtain quantitative information. Specifically, numerical data on the economic practices of a street gang

(including wage and nonwage expenditures) were gathered through the use of participant-observation techniques. The project captured not only qualitative information on gang members' views, daily activity patterns, household relations, and other variables but also information on how much they earned, how their earnings changed as they "aged" in the gang, and other quantitative data.

Ethnography was helpful in gathering two data sets that may assist in the policy arena. In developing the first data set, the ethnographer contacted a former gang member who had access to the financial records maintained by a single gang for a 4-year period between 1988 and 1995 (to protect confidentiality, the exact dates cannot be revealed). These "books" recorded the price and quantity of drugs sold; other sources of revenue; and gang expenditures for wages, weapons, funerals, and other items. The gang leader had updated the data monthly to manage the gang's financial activities.

In developing the second data set, the ethnographer worked with a macroeconomist to conduct longitudinal tracking of nearly one dozen gangs in a large city. Data on wages and expenditures were periodically collected from many different drug dealers in the city. This ongoing observation of gangs was intended to produce a taxonomy of the various organizational structures in which drug trafficking takes place (and to identify the most lucrative and successful) and a model of how gang members age throughout their tenure in the gang. Questions answered included when and why members left the gang and how much they earned over the course of their involvement.

Findings: Gang revenues and expenditures

Results indicated that ethnography can be a productive technique to study criminal processes. It can provide extremely valuable observations of difficult-to-reach social groups and also can be used with survey and interview protocols to yield quantitative information.

The financial books kept by a large, now-defunct street gang reveal that the gang sustained a lucrative operation. The gang, consisting of several hundred members, included a leadership class (typically, a leader and 3 officers); a "foot soldier" class (ranging from 25 to 100 members aged 16 to 25 years) that sold drugs; and "rank and file" members (usually 200 persons younger than high school age) who were not allowed to conduct entrepreneurial activities. More than 70 percent of the

gang's total annual revenue of approximately \$280,000 was generated from the sale of crack cocaine. Dues provided some additional gang revenue (approximately 25 percent), and extortion directed at local businesses and entrepreneurs represented a small fraction of revenues (about 5 percent). The gang operated in a neighborhood of roughly four city blocks (eight blocks to a mile).

Costs were subdivided into nonwage and wage expenses. The single greatest nonwage expenditure was the purchase of wholesale powder cocaine. Tribute payments by the leader to the central gang leadership holding authority over the gang represented the local gang's second greatest nonwage expenditure, accounting for nearly \$50,000 annually (more than 15 percent of the total revenue).

In return for this payment, local gang members received protection on the streets and, more critically, in prison; some help in finding and maintaining supplier networks; and the opportunity to rise in the organization and extract tribute from other local gangs. Another nonwage gang expense was payment to mercenary fighters (known as warriors), who performed some of the most dangerous tasks (such as drive-by shootings and guarding key drug-selling locations during gang wars). These warriors, typically former gang members with reputations for bravery and violence, were held on retainer by the gang. Funerals and payments to families of the deceased were a nontrivial expense for the gang. When a gang member was killed, the gang paid funeral expenses and typically provided compensation to the slain member's family. The total average cost to the gang was \$5,000 per funeral, a large amount compared with the annual wage payment to the typical foot soldier (averaging less than \$2,000 per year).

Wage costs were divided into two categories: expenditures for officers and those for foot soldiers. The gang leader retained between \$4,200 and \$10,900 per month, for an annual wage of \$50,000 (year 1) to \$130,000 (year 4). Officers (for example, the runner, enforcer, or treasurer) earned roughly \$1,000 per month working full time, and most did not work in legitimate jobs simultaneously. The typical foot soldier was paid about \$200 per month and worked approximately 20 hours per week, implying an hourly wage well below the Federal minimum. But foot soldiers also were allowed to sell marijuana and heroin outside the gang structure—the gang sold only crack cocaine. Calculations indicated that the average foot soldier's hourly wage ranged from \$5.90 to \$11.10 during the 4-year period.

Gang members who were active for the entire 4-year period had roughly a 25-percent chance of dying.

On the surface, the wage range available to foot soldiers was substantially greater than the minimum wage available to these poorly educated inner-city youths through legitimate employment. However, as shown in the table below, risk calculations based on the gang’s own tally of injuries, deaths, and arrests, combined with ethnographic observations, indicate, not surprisingly, that street-level drug distribution is an extremely risky business. The annual death rate among the gang’s foot soldiers was 4.2 percent—more than 40 times the national average for African-American males in the 16- to 25-year-old age group. On average, a drug seller could expect 0.59 wounds (virtually all from bullets) and 1.43 arrests each year. The most alarming statistic is that gang members who were active for the entire 4-year period had roughly a 25-percent chance of dying. Furthermore, there was an average of more than two nonfatal injuries (mostly gunshot injuries) per member and nearly six arrests for the 4-year period.

By comparison, homicide victimization rates for black males aged 14 to 17 in the United States are roughly 1 in 1,000 per year, or about 100 times lower than observed in this sample. Even among rank-and-file members of this gang (for example, those affiliated with the gang

Adverse Events Experienced by Gang Members*

	Number in Sample	Annualized Rate per Member
Violent death	3	0.042
Nonfatal wound or injury	42	0.590
Arrests	102	1.433

*Data on adverse events were gathered during ethnographic study of the gang and correspond to the 26 months for which financial data were available (financial data were not available for each month of the entire 4-year period). Annualized rates are based only on the experiences of gang officers and foot soldiers (excluding rank-and-file members who did not actively participate in the drug trade). On average, there were approximately 30 foot soldiers at any given time during the study period.

but not actively engaged in the drug trade), homicide rates are only 1 in 200 annually in this sample.

Because most gang members never realize significant material gain, an economic-based explanation [for gang membership] is not sufficient in itself.

The nonofficer stratum within the corporate gang endures risky work conditions for the opportunity to move up in the gang's hierarchy and to earn a more significant salary. In economics, this situation is referred to as a "tournament"—an opportunity structure similar in some respects to that of medical residents or associates in law firms. However, even when factoring in the probability of moving up in the gang organization, the expected wage of the average gang member during his tenure in the gang is only \$7 per hour. This wage does not seem high enough to counter the tremendous risks of injury, arrest, and death inherent in the drug trade.

What motivates gang participation?

Given the findings that the majority of individuals in the gang are poorly compensated and face grave risks, the clear question is, Why would gang members choose to participate in such activities? Those studying corporate gang activity tend to explain gang involvement by emphasizing either economic attractions or symbolic factors. In the economic model, gang members are entrepreneurs who rely on the gang for material benefits because they are unwilling to accept the mainstream opportunities available to them or because they have not encountered much success in the legitimate labor force. In this study, most gang members never realize significant material gain, so an economic-based explanation is not sufficient in itself. Symbolic theories emphasize the role of ideologies such as "family" that afford gang members a basis for personal and collective identity in social ecologies of impoverishment and minimal mainstream resources. Gang members do find in corporate gang activity a measure of peer group support and a sense of belonging to a larger community; however, these symbolic benefits alone also seem to be incapable of sustaining motivation in

gang-based entrepreneurialism over an extended time period, perhaps because gang members eventually find social support from peers who are not affiliated with gangs.

Indeed, the life-course appears to be the best perspective from which to understand the interaction of symbolic and economic incentives. Ethnographic observations of several gangs over an extended period of time indicate an aging-out pattern. For example, at the most basic level, the successful corporate gang will provide for all of its members an immediate wage and a direct sense of community and identity. The significance of these two benefits changes, however, as the individual member ages. In his role as an entering foot soldier, the member has few financial commitments, and so gang involvement makes possible fairly continuous consumption and provides an alternative to menial work in the service sector, along with the fellowship of one's peers. The younger foot soldier is motivated to stay in the gang by the prospect of a potentially lucrative salary as an officer. However, for the older, more experienced drug trader, one with perhaps a growing number of financial and familial commitments, the immediate economic wage is no longer sufficient; similarly, while the benefits of the peer group continue to exist, opportunities for high income and promotion in the gang diminish. It is at this point that most of the gang members in this sample abdicated their involvement in the gang's entrepreneurial activities and chose instead to direct their energies to the mainstream labor market. While many continued to participate in the gang's social activities, the symbolic attraction of dramatic future material rewards appeared to lose its motivating capacity.

Faced with continuous turnover, the gang brings aboard new recruits who are sustained by the objectively very slim—but symbolically very powerful—belief that they will achieve substantial earnings while working for the gang. In this manner, the individuals composing the gang are continually changing while the overall structure of the gang remains constant. Nearly every other corporate, metropolitan area variant examined is characterized by this basic structure—there exist both a young cohort motivated by the remote possibility of substantial earnings and an older adult contingent that grows disillusioned with the gang as an adequate employment prospect but relies on the gang for supplemental income (until a full-time legitimate job at a competitive wage is found) and for peer group support. Preliminary study results suggest that both younger and older gang members are motivated by

material attractions as well as the benefits of membership in a company of like-minded peers. Further research is clearly necessary, however, to understand the precise role of symbolic and economic motivations.

Both younger and older gang members are motivated by material attractions as well as the benefits of membership in a company of like-minded peers.

Data authenticity, validity, and usefulness

Never before have such detailed financial data from a street gang been available for scholarly inspection. The existence of such data raises important questions regarding authenticity and validity. On the question of authenticity, there is no reason to doubt that these records actually reflect data that the gang compiled on a monthly basis. During the ethnographic phase of data collection, the researchers learned of several gangs that were monitoring their financial activities. The researchers were not given access to these data until after the gangs had dissolved and word was received that the records could be made available. The general knowledge among those in the city's law enforcement and social service communities that some street gangs record their financial activities, and that many leaders have documented on paper their personal portfolios, provides additional confidence in the data set (indeed, a recent trial of a police officer accused of assisting gang drug operations used a gang's books as part of its evidence).

The question of validity is more problematic. The study data were compiled by hand and stored in notebooks or on scraps of paper. Those responsible for keeping the data had no formal training in accounting. Several possible biases in the data necessitate viewing the results obtained as a lower bound on the profitability of the gang. First, although used primarily for tracking day-to-day gang operations, the data were also intended to serve as a means by which the gang leader could credibly report to his superiors about profitability or lack of profitability.

Ethnographic methods open doors for subsequent policy-relevant research that could be exploited by social scientists.

This second use of the data raises the possibility that the scale of the operation as a whole was consciously understated—the less money the gang earned, the smaller the monetary tribute that had to be given each month to the leader’s superior officer. Also, the gang leader had great flexibility to make “off-the-books” arrangements, such as allowing individual members to sell goods on their own for a small fee payable to the gang, or allowing other local entrepreneurs to sell illicit goods for a similar fee. Finally, the gang also permitted its own members or others in the community to sell marijuana, heroin, or amphetamines in exchange for payment of a monthly “tax.” Neither the leader’s independent activities nor the sales of these other drugs are reflected in the data. However, both of these revenue sources are likely to be minor when compared with the sale of crack cocaine.

Despite concerns regarding authenticity and validity, ethnographic methods open doors for subsequent policy-relevant research that could be used by social scientists. The receipt of a gang’s financial records is one benefit. However, this study’s model of the life-course aging process was also a product of ethnographic observation of several gangs throughout the city. Ethnography was used as an initial screening device to gain information about the range of different organizational structures that gangs adopt. Once this “universe” of gang organizational types was formed, it was possible to form a smaller sample and to interview gang members and track their wages/expenditures over an extended period. The outcome was the empirical data on drug trafficking that are representative of gangs throughout the city—not just one region or one organizational type. Moreover, the breadth of ethnographic participation yielded insights into the developmental trajectory of gang members (that is, how they age and at what points particular forms of intervention might be useful).

Although more research of this type is needed, this study offers a preliminary basis from which to analyze the motivations for individual participation in the corporate gang. In light of tremendously skewed

wage distribution, a life-course perspective was employed to account for the economic and symbolic incentives of individual corporate gang involvement. Throughout their tenure, gang members move in and out of the service sector and so rely on the gang for both an immediate (but pecuniary) wage and for support and friendship. However, over the course of their involvement in the gang, as members realize that their opportunity to move higher in the gang hierarchy is diminishing, the possibility of lucrative earnings loses its attractive potential and members grow disillusioned with the gang as a viable sphere of economic mobility. Thus, most young adult members withdraw from full-time involvement in the gang's economic activities and become primarily social members.

The fact that gang wages are so low and most gang members work at least sporadically in the legitimate sector suggests that public policies designed to encourage greater labor market participation and discourage gang involvement may be successful.

Recommendations: Jobs are key

The fact that gang wages are so low and most gang members work at least sporadically in the legitimate sector suggests that public policies designed to encourage greater labor market participation and discourage gang involvement may be successful. To be optimally effective, such policies must recognize the differing motivations for participation among younger drug sellers and those in their adult years. Policies that attempt simply to replace gang-based drug dealing with jobs in the service sector will not be as successful in limiting gang recruitment and countering the dream of underground economic mobility. Indeed, for young members, in addition to peer affirmation, it is the illusion of riches and rewards that is an overwhelming attraction of the corporate gang. For them, the gang must be countered with another meaningful ideal of social mobility and self-efficacy.

As members age, peer group support and identity continue to be important motives for remaining in the gang, but the gang also becomes an employer of last resort, furnishing income in contexts where other opportunities may be limited. For this group, direct job creation may have a more lasting impact in offering a real exit mechanism by which older members can end their involvement in drug economies.

Notes

1. Taylor, Carl S., *Dangerous Society*, East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Press, 1990.
2. Padilla, Felix, *The Gang as an American Enterprise*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992; Bourgois, Philippe, *In Search of Respect*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989; and Jankowski, Martin S., *Islands in the Street*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991.

The Ethnographic Approach to Studying Drug Crime

Richard Curtis, Ph.D., John Jay College of Criminal Justice

I am an ethnographer specializing in the study of illegal drugs, primarily in New York City neighborhoods, and I will address “crime from the street level.” Those who might think I could talk with more authority about crime from the victim’s rather than the offender’s perspective could not be more wrong. In fact, after more than 20 years of intensive and extensive street-level research in New York City’s most dangerous neighborhoods, I have never been harmed or have even really feared for my physical safety—except occasionally because of nervous police officers who are surprised to find me in what they consider to be hostile territory, like crack houses or shooting galleries. For the past 10 years I’ve lived in Brownsville, Brooklyn—Mike Tyson’s boyhood neighborhood and the one-time homicide capital of New York City—where my two daughters attend public school and where I’ve become quite involved in community affairs. My reasons for living in Brownsville are complex. They include my commitment to improving the inner city and my belief that if I want to “talk the talk,” I need to “walk the walk.” I have never regretted my decision.

What does an ethnographer do?

Ethnographers do many different things. For example, a recent *New York Times* article described how corporations are increasingly turning to ethnographers to better understand how people use their products so that they can devise improvements. The work of an ethnographer—data collection—involves observing individuals over prolonged periods of time and interviewing them about topics of interest. Ethnographers typically study relatively small groups of people, and although we hope that such intensive scrutiny might lead to generalizations that can be applied to other groups across time and space, that is not always the case. What an ethnographer learns about drug dealing in Harlem or Brooklyn may or may not have relevance to policymakers and public officials outside New York City, except that trends beginning in New York sometimes spread elsewhere.

One might simply say that ethnographers study people's everyday lives. While I do study people's everyday lives, the people I study are involved in illegal activities—typically, selling or using drugs.

The work of an ethnographer—data collection—involves observing individuals over prolonged periods of time and interviewing them about topics of interest.

Individuals unfamiliar with the streets or the populations I study often want to know how I actually do the work. First, I am always straightforward about what I am doing with the people I would like to know better. I try never to deceive anyone or misrepresent myself. Sometimes, I initially simplify the story because people often become suspicious when a complicated research agenda is presented at the beginning of a relationship. In those cases, I usually tell people that I am writing a book about drugs and would appreciate their help and opinions. Later, if they are interested, I explain the purpose of the study in greater detail.

Second, I carry no protection while doing research; I rely on the relationships that I develop to ensure my safety. I do not own a gun or carry a knife or any other kind of protection device, and people are generally aware of this. This actually works to my advantage because research subjects are often so concerned about my well-being while I am working in “neighborhood minefields” that they feel obliged to accompany me to ensure my safe passage. On more than one occasion, local “tough guys” who felt it necessary to play bodyguard because they thought I was a walking target for stickup artists were shocked and appalled at how readily I entered crack houses and shooting galleries that even they had been afraid to enter. When they discovered that everyone inside knew me, they were even more surprised. While I do not mean to minimize the dangers involved in this line of work—and there are some if you do not know what you are doing—I have always felt extraordinarily protected by those around me.

Finally, I try to leave the work in the street when I return home at night. Although I make no secret of my address and telephone number (I am

listed in the telephone book), people generally respect my privacy. In emergencies, they know they can call me.

Lessons from the street level

I wish to convey some idea of how my research subjects think about crime and offending. It was very difficult to decide what to relate that might be useful or lead people to think about things from a different perspective. The first problem that occurred to me when I started to consider the topic was that there is no single “criminal perspective” on crime. Since my particular areas of interest have been drug distribution and use, I count among my acquaintances—and sometimes my friends—hundreds of drug dealers and users. The opinions and attitudes of drug dealers and users vary as much as anyone else’s, although there are some broad trends (which I will discuss later). In this paper I will share several lessons I have learned from the street level.

Don’t make assumptions about what people believe

I have learned—and continue to relearn with disturbing frequency—that it is not wise to make assumptions about people and then act on those assumptions. For example, I used to think that because police and drug dealers are adversaries they naturally dislike each other. Certainly, I have heard drug dealers rail about how aggressive policing has affected their business and how particular police officers seem to single them out for harsh (and, in their eyes, unjustified) treatment. I have also heard police officers complain about the “scourge” of drug dealing and talk about dealers and users as though they are subhuman. My conversation with the owner of a mid-sized crack business in Brooklyn illustrates another aspect of this issue.

I had been eager to meet this individual, but I knew he was anxious about being “set up” by the police. I thought I might ease his fears about me by commiserating with him—by telling him about my own problems with a pair of officers in his precinct who had a history of abusive behavior. As I described my difficulties with these two officers, trying hard to establish my pedigree—my legitimacy—a funny grin came over his face. I finally stopped and asked what he found so amusing. He told me that one of the officers I had mentioned was a member of the paint ball team that he leads. I scratched my head and asked, “Now, let me get this right, Monday through Friday you shoot bullets at each other, but on Saturday and Sunday you shoot paint balls?!”

“That’s right,” he said. He didn’t seem to have any problem with the concept, but it took me a little while to digest what he had said and understand its implications.

A general lesson was learned here: Don’t make assumptions about what people believe. Assumptions can get you into trouble. A more specific lesson was also learned: Residents of inner-city neighborhoods that have been heavily policed have sophisticated attitudes and complex feelings toward law enforcement. The more I thought about what he told me, the more it made sense—sort of.

In some ways, law enforcement officers and drug dealers are two sides of the same coin, and it should not be so surprising that they know each other so intimately. In many ways, selling drugs—or pursuing those who do—represents the major employment opportunity for youths from these neighborhoods. I know many dealers who have aspired to be law enforcement officers and many police officers who have “checkered” backgrounds.

Rates and types of crime vary by neighborhood

The challenge of ethnography is to find out what is specific to one place and time and what has more general implications. The only way this can be accomplished is by undertaking comparative studies over a prolonged period of time.

The largest, most violent street-level drug distribution organizations studied were located in neighborhoods where community cohesion was the weakest.

A main point of one of my earliest comparative studies was the idea that the rates and types of crime vary by neighborhood. The results of this study, published in the late 1980s in *Getting Paid*, by Mercer Sullivan, indicated that crime varies by neighborhood for perhaps two main reasons.¹ First, there are different opportunities for crime depending on where an individual lives. For example, in neighborhoods adjacent to industrial areas, factory break-ins are common; in neighborhoods with

few commercial areas but dominated by highrise apartment buildings, robberies and crimes like chain- or purse-snatching are more common.

The second reason crime varies is “collective efficacy”—that is, neighborhoods are more or less able to exert influence over those who commit crimes. The idea is that crime will likely be lower in neighborhoods where there is “mutual trust among neighbors combined with willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good, specifically to supervise children and maintain public order.”²

Only by placing the behavior of offenders within the context of a community can we decipher whether their acts are consistent with that environment or aberrations that require deeper scrutiny.

It was no coincidence that the largest, most violent street-level drug distribution organizations studied were located in neighborhoods where community cohesion was the weakest. Just as the types of crime varied by neighborhood, the attitudes of offenders also varied greatly, depending on where they lived. Offenders also live in communities, and even if one believes they are biologically or psychologically predisposed to crime or antisocial behavior, their outlooks and orientations toward life are forged and honed in the context of families and neighborhood groups. Only by placing the behavior of offenders within the context of a community can we decipher whether their acts are consistent with that environment or aberrations that require deeper scrutiny.

Crime rates vary over time

The fact that crime rates also vary over time is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting aspects of my research. Even the most casual observer will likely have heard at the end of the 1990s that serious crime is down in almost every major American city. The drop in crime has astounded and delighted the pundits, the policymakers, and the general public, although no one seems to know exactly why it has happened. One reason it has been so surprising is that it seems to contradict a fundamental assumption upon which much of the adult world rests: that youngsters have

no respect for their elders. If you buy into this idea, then each successive generation has to be a little worse than the one preceding it. (My mother, who each morning walked 14 miles to school barefoot in the snow, is sure this is the case.) The academic proponents of this idea—most notably, John J. DiIulio and William J. Bennett—take the idea to its logical conclusion and tell us that our “criminogenic” inner cities are producing “amoral” kids who will grow up to be “superpredators.” They seem to feel that our undoing, like that of the Roman Empire, will not come from external enemies but, rather, from a rotten core. The drop in crime has to be shocking for these doomsday prophets because the steepest drops came in precisely the areas that they had considered almost unsalvageable—minority neighborhoods in the inner cities.

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While public officials and governmental agencies scramble to take credit for this unexpected, improbable, and fortuitous turn of events, few observers have bothered to solicit the opinions of the offenders themselves about why they seem to be committing fewer crimes. Again, it is worth noting that offenders do not form their opinions and attitudes in a vacuum—they do so in the context of families, peer groups, and communities, and all of these clearly evolve over time.

In the neighborhoods where I work, the beginnings of the shift in the prevailing current on the streets were first noticed in 1988. It was then, while I was working for the Vera Institute of Justice evaluating the effectiveness of the New York City Police Department’s Tactical Narcotics Team, that I first noticed young crack dealers exhorting their crack-selling peers to avoid consuming the product. At first, I thought this was motivated simply by a profit motive, and clearly that was part of the story, but the larger picture was more significant and, eventually, the ethos first developed and espoused by these youths extended outward and was picked up and refined by groups of youths who had little to do with selling drugs.

For lack of a better description, I will call this new identity “anti-drug dealer chic.” This new identity was an explicit repudiation of the excesses of the crack era. Youngsters no longer aspired to be big-time drug dealers. Even some drug dealers no longer wanted to be identified as such. Gone was the “Mr. T” look characterized by wearing gaudy jewelry. Where drug dealers in the 1980s advertised their success through the purchase of consumer display items, dealers in the middle to late 1990s have preferred an understated style, making them, in many respects, indistinguishable from their peers.

It is not simply outward appearances that have changed among the new generation of drug dealers. In their view, their predecessors made two glaring errors: (1) they used the product they sold, resulting in a tragic loss of self-control whose spillover hurt their families, neighbors, and communities; and (2) they didn’t know how to handle “success.” Lacking a sensible approach to business, they brought chaos, unprecedented levels of violence, and an army of drug warriors to their neighborhoods.

The dealers of the late 1990s are, in many ways, “control freaks”

In their personal habits, the new generation of dealers believe in keeping a tight rein on the use of mind-altering substances. For many, marijuana is the only substance consumed because it allows users to “keep their wits about them” regardless of how much they smoke. Even alcohol, once aggressively marketed in minority neighborhoods in 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor, is shunned by many youths who dislike its stultifying effect. Crack or heroin use is strictly taboo—so much so that in two studies I am currently conducting we are experiencing great difficulty in locating young people who use these substances. Although sniffing cocaine is tolerated, users are not lionized by their peers as they were in the 1980s; indeed, they are praised for their ability to show restraint at the end of the night when the compulsion to buy more is strongest.

Strictly regulating the intake of substances that go into one’s body is only one facet of the control that the current generation of young people seek to impose on their daily lives. While the 1980s were characterized by out-of-control drug markets that featured gratuitous and often undirected violence as a hallmark, the reconfigured drug markets of the late 1990s are comparatively docile, discreet, and orderly. They are also much smaller and offer far fewer financial rewards to those

who become involved in them. For this generation, selling drugs is much more like a job flipping burgers than it is the pursuit of fame, infamy, or fortune. For many young men, the current unattractiveness of drug selling is compounded by the widespread repudiation of that lifestyle by young women who frequently and consistently reinforce the message that they will not date drug dealers. Believe me when I tell you that appealing directly to the libido is a powerful motivating force for young men!

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In many respects, these changes in the attitudes and actions of drug dealers and users are astounding, but they are even more remarkable because they arose from the grassroots without any support or intervention from governmental sources. If only we could bottle what has happened. What is most alarming to me is that the significance of these fundamental shifts has been almost totally misread or ignored by those with the power to do something about it. Rather than capitalizing on the tendencies toward moderation that the current generation of young people so clearly demonstrate, we continue to act as though we are at the height of the crack epidemic, beefing up drug squads and incarcerating people at unprecedented rates for increasingly petty drug-related charges. If ever there were a recipe for disaster, surely this is it.

Learning from the lessons of the past

I would like to share a few observations about how we have waged the war on drugs. A consensus that the tally sheet is awash in red ink seems to be growing and, surely, the cost of the war in dollars and cents is more than most of us had bargained for. The social costs also seem to be extraordinarily high. In New York, there has been a push to soften the punitive Rockefeller drug laws, and several other States have already taken steps in that direction.

The expected outcomes of certain actions are always greatly outnumbered by the unintended consequences. Sometimes the unintended results of such actions are beneficial, but mostly they are not.

From the experience of having worked extensively in neighborhoods that have been the primary battlegrounds in this war, I have seen that the expected outcomes of certain actions are always greatly outnumbered by the unintended consequences. Sometimes the unintended results of those actions are beneficial, but mostly they are not.

The plight of middle-aged ex-prisoners is just one example. During the past 2 years, we have noticed that many of the men who had been locked up in the late 1980s and early 1990s have been released from prison. We could reasonably expect that their transition back to their neighborhoods would be fraught with difficulties, especially for minority men whose opportunities are limited, but their problems have been even more severe than could have been anticipated. For instance, finding that their peers who were fortunate enough to have escaped the drug wars relatively unscathed have moved on, many returnees revisit their old haunts, seeking to reconnect with the past. Coming back to an altered urban terrain, many of these middle-aged men attach themselves to street-corner groups whose members are as young as 13 or 14. Forced to jockey for position in the pecking order of these groups, middle-aged ex-prisoners frequently find themselves challenged by young men eager to build a reputation in the street. When these guys say that young people today don't respect their elders, they have the stitches and broken bones to prove it. While some people would have little sympathy for the plight of these men, their presence on the street is likely to have a significant impact on the children, teenagers, and young adults who bear witness to the inversion of age and respect, both of which are, in a "normal" world, supposed to grow together over time.

What we did in 1989 is still reverberating in 1999, and that echo is likely to last a lot longer. What we do today will likely have an impact well into the next century. It is my hope that, as we reformulate drug policy based on the lessons of the past, we do so not only with short-term goals in mind but also with the knowledge that such interventions

are likely to have long-lasting repercussions that may far outweigh their momentary gains.

Notes

1. Sullivan, M.L., *Getting Paid: Economy, Culture, and Youth Crime in the Inner City*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.
2. Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush, and F. Earls, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy," *Science* 277 (August 15, 1997): 1–7.

A Police Chief's View: A Response



Charles H. Ramsey

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To the question of what proportion of crime can be accounted for by gang activity, I would reply that it is difficult to really get a good handle on how much is actually committed by gang members or drug dealers. Often, when crimes are committed, we don't really know the motivation behind the crime. A significant amount, however, is committed as a result of our drug trafficking problems here in the District of Columbia as well as gang activity in the District.


Gang crime and drug crime persist

I wish these gang-bangers in New York or in whatever sites you were studying would come to D.C., because those in D.C. apparently haven't yet gotten the message that this kind of activity is on the decline. We've had a decline in crime overall here, but we've still got a tremendous amount of violent activity by members of street gangs here in the District.

My perspective on what these young people are thinking and doing when they first join gangs is that, for one thing, they are unemployable. They are frequently high school dropouts; they have no skills. Where are they going in life? Crime itself becomes a job for many of them because they don't see any alternative. They climb the "pyramid" of the criminal enterprise by eliminating the competition. So they're able to maneuver and do things based on just the rule of the street. And that's still very, very appealing to a lot of these kids.

When I was in Chicago recently, I went to the theme park Great America with my son. We saw two young men walking down the midway wearing T-shirts that read "Living the Life of a Thug." That was the message on the T-shirt! There was the big "thug" on the front, and the men wore caps with a gravestone design on them with the saying "Rest in Peace" and that kind of thing. Now, they apparently did not get the message that this is no longer glamorous, because they seemed quite proud of what they were doing. When you're dealing with that kind of mentality, it's difficult to really break through.






I think the value of research like we have heard presented here, though, is that from it there are some prevention and intervention strategies for some of the “borderline” kids—some of the ones who haven’t yet quite crossed the line into crime. But with many of them, when you ask how do they get out of the cycle of selling drugs so they can get a job (as if it’s possible for them to get a job with IBM or some similar firm), I think we need to face the reality that we’ve got a lot of very profound social problems that are putting people into positions in which they have no alternatives. People are going to eat. You’re going to provide for your family. You’re going to provide for yourself. If you can’t do it legitimately, you’re going to do it in a criminal way. That’s the situation we find ourselves in, in my opinion.

What explains the drop in crime?

If, as the speakers have said, the large drug-dealing organizations are out of business or have been dismantled, the question is why. Could it be because all of them suddenly just realized that selling drugs was wrong—that it’s destroying their families, it’s destroying their friends, it’s destroying their lives—so they decided to just get out of the business? Or is it because they were arrested, they were put in jail, and now the whole structure has been disrupted? And if so, as a result, do you now have lower level entrepreneurs who haven’t yet become sophisticated enough to have the kind of connections that some of the other ones do? They’ll grow into it, but they haven’t gotten there yet. Is that the reason?

I don’t quite understand. In one sense, we’re saying that this is happening because people have finally learned about the dangers of drugs and, doggone it, they’re changing their lives. But another reason given is that some of them—many of the larger organizations—have been dismantled. That’s now given as the reason. I have trouble keeping up with why we’re seeing the situation we have now if, in fact, there is a decline in drug trafficking across the country, or at least in New York.

When the speakers say the use of crack cocaine has declined and there has been a shift to marijuana use, they seem to be saying it’s the lesser of two evils. I’ve worked in narcotics for many years, and what I’ve seen is that if there is increasing heroin use, there usually is a decline in cocaine use. If you have an increase in cocaine use, then you have a decline in heroin use. Marijuana is always there. A lot of the traffickers found out that they did a lot less time in prison trafficking in marijuana, and they were able to make an extraordinary amount of money traffick-



ing in marijuana with much less risk. Many of these major trafficking organizations, including the ones that were running heroin and cocaine, began running marijuana.

Once, when we made a seizure, what I thought was 200 kilos of cocaine was 200 kilos of marijuana packaged exactly like cocaine. It was about 10 to 15 years ago when we started seeing more and more and more and more of it. So the drug of choice just seems to shift from one to the other. There is a need in our society for people to somehow escape—either through alcohol, through marijuana, through cocaine, or through some synthetic drug that will take its place. I don't know if people are wising up or if it's that some other drug is replaced for a while and then it shifts back.

What is happening on the streets that's helping to bring crime rates down is, for one thing, the strong economy. And I agree that there are alternatives to involvement in crime. A lot of people who get involved in criminal activity do so because there are no other options. If there is a stronger economy or something else that gives them an option, many of them will take it. I think you can't overlook that. I also think you have to look at policing strategies, involvement of the community, and all that sort of thing as reasons for the decline in crime.

Reaching young people

It's a very complex issue. I don't think people understand fully why the crime rate goes up, and they don't understand fully why it goes down. I know one thing: I will not take credit for crime declines, because then I've got to take the blame when crime goes up! It's a two-edged sword—eventually, the rate will go up. We've all been around long enough to know there are cycles. I think it's the year 2009 or 2010 when the teenage population is going to increase by almost 9 percent. History tells us that could present a problem. But if we start working with those young kids now and do something now to provide opportunities for them, then many of them will not choose the path of crime. Some will, but most will not.

We have to act now. And that's where research plays a very valuable role. Because of research we know these kinds of things. The best way to predict the future is to help create it. If you know that, then you must start now taking steps to reach those kids so they aren't at the crossroads in 2010, and we're all still sitting here having this discussion about the rising crime rates rather than the declining crime rates.

Decriminalization is not the answer

As to suggestions to relax the drug laws, you know what my reaction is going to be. I just don't believe in doing that. I think we just have to be a little smarter. I think the biggest breakdown in our so-called War on Drugs has been that we have not provided money for treatment and prevention. We've always put money on the enforcement end—as if incarcerating our way out of our problem is going to be the solution. I think it was back in the 1960s and 1970s when we first started talking about the dangers of cigarette smoking, and we basically changed an entire culture—away from smoking cigarettes. Now you're starting to see it come back again because we felt we had the problem licked and so we stopped the campaign. Now you are starting to see younger and younger people smoking. But you can do it again if you really pay attention to prevention and intervention strategies and, in the case of drugs, of course, treatment.

You've got to get people off drugs. Making drugs more available by relaxing the laws is going to have an impact on whom? Minority communities are where it would be the most devastating. Do you think that they're going to open a clinic in Georgetown and let you go there to buy all the crack cocaine or heroin you want? No. It's going to be in Southeast D.C. if it's anywhere. That's exactly what's going to happen if we relax the drug laws. The communities hit by drugs now are going to be the same ones hit if we try to legalize it. I personally think that legalization is just not an option.

Avoiding truancy by instilling hope

Truancy is a serious problem, but I don't think anybody really wants to take ownership of it. When you talk to one group, they will say it's the police who should be picking these kids up. Another group will say it's the schools that are responsible. I don't know where the parents figure into it. It's always some government institution—not the parents—that's said to be responsible. It's very important that you keep these children in school. I agree with the statement that most kids drop out around 9th or 10th grade. At a high school in Chicago on the west side where I worked for about 17 years, we'd get a freshmen class of 500 kids, but 4 years later we'd graduate maybe 120. What happened to the others? Many dropped out, and usually it was when they were in 9th and 10th grade.

No one was there—no counselors, no one—to help them adjust to this new school environment. Nobody was there, when they first started skipping class, to take them and bring them in and talk to the parents and do that sort of thing. We seem to treat truancy as just a minor offense, but we don't recognize that it leads to other kinds of behavior in the long term. That uneducated kid is the one who's going to have to turn to a life of crime because what else can he do?

However, during the time I worked at that high school, I also saw kids who came out of horrible circumstances who really did very well in school. They went on to college and they did a lot of positive things. You wondered how they did it. In each and every case, they had something that was a kind of hope for them, whether it was athletics, a positive role model, a mentor, or the church. For these kids there was always something that served as a symbol of hope when they were surrounded by things that were very, very negative. In cases where there are children whose environment is negative, they've got to have something to hold onto. There are very many kids who do have this, and in a lot of cases, it's just their parents.

Special populations at risk

As to an increase in women's or young girls' involvement in gang activity, I've not seen anything that would really lead me to believe there has been such an increase. But there has been an increase in media coverage of it. Here in D.C., the media jumped on a couple of cases and made a big story about girls in gangs. There have always been a few girls who have been involved, but I've not seen anything significant. When something like that captures the attention of the media and they start to talk about it, it conveys the impression that there's been a dramatic increase. There may, indeed, be somewhat of an increase; I'm not saying there is none. But the increase hasn't been so noticeable that everybody in the department is talking about it and that we're doing anything special to really try to get a handle on it.

There have been female gangs in Chicago, for example, where a few were affiliated directly with specific gangs. I know the Latin Kings, the Disciples—all the bigger gangs—had female factions. Many of them date gang members, and they may hold drugs, or they may hold guns and do those kinds of things. That is nothing new. To the question of whether there has been an increase in female gang activity, I would say

I've not seen a rise, although it is a serious problem. I don't know if they're included in research studies, but they're out there.

In terms of changing demographics, I haven't seen anything in D.C. that would indicate the pattern that's been suggested (the movement of some people from Central America into gang activity). We have Latino gangs here and we have African-American gangs. I don't know whether the first generation of immigrants coming to D.C. consists to a large extent of people from Central America. That first generation is going to be one thing, and then their children may begin to develop some of the same kinds of problems that have plagued African-Americans and some of the Latinos who have been here for a while. You may see that in the future. It's certainly something that would be interesting to keep an eye on.

Community policing and the decline in crime

I think that, in the short term, we will continue to see some decline in crime. Maybe we won't see double-digit decreases, but we are likely to see some further decline. I don't think we've really "hit bottom" yet. But I also think that until we decide to deal with some of the more systemic problems in our society and really repair the educational system and things like that, we're going to be looking into crystal balls trying to guess at this. We already know what the ingredients for crime are, and yet we're not doing a whole lot in response. In fact, I think this decline in the crime rate has given us a false sense of security that somehow we've had some kind of major breakthrough, and we haven't. We've just been lucky.

I think that if community policing had not come along when it did, it probably would have fallen flat on its face. We were fortunate enough that it came at a time when crime rates were falling. The reality is that police chiefs live in a pressure cooker. I'm here to tell you that if you're talking about establishing community policing and your mayor is saying there's a rise in homicides, you will know very quickly who's going to win that argument—it won't be community policing. So, again, in the timing of community policing, we were very, very fortunate.

But what community policing did was make us start thinking about crime differently. It started making individuals take some responsibility for dealing with crime. If we stay on that track and really start to work on some of the profound social issues that are causing the dichotomy of have's and have-not's to be here to begin with, I think it will have a long-term impact on crime.

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