Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City

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Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City offers an interpretive account of juvenile delinquency within the modern inner city, an environment characterised by a long history of social deprivation and high rates of crime. A wide range of topics are explored, such as young people's motivation for, frequency of and attitudes towards a variety of illegal behaviours, such as street robbery, burglary, theft, drug use, drug selling, and violence. Why do young people commit these offences? Who do they commit them against? How do they feel afterwards? *Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City* attempts to answer these important theoretical questions, utilising qualitative data collected over a seven-year period and based around the London inner-city borough of Lambeth, including in-depth interviews with young people who have offended and interview material with those working with juvenile offenders. Additionally, *Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City* addresses the key cultural aspects of young people's lives in order to determine what particular cultural factors surround their offending behaviour.

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To my new wife, Cheryle, whom I met in London: your love and support are without parallel.

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Preface

My upbringing was both outside England and outside the inner city. Six years of living in central Brixton, though, offered me an idea of what daily life must be like for English inner-city inhabitants. The sights, sounds and smells of Brixton, what can be expected from walking down the area's high and back streets, where the 'good' and 'bad' areas are, and some restaurants and cafes worth checking out are well remembered. Due to my length of time in Brixton, to a degree, I became localised, and enjoyed many of the area's small perks. I discovered a couple of places to buy inexpensive CDs, shops selling cheap refillable shaving razors, and some off-licences that are open every day of the year. I enjoyed much of what Brixton had to offer, and could take people on guided tours, showing off the area's many attractions.

Some extraordinary events occurred during my time in Brixton. Nelson Mandela visited, and gave a talk at the Recreation Centre. The vibe he generated amongst the throngs of people who came to welcome him was one of wonder and respect. I caught a glimpse of him as his motorcade departed. Mike Tyson also came to Brixton to check things out, and had to duck into the local police station to avoid getting mobbed by his fans. Activists once 'reclaimed the streets' and turned Brixton High Street into a giant party, complete with banners demanding that Effra Road be dug up as 'a river runs below it'. On the day of Princess Diana's funeral, Brixton seemed relatively empty, and the chorus of the broadcasted funeral procession was audible in the streets. A racist homophobe exploded a nail bomb on Electric Avenue, about 40 metres from where I stood at the time. The shockwave caused by the explosion was not too dissimilar from the tremors caused by minor earthquakes in Southern California. These events will never be forgotten.

In October 2002, I moved out of Brixton to live with my fiancée in Tottenham, North London, an environment not too dissimilar from Brixton, and then finally out of Tottenham a year later to take up a position at Columbia University. I always knew my time in Brixton was temporary. My plan was to get in, do research, and get out, and the plan unfolded accordingly. Throughout the course of this research, the knowledge of eventually leaving Brixton never really left my mind. Brixton was only my temporary home, a chapter in my life that I opened and closed. I put myself in and took myself out of this environment. The majority of people living in Brixton and Lambeth more generally probably do not have these

options. In other words, that many people in Lambeth would be able to pick up, move out, and resettle elsewhere is unlikely. My inner-city experiences, being both temporary and relatively controlled, can never form a complete picture of what being *from* the inner city is truly like, to be born, raised and educated there. I only experienced a taste of inner-city life, a glimpse of the realities of Brixton's long-term residents.

Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City endeavours to illustrate the complex series of normative judgements young people make regarding their offending behaviour. It aims to offer a glimpse into the 'moral universes' of young people with a particular focus on their histories of offending. I wanted to offer some insight into the minds of young people as they committed 'crime', and the overall role of 'crime' in their lives. While these were my research tasks, I enjoyed many fantastic experiences during my time in Brixton, and England more generally. I spent the greater part of my 20s there. I met people from around the world, and bathed in multiculturalism. I made dear friends, several of whom I have seen marry. I also have a godson who lives outside Brighton. What I call my overall 'British Experience' extends well beyond the work presented here. I established connections in England that will hold for the rest of my life.

I truly enjoyed my time in Brixton, and think it to be a vibrant and exciting multicultural environment. Rather than a 'British Experience', I underwent more of a 'Brixton Experience', for this area was where I spent the majority of my time. Many fantastic and wonderful people and aspects about Brixton and Lambeth more generally exist, but these should not belie the borough's dark underbelly. The conditions and histories of crime – including serious offences such as robbery, burglary and crack and heroin sales – within the borough surely add, unnecessarily, to the pressures and tribulations that inner-city residents, already living in an overcrowded borough with a high unemployment rate, must suffer. The many businesses skirting on the lines of legality by trading in 'hot' goods also add to the atmosphere of crime in the area. Lambeth's citizens may not be direct victims of these crimes per se, but living in the wake of these behaviours surely compounds their daily grind, their daily struggle. These things are important to bring up; such activities and behaviours do not occur with such frequency or such visibility everywhere, though they happen in Lambeth, and have been doing so for a very long time. If nothing is said then surely nothing will be done. High rates of serious offences will not go away by themselves, as evidenced by their prominence within Lambeth over decades. I hope this book in some way serves as a catalyst for positive change in the borough.

Bill Sanders
Brooklyn 2004

Introduction

Why study young people and crime? Many forces drive researchers to study social phenomena, some of which may stem from the researcher's history. What might best be described as a personal 'connection' between a sociologist's biography and their topic of study has been suggested as an incentive (Becker 1963; Corrigan 1979; Hobbs 1988; Polsky 1969; see also Geis 2002; Lofland and Lofland 1984), and indeed a personal connection served as an impetus for this research.

My initial interest in criminology partially stemmed from growing up around gangs in San Diego, California. San Diego, like many major US cities, has criminal street gangs (Klein 1995; Spergel 1995). The gangs exist in various communities in San Diego (Sanders 1994), including the residential suburb where I lived in North County. I knew guys in the gang throughout my teen years, and still run into some of them when I occasionally go back to visit. Their faces are not easy to forget; we attended the same schools, were in the same classes and lived around the street from one another. This upbringing also helped shape my interest in *how* to research crime and delinquency. For instance, that only some of the guys I grew up with joined the gang, not all of them, was interesting to note. Qualitative approaches towards the study of crime and delinquency – such as interviews, observations and ethnography – have a great potential for uncovering reasons for such a discrepancy. These methods, generally speaking, allow for subjective interpretations and understandings of social phenomena to emerge, including those in the general field of crime and delinquency (Berger and Luckman 1967; Goffman 1959, 1963, 1967; Groves and Lynch 1990; Weber 1947). Furthermore, these qualitative methods offer the opportunity to bridge the often large gap between a researcher of crime and delinquency and the 'criminals' they research (Nelken 1994), and allows us an opportunity to find out what 'crime' really means to others and how it fits with their daily lives.

My original intentions for this research were 'gang' oriented. I intended to come to London, find an area to study young people, hang out with them, determine how they compared to US-style street gangs, and write about it. *Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City*, however, turned out to be much more than expected. This book offers an interpretative account of young people, crime and culture in a multi-cultural environment. It examines a reality experienced by young 'white', 'black' and 'mixed-race' people who have offended, as translated through their voices and

the voices of those who have worked closely with such individuals. It offers my analysis on several topics related to various categories of behaviour that, by definition, are illegal. This book aims to offer a contemporary picture, both physically and theoretically, of young people with various histories of offending in an inner-city London borough.

This research is much needed; there is a dearth of interpretative studies on young people within urban settings who commit crime. What do we know about young people who offend in London's inner-city areas in the early years of the new millennium? How do young people make sense of their offences? How do they talk about them? How does offending fit in with the rest of their lives? The present study attempts to answer these questions. Also, and importantly, inner cities are often equated with crime (Foster 1990; Graef 1993). Recent British Crime Survey data have shown a disproportionate amount of 'street' crimes, victims of these crimes and fear of crime in inner-city areas (Kershaw *et al.* 2000; Mirrlees-Black *et al.* 1996, 1998; Simmons *et al.* 2002). These considerations may give rise to feelings of lawlessness and helplessness associated with inner cities. But is this really the case? By researching crime in the inner city, this study is addressing a major social concern in an area that typifies where this concern is substantial.

Specific themes examined within the book include sociological, criminological and more general concerns. One of these is motivation – criminology's 'Holy Grail' (Groves and Lynch 1990: 360). Why do young people offend? This question is difficult to answer, and several general theories of crime and delinquency attempt to account for such behaviours. One line of reasoning – strain theory – contends that young people turn to offending as a way to reach their desired goals, and that offending is the result of them being denied legitimate access to what they want in life (Agnew 1992; Merton 1938, 1957). Another major theoretical standpoint suggests that we have various social bonds – investments, commitments, attachments to and beliefs about our society – which, in effect, keep us from offending (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Hirschi 1969). These control theories argue that when these bonds become weakened or are altogether removed, an individual may offend. Others have suggested that crime may be a rational choice (Coleman and Fararo 1992; Cornish and Clarke 1987). Rational-choice theory holds that people carefully calculate their offences by weighing out perceived risk against perceived gain, and only commit them when the former is deemed acceptable in lieu of attaining the latter. An additional theory suggests a seductive nature of crime, where people offend in order to transcend their everyday rational worlds and enter an alternative 'carnivalesque' reality where they indulge in fantastical 'sneaky thrills' (Katz 1988; Presdee 2000).

This book is not aimed at testing or proving any one of these major theories of crime and delinquency. However, it attempts to see how they fit with the interpretations offered by young people about their offences. Likewise, this book cannot exactly answer *why* young people behave illegally, although I move towards explanations for various offences by piecing together existing bits of some contemporary theories. Aside from seeking motivation, additional phenomenological aspects of the young people's offending – such as how they select appropriate victims or

targets, the extent to which they plan such acts, and how they feel after committing their offences – are also explored within the book. Information on the young people's motivation, planning, target selection and their attitudes towards various offences are referred to as that pertaining to their 'moral universes' or their worldviews.

Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City also addresses structural and cultural conditions of the young people's urban environment in attempts to evoke or explain specifics about their offending. In particular, I explore the extent to which structural deficiencies within the borough, such as high population density and high unemployment, may have given rise to additional, illicit and illegal forms of economic activity, such as selling drugs and the trading of 'second-hand' merchandise (Coleman 1988; Foster 1990; Hagan 1994; Sullivan 1989). From here, I attempt to assess the degree to which the presence of such activity, and, invariably, those involved with it, may have been influential on young people's decision to offend (Sutherland 1947; Sutherland *et al.* 1992).

Other perspectives on crime and delinquency that I explore in this research attempt to account for the moral climate towards specific offences. Is there a broad 'culture of offending' (Matza 1964; Sykes and Matza 1961) amongst young people in the inner city where certain offences are 'allowed', or are there smaller 'offending cultures' where such behaviour is 'required' (Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Cohen 1955)? Perhaps young people who offend in the inner city comprise the 'criminal Other' – individuals relatively detached from conventional values and lifestyles (Nelken 1994)? Alternatively, maybe these young people are more like everyone else than previously expected. This book examines the extent to which such perspectives are valuable in capturing explanations of crime and delinquency amongst young people.

Cultural attributes of young people themselves are considered in relation to their offending. This examination is steeped within the tradition of 'cultural criminology' – the explorations and analyses of the intersections of culture and crime (Ferrell and Sanders 1995; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Jefferson 1993; Presdee 2000; Willis 1978). The importance of this lies not only in how we view young people who have offended, what we think they look like and get up to, but also in finding out if anything about their own cultural minutiae is significant in better explaining aspects about their offending. For instance, there exists in the inner city a variety of mediated images of 'crime and deviance', which, in part, offer up portrayals and stereotypes of individuals considered 'criminal' or 'deviant'. These images, in turn, have the potential to become internalised by a vast audience, suggesting who should be considered criminal or deviant in our society (S. Cohen 1972; Sparks 1992; Surette and Otto 2001). Postwar Britain has seen a veritable rogues' gallery of young offenders with the teddy boys, mods and rockers, punks, skinheads, hippies, ravers, and, perhaps more recently, yardies and gangstas. And while the image of the young offender has certainly changed in appearance over the second half of the twentieth century, how much has it changed fundamentally? Are the groups fairly similar to one another, each being a continuation of Britain's 'history of respectable fears' (Pearson 1983)? Or have

their structure and functions recently changed, maybe being more similar to US-style gangs? Certainly previous literature has failed to find gangs in Britain (Downes 1966; Foster 1990; Parker 1974; Robins 1992), but some social and economic conditions in the UK had, near the end of the twentieth century, shifted towards those in the USA linked with the emergence of gang behaviour (Downes 1998). 'Yardie' and 'gangsta' are also terms heard in the media, and reported in journalistic accounts (Davidson 1997; Thompson 1995). Concomitantly, popular music is saturated with hip-hop's tattooed, self-proclaimed 'thugs' and 'rude bwois'. Yet to what extent are these accurate portrayals of young people who offend in the inner city? By addressing various aspects of the young people's cultural worlds, how they represent themselves and how they are perceived, an additional aim is to draw attention to how (and if) such aspects are important in comprehending crime and delinquency in their lives.

In order to answer my questions, getting very close to young people who have offended was important. This occurred through various efforts. *Youth Crime and Youth Culture in the Inner City* is not an ethnographic study per se, but it was carried out in the spirit of ethnography: *in situ* and over time. Whyte's (1955) *Street Corner Society*, Liebow's (1967) *Tally's Corner*, Becker's (1963) *Outsiders*, Parker's (1974) *A View From the Boys*, Foster's (1990) *Villains*, Robins' (1992) *Tarnished Vision* and Bourgois' (1995) *In Search of Respect*, to name a few, were all highly influential works. Like these researchers, I sought to analyse crime and deviance 'up close' through direct experience, interaction and communication. Rather than generating data through what are generally considered 'participant observational' methods, this research is primarily based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 31 young people with various histories of offending, supported by similar interviews with 67 professionals who have worked with young people who have offended in miscellaneous capacities. This information is complemented by six years of field notes on general information about aspects related to crime and delinquency in an inner-city London borough generated from living, working and playing there. In the first chapter I discuss exactly how I came to London and 'hit the ground running' in terms of attempting to find and interview young people who have offended and those who have worked with them. I also highlight some of the trials and tribulations I encountered in the process of finding paths that would (hopefully) lead me closer to young people who have offended, and discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of the methods that were eventually employed. In addition, Chapter One offers some background information on the young people and professionals interviewed, and discusses how my information about them will be presented. Furthermore, I address some issues of conducting research on crime and delinquency in a multicultural area.

The 31 young people interviewed each have different histories of offending. Some have committed very serious offences, such as street robbery or burglary, whereas others have a relatively tame record of offending, perhaps an odd fight or theft when younger. For analytical purposes, I divided the 31 young people into two generic groups: those more involved in offending and those less so. These caterories are based on the classification and total number of offences the young

people said they committed with the exception of fighting, and the amount of times they said they had been arrested, if any. Throughout the book comparisons are made within and between these groups to account for similarities and differences in the young people's perspectives – their moral universes.

Prior to discussing and analysing the offences committed by the young people, examining the area they grew up in is important. The second chapter aims to do this. Within the sociology of crime and delinquency, several theories focus on the environmental context and social and economic status of an offender. These include: 'social disorganisation', 'subcultural', 'strain' and the idea of the 'underclass' (Agnew 1992; Merton 1938; Sampson and Groves 1989; Shaw and McKay 1942; Wilson 1987). However, at no point in this book do I suggest any direct link or correlation between structural aspects of the young people's environment and their involvement in offending. Chapter Two illustrates and explores the young people's urban surroundings, so as better to contextualise this behaviour. The point here is to paint the 'background' scenery, to set the environmental tone. Specifically, I offer some socioeconomic statistical information about the inner-city borough, as well the recorded rates of various offences that have occurred within it. Furthermore, I detail discovered and recorded forms of illicit and illegal economic activity within the borough that comprise part of an 'underground economy', and address how this economy may fit into the lives of ordinary people (Foster 1990; Robins 1992). A further analysis centres on the potential influence this economy may have on the young people's involvement in offending (McGahey 1986; Pitts 1999; Sullivan 1989).

Robberies, burglaries and thefts are the topic of Chapter Three. The themes explored in this and other chapters that directly discuss their offences include traditional criminological concerns, such as motivation, planning, learning, skills and reactions to such offences. Chapter Three attempts to find out what goes through the mind of a young person when: they enter a house illegally; stuff expensive clothing in their jackets and leave without paying for it; or dash by and grab someone's bag or purse. The focuses of these analyses centre on the phenomenological context of these behaviours (Gibbons 1971; Groves and Lynch 1990; Jacobs and Wright 1999; Katz 1988; Shover 1996). In other words, I examine the young people's actions immediately revolving around their illegal acts. Also in this chapter I explore the extent to which adults and the underground economy within the area influenced the young people's decisions to become involved in these acquisitive offences.

Illicit drugs are a great social concern. Drug use is very widespread amongst young people and drug markets have the potential to offer them lucrative returns and real dangers. Chapter Four explores these topics. It first looks at how often young people used drugs and their overall attitudes towards them. Cannabis dominates this discussion, but some young people mentioned experimenting with other drugs, such as cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, speed and aerosol inhalants. From here, I discuss how drug use amongst young people is theoretically conceptualised. Does drug use take place within closed, confined circles amongst society's failures (Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Merton 1957)? Or has the use of some drugs become so

widespread as to be considered a 'normal', routine aspect of youthful behaviour (Parker *et al.* 1995, 1998)? Perhaps it lies somewhere in between. In the second half of the chapter I examine the interpretations and attitudes of the few young people I interviewed who said they sold crack, heroin and/or cannabis, and find out exactly how they carried it out and why. Their interpretations of these behaviours are compared against that of drug-selling youths previously researched (Fagan 1996; Padilla 1992; Ruggiero and South 1995).

Chapter Five is about expressive offences, such as vandalism, joyriding and graffiti. I look at the frequency of these behaviours and find out exactly how they were committed and with whom. From here, I analyse the significance that the young people attributed to such acts. Why would they purposely destroy public property? What attracts them to smashing car windows or 'tagging' a street name? What function does joyriding serve? Perhaps, as has been suggested, they commit them for 'fun' or 'just for the hell of it' because they are 'bored' with 'nothing to do' (Corrigan 1979; Presdee 1994, 2000). Or maybe they just enjoy being 'bad' (Katz 1988)? I attempt to tease out explanations for these behaviours and answer other questions related to the young people's expressive offences.

Chapter Six concerns violence. It starts by looking at the nature of young people's fighting. By this I refer to why the young people said they fought, whom they fought, and how these fights were carried out. Next, I look at the young people's attitudes towards and use of weapons, namely guns and knives. How prevalent was the use of firearms and 'choppers' amongst young people in this inner-city borough? Are 'guns on the streets' becoming a 'sign of the times'? I try to answer these questions. In the final part of the chapter I look at the extent to which territory was something that the young people fought over, and their degree of willingness to 'defend it' (Anderson 1999; Shover 1996). From here, I compare the young people's territorial issues to those exhibited by US-style street gangs in order to account for similarities and differences (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Fagan 1996; Klein 1971, 1995; Sanders 1994; Spergel 1995; Vigil 1988).

In Chapter Seven I shift away from directly addressing the young people's interpretations of their offences. Instead, I look at other aspects of their lives, such as how they present themselves in public, what they get up to on a daily basis, and their interactions with police officers in their neighbourhoods. These three completely different cultural aspects of their lives are grouped together here in order to explore the extent to which they intersect with the young people's offending. The overall aim is to find out if we can learn anything relating to this behaviour by closely examining these cultural indicators (Ferrell and Sanders 1995; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1978). First, I look at the style of the young people, which here refers to their clothing, music and overall demeanour, aiming to detect significance and meaning. Next, because the young people said they spend much of their time with their friends, I investigate what they get up to together. In the final section of this chapter I analyse the experiences those in my sample have had with police in their environment.

The concluding chapter reflects on the discussions in the preceding chapters. In particular, I focus on the limits or rules those in my sample, and perhaps other

young people in the inner city from similar backgrounds, followed (or still follow) when they committed (or still commit) their offences. These self-imposed and, no doubt, culturally informed rules seem to outline a culture of offending – their normative judgements regarding their illicit or illegal acts. I explore what these judgements may suggest. Are they mindless thugs bent on chaos and destruction, or are there limits they imposed on themselves when behaving illegally? Is crime a 'free for all', or are there guidelines that young people adhere to which regulate their offending? I attempt to answer these questions. I also examine the extent to which young people see themselves committing offences in their futures. Do they believe that they will be 'doing crime' for the rest of their lives, or do they have more typical employment expectations? Additionally, I ask: What can my data reveal about young people who offend in the inner-city borough more generally? Interviews with many professionals who have been working with young offenders in the area for several years offered comments in parallel with the young people's interpretations of their offences. I draw out these parallels, so as to offer a general impression of young people with histories of offending in the borough. From here, I explore the extent to which some of the more general theories of crime and delinquency can adequately explain or evoke the young people's offending, and then offer my own theoretical views on the young people's offending behaviour. A small supplementary chapter offers some advice on what might be done about certain acquisitive and drug-related offences.

This book is about black, white and 'mixed-race' young people who have offended in an inner-city London borough. It explores how they make sense of behaviour generally defined as 'crime', attempts to understand the fine distinctions they make regarding this behaviour, and examines the relationship between offending and specific cultural aspects of their lives. My interviews and observations are very rich in detail and personal experience, and, as such, are able to offer much insight into the minds and lives of young people from the inner city who offended from a fairly unique perspective: up close and personal. The general idea is to offer a peek into the world of these young people, to examine their 'moral universes' in relation to their law-breaking behaviour, and to understand crime and delinquency in their lives as seen through their eyes.

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