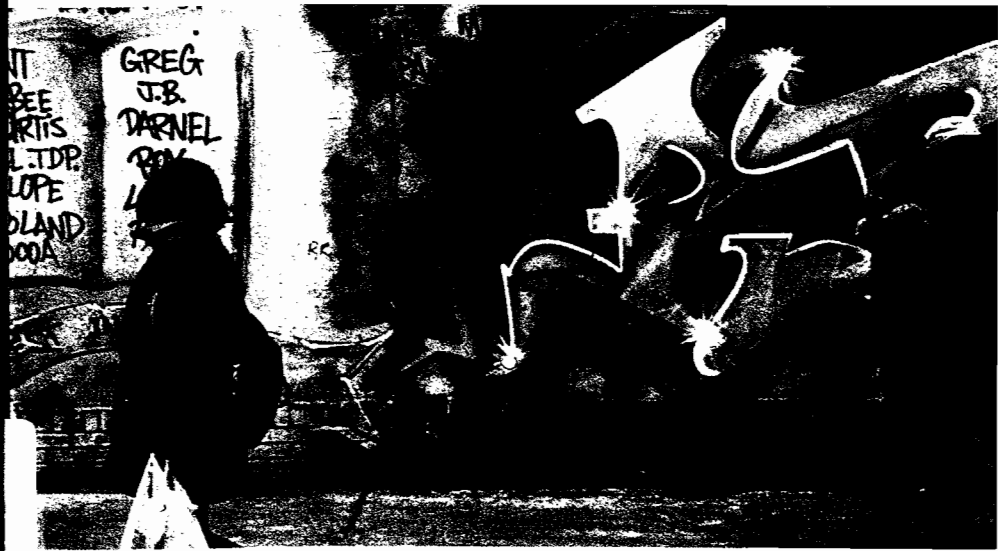


Code of the Street

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ANDERSON, ELIJAH
CODE OF THE STREET:
DECENCY, VIOLENCE, AND
THE MORAL LIFE OF THE
INNER CITY

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Moral Life of the Inner City



*"Eloquent and moving. . . . A
strikingly powerful work that
rings with urgency."*

—Alex Kotlowitz, author of
There Are No Children Here

Elijah Anderson

Drugs, Violence, and Street Crime

IN 1899 W. E. B. Du Bois published *The Philadelphia Negro*, which made a major contribution to our understanding of the social situation of African Americans in cities, although this was not appreciated at the time. Like so much significant ethnography, this description has become part of the wider historical record, describing social life in the period under study.

In today's ghetto there appears to be much more crime and higher levels of violence and homicide than in the earlier period. In addition, an ideology of alienation supporting an oppositional culture has developed; this can be seen with particular clarity in the rap music that encourages its young listeners to kill cops, to rape, and the like. Nowhere is this situation better highlighted than in the connection between drugs and violence, as young men involved in the drug trade often apply the ideology glorified in rap music to the problem of making a living and survival in what has become an oppositional if not an outlaw culture.

Du Bois was concerned with the reasons why black Americans were poorly integrated into the mainstream system in the wake of their great migration from the rural South to the urban North after the abolition of slavery. The situation he discovered was one of race

prejudice, ethnic competition, and a consequent black exclusion and inability to participate in mainstream society, all in the social context of white supremacy. This pattern of exclusion resulted in deep and debilitating social pathologies in the black community, the legacy of which persists to this day.

In making sense of the social organization of the black community, Du Bois developed a typology made up of four classes. The first were the well-to-do; the second, the hardworking, decent laborers who were getting by fairly well; the third, the "worthy poor," those who were working or trying to work but barely making ends meet; and the fourth, the "submerged tenth," those who were in effect beneath the surface of economic viability. Du Bois portrayed the submerged tenth as largely characterized by irresponsibility, drinking, violence, robbery, thievery, and alienation. But the situation of the submerged tenth was not a prominent theme in his study as a whole. Today the counterpart of this class, the so-called ghetto underclass, appears much more entrenched and its pathologies more prevalent, but the outlines Du Bois provided in *The Philadelphia Negro* can be clearly traced in the contemporary picture.

The growth and transformation of this underclass is in large part a result of the profound economic changes the country—especially urban areas like Philadelphia—has undergone in the past twenty to thirty years. Deindustrialization and the growth of the global economy have led to a steady loss of the unskilled and semiskilled manufacturing jobs that, with mixed results, had sustained the urban working class since the start of the industrial revolution.¹ At the same time "welfare reform" has led to a much weakened social safety net.² For the most desperate people, many of whom are not effectively adjusting to these changes—elements of today's submerged tenth—the underground economy of drugs and crime often emerges to pick up the slack.³ To be sure, the active participants in this economy are at serious risk of violence, death, and incarceration. Equally important, those living near drug dealers and other hustlers are often victimized. Decent and law-abiding people at times become victims of random violence or are otherwise ensnared in the schemes of the underground economy's participants. Sometimes even those from decent families, particularly the young, become seduced by the ways of the street.

In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois pointed to the problem that kept young African American men from finding jobs: the lack of education, connections, social skills, and white skin color, as well as the adoption of a certain outlook, an unwillingness to work, and a lack of hope for the future. Today it is clear what that persistent state of affairs has led to.

The severe problem of racial discrimination Du Bois uncovered certainly persists in Philadelphia and other cities, but, as will be discussed below, it has been transformed and at times taken on a more practical form. More conventional people often seek to place much social distance between themselves and anonymous black people they encounter in public. And many young blacks sometimes in direct response find it difficult to take white people or even conventional black people seriously, and they actively live their lives in opposition to them and everything they are taken to represent. Lacking trust in mainstream institutions, many turn to "hustling" in the underground economy. This has implications for middle-class blacks, many of whom have remained in Philadelphia and often work hard to defend themselves and their loved ones not only from those espousing oppositional values but also from the criminal element.

In many working-class and impoverished black communities today, particularly as faith in the criminal justice system erodes, social behavior in public is organized around the code of the streets. Feeling they cannot depend on the police and other civil authorities to protect them from danger, residents often take personal responsibility for their security. They may yield, but often they are prepared to let others know in no uncertain terms that there will be dire consequences if they are violated. And they tend to teach their children to stand up for themselves physically or to meet violence with violence. Growing up in such environments, young people are sometimes lured into the way of the street or become its prey. For too many of these youths, the drug trade seems to offer a ready niche, a viable way to "get by" or to enhance their wealth even if they are not full-time participants.

Because the drug trade is organized around a code of conduct approximating the code of the streets and employing violence as the basis for social control, the drug culture contributes significantly to

the violence of inner-city neighborhoods. Furthermore, many inner-city boys admire drug dealers and emulate their style, making it difficult for outsiders to distinguish a dealer from a law-abiding teenager. Part of this style is to project a violent image, and boys who are only "playing tough" may find themselves challenged and honor bound to fight. In addition, the trappings of drug dealers (the Timberland boots, the gold chains) are expensive, encouraging those without drug profits or other financial resources simply to steal.

THE CULTURAL ECONOMIC CONNECTION

As I indicated above, anyone who wants to understand the widespread social dislocation in the inner-city poor community must approach these problems—along with other urban ills—from a structural as well as a cultural standpoint.⁴ Liberals and conservatives alike today tend to stress values like individual responsibility when considering such issues as drugs, violence, teen pregnancy, family formation, and the work ethic. Some commentators readily blame "welfare" for poverty and find it hard to see how anyone, even the poor, would deliberately deviate from the norms of the mainstream culture. But the profound changes our society is currently undergoing in the way it organizes work have enormous cultural implications for the ability of the populations most severely affected by these developments to function in accordance with mainstream norms.

The United States has for some time been moving from manufacturing to a service and high-tech economy in which the well-being of workers, particularly those with low skills and little education, is subordinated to the bottom line. In cities like Philadelphia certain neighborhoods have been devastated by the effects of deindustrialization. Many jobs have become automated, been transferred to developing countries, or moved to nearby cities like King of Prussia. For those who cannot afford a car, travel requires two hours on public transportation from the old city neighborhoods where concentrations of black people, Hispanics, and working-class whites live.⁵

With widespread joblessness, many inner-city people become

stressed and their communities become distressed. Poor people adapt to these circumstances in the ways they know, meeting the exigencies of their situation as best they can. The kinds of problems that trigger moral outrage begin to emerge: teen pregnancy, welfare dependency, and the underground economy. Its cottage industries of drugs, prostitution, welfare scams, and other rackets are there to pick up the economic slack. Quasi-legal hustling is part of it; people do odd jobs under the table and teach young people to follow their lead. Some people have a regular second or third job entirely off the books.

The drug trade is certainly illegal, but it is the most lucrative and most accessible element of the underground economy and has become a way of life in numerous inner-city communities. Many youngsters dream of leading the drug dealer's life, or at least their highly glamorized conceptions of this life. Of course, drugs have been around for a long time, but they have become deeply rooted in the inner-city black community, a situation largely tolerated by civic authorities and the police. As law-abiding residents witness this situation, they become ever more cynical and alienated.

Here it is important to underscore the connections between jobs, drugs, and alienation. Many of the young blacks who have difficulty obtaining a job feel victimized by prejudice and discrimination. Such feelings of victimization may lead to a greater understanding, if not tolerance, of those who resort to dealing drugs to "survive." In these circumstances the drug trade, so dangerous and problematic for local communities and for society, becomes normal happenstance. In desolate inner-city communities, it is in fact becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish poverty from drug involvement. For example, many welfare mothers have become intimately connected with the drug trade, either as users or as what might be called support personnel, by allowing drug-dealing boyfriends or male relatives to use their homes as crack houses or drug depots in exchange for money or favors.

In addition, the young man who sells drugs is often encouraged and motivated to create new markets, sometimes recruiting his own family members into the drug culture, thus at times leading to their drug dependency. Why? Because he has come to covet the material

things he sees dangled before him, things that become important not simply as practical items but as status symbols among his peers. A particular brand of eyeglasses or shoes or pants can indicate a person's social standing, bestowing on him a certain amount of self-esteem. Timberland boots, for example, which support a roughneck or macho image, are now being worn by many drug dealers and have come to be considered hip. The owner of such items, through his exhibitions and displays, is thus able to gain deference from and status among his peers. Media images—television, movies, the consumer mentality—fuel these desires as well. And when the regular economy cannot provide the means for satisfying them, some of the most desperate people turn to the underground economy.

But the despair, the alienation, and the distress are still there, and this condition encourages the development and spread of the oppositional culture. For those living according to the rules of that culture, it becomes important to be tough, to act as though one is beyond the reach of lawful authority—to go for bad. In this scenario, anything associated with conventional white society is seen as square; the hip things are at odds with it. The untied sneakers, the pants worn well below the waist, the hat turned backward—all have become a style. These unconventional symbols have been taken over by people who have made them into status symbols, but they are status symbols *to the extent that they go against what is conventional.*

Exacerbating the antagonism toward the conventional is the way residents of the ghetto become personally victimized by all this. Not only does their community get a bad reputation, but the people themselves, particularly black males, become demonized. They are stereotyped; everyone from that community who dresses and who looks that way is a priori seen as being at odds with conventional society. The anonymous law-abiding black male is often taken as a threat to it. Yet many ghetto males are caught in a bind because they are espousing their particular ways of dressing and acting simply to be self-respecting among their neighborhood peers. A boy may be completely decent, but to the extent that he takes on the *presentation* of "badness" to enhance his local public image, even as a form of self-defense, he further alienates himself in the eyes of the wider society,

which has denounced people like him as inclined to violate its norms, values, rules, and conventions—to threaten it.

Such cultural displays in turn make young people even less employable. Baset with negative stereotypes, employers sometimes discriminate against whole census tracts or zip codes where impoverished people live. The decent people are strongly associated with the indecent people, and the employers often do not worry about making distinctions. They just want to avoid the whole troublesome situation, selecting whites over blacks. Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn Neckerman conducted a study in Chicago to discover the extent to which employers discriminated against young black people.⁶ They found that discrimination was rife: many of the employers much preferred white women and immigrants to young black people.

Similarly, in Philadelphia, a great many black boys and girls, especially the boys, are feared by employers. Even when they do get work, there is often a racial division of labor in the workplace. Inner-city black boys and girls tend to get stuck in entry-level jobs and are rarely promoted. One very clear example of this in present-day Philadelphia is the restaurant business, in which an obvious division of labor exists. In upscale and moderately priced restaurants, blacks are conspicuously absent from the wait staff but overrepresented among the kitchen help. In addition, if a problem with stealing or some other trouble on the job arises, they are prime suspects and are sometimes summarily dismissed.⁷ Such experiences, and the reports of them, contribute to their working conception of the world. Their resulting bitterness and alienation then nurture the oppositional culture. To be self-respecting, many young men and women must exhibit a certain contempt for a system they are sure has contempt for them. When such factors are added to the consequences of deindustrialization, the result is an incendiary situation, as Du Bois appreciated.⁸

The attraction of the violence-prone drug trade thus results from a combination of inadequate opportunity in the regular economy, on the one hand, and the imperatives of street life, on the other. The interplay between these two factors is powerfully at work in the social organization of the underground economy in inner-city neighborhoods.

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CLOCKING: THE DRUG TRADE AS A LIVING

The transition from the regular economy to the underground economy, particularly to the drug trade, is not simple. Some young people are able to dabble in it for a while and then return to the regular economy, or they operate simultaneously in both. But the drug trade and the wages it pays sometimes become overwhelming and downright addictive. People may manage to quit when a better opportunity appears or when they confront death or jail (for themselves or for loved ones or friends) and begin to have second thoughts. More likely, however, working in the drug trade becomes a regular occupation for the most desperate, who are then said to be "clocking."

The introduction of crack has exacerbated the problem. Because it is cheap and readily available, it can support many dealers. Boys can acquire the needed skills—"street knowledge" and the ability to act on it—just by growing up in the impoverished inner-city neighborhood. Whatever a boy's home life is like, growing up in the hood means learning to some degree the code of the streets, the prescriptions and proscriptions of public behavior. He must be able to handle himself in public, and his parents, no matter how decent they are, may strongly encourage him to learn the rules. And because of various barriers he can often parlay that experience into a place in the drug trade much more easily than into a reasonable job. The relative ease of that transition speaks volumes about the life circumstances of inner-city adolescents.

For many impoverished young black men of the inner city, the opportunity for dealing drugs is literally just outside the door. By selling drugs, they have a chance to put more money into their pockets than they could get by legal means, and they can present themselves to peers as hip, in sharp contrast to the square image of those who work in places like McDonald's and wear silly uniforms. In fact, the oppositional culture has dubbed opting to sell drugs "getting legal." Martin, the decent, law-abiding young man referred to earlier, was often accosted by his drug-dealing peers as he stepped outside his door and headed for his regular job with the remark "Hey, Martin. When you gon' get legal?" He would simply reply, "Later for that. Later for that."⁹ When one needs money, which is always, this way

of making it can seem like a godsend, and other boys encourage him to sell.

A common way of getting into the drug trade is to be part of a neighborhood peer group that begins to sell. A boy's social group can be easily transformed from a play group or a group that hangs around the corner listening to rap music or playing basketball—relatively innocuous activities—to a drug gang. The change requires a drug organizer to approach the group and consult the leader or "main man." The leader then begins to distribute opportunities to deal drugs—which is a kind of power—to various of his friends, his "boys." In time the small neighborhood group becomes a force to be reckoned with in the community, while taking an ever sharper interest in issues of turf and territory. The group then works to confuse concerns having to do with money and with protecting turf. The leader can paint an enticing picture for these boys, and he has an incentive to do so because the deed enhances his power. With "top dogs," "middle dogs," and "low dogs," the system resembles a pyramid scheme.¹⁰

Youths who have strong family grounding—very decent folks, churchgoing families with a nuclear or quasi-nuclear structure and with love and concern for the younger people—are often the most resistant. But those who are drawn by the group, who get caught up with the responsibilities of breadwinning, with little opportunity to do so in the regular economy, sometimes resolve the tension by joining the drug trade. In turn, as they become serious dealers, these boys will often sell drugs to anybody who will buy them, including their own relatives; money and group loyalty become paramount issues. In this connection they may develop not only an excuse but a whole rap, a way of cajoling people to try crack just to get them hooked, because they know how quickly one can become addicted. For instance, they may approach someone as a friend and invite him or her to share some of their own supply, saying things like "It's not going to hurt you, it's not bad, you can handle it."

Strikingly, they may even become customers themselves—it is easy enough to become hooked by trying it once. Through the posturing required to prevail in the street life, many young people come to feel invincible, or they develop a profound need to show others they feel

this way. And the power that accrues to dealers compounds the sense that they can control anything, even a crack cocaine high. In these circumstances they become "the man." Sometimes such a dealer does manage on crack off and on for a couple of years. Getting high now and then, he feels he is handling it, but, as the wiser dealers say, there is a fine line between handling it and having it handle you. At some inopportune moment he may be suddenly overcome with an insatiable need for the drug. Such a person is said to be "jonesing" for it; he is filled with such an intense desire for a high that he loses control of his actions. The predator becomes the prey—a common occurrence.

Like any marketing enterprise, the drug trade requires production and distribution networks.¹¹ Another requirement is social control. Among drug dealers that requirement is satisfied by the use and threat of violence. Violence is not always intended, but it occurs easily as a result of both the intense competition for customers and the general disorganization that marks the lives of so many young dealers. Misunderstandings easily arise, such as "messing up" somebody's money—not paying for drugs that one has been advanced, thus squandering the dealer's investment. The older and established dealers are obligated to "do in" the people who have messed up their money, because otherwise they would lose credibility and status on the streets. Attempted takeovers of the business of rival dealers are also common. Though there is room in the system for more people now than there was before crack, competition remains fierce, especially as the belief that anyone can get rich dealing drugs becomes increasingly prevalent. The push to get in on the drug trade can in this sense be likened to the gold rush.

It is understood on the streets that the drug trade itself is unforgiving. To make a misstep is to risk getting roughed up, shot, or killed. When a seemingly senseless killing occurs, people in the community immediately assume it is drug-related. Those who get into the trade realize they are playing with fire but, given the presumed financial stakes, may feel they have no choice or are up to the challenge. Often the people who get hurt "deserved it," in terms of the code of the drug trade: they "crossed somebody big," or they "thought they were slick." People in the community understand this

rationale, and it seems that the police acknowledge it too. Once a crime is drug-related, there often seems to be little interest and accountability in bringing the people who perpetrated it to justice.

Arguments over "business" are frequently settled on the spot, typically on the basis of arbitrary considerations, unfounded assumptions, or outright lies. There is also an ongoing fight for turf because of the large number of dealers, some connected with an organization, others freelancing. When a gang is set up in a particular area, its members know the streets and control the turf. As the trade becomes profitable, however, would-be dealers from outside the gang may want to do business in the same area or even take it over. A person who tries to muscle in, however, is threatening not just the current dealer's economic well-being but that part of the community as well. The connections of many of these boys go deep in the community through extended families, who may rely on the money. If a dealer is pushed out, he and a portion of the community can face financial disaster. As a result, some dealers are ready to fight to keep their turf, and people often get wounded or killed in the process.

There are major and minor turf wars. A major turf war often spawns smaller ones. In a major fight—whether the weapons are words, fists, or guns, but especially if they are guns—the dispute gets settled, at least for the time being. But everyone has an interpretation of what happened. The interpretations are exchanged in the various neighborhood institutions, including barbershops, taverns, and street corners, where people gather and talk, and an understanding of the original fight is negotiated. Since at least some of the people involved know the principal participants personally, they may take sides, becoming emotionally invested in having their version of the event prevail, and the discussions themselves can become heated and lead to violence.

Some boys simply crave the status associated with being a dealer. They want to wear a beeper, to be seen to be "clocking," to be associated with something hip and lucrative, even though it is an underground enterprise. Drug dealers are living the fast life; they are living on the edge. Older people will give young dealers advice, telling them that they are "living too fast." But everyone knows that once a person gets into that world, it is very hard to get out. The dealer can get

hooked on the money and the material things it can buy, just as someone can get hooked on the drug; the adventure, the thrill of danger, and the respect people give him are also addictive. Furthermore, his associates in the trade may not let him out, because he knows too much and might pass information on to the wrong people, or they may want to make him an example. Much of his ability to maneuver depends on his identity and connections (his cousins, brothers, uncles, his other associates in the trade, his gang members, his boys) and on his status. Often the higher his status, the more leeway and independence he has—the more “juice” he has. The truly independent people, those who have achieved a high level of respect, may be able to get out in ways other people cannot, because they have established that they can be trusted. But often the only sure way of getting out is to get out of town.

VIOLENT FALLOUT

Drug users also engage in violence. Many users start out as victims—when family members or boyfriends who deal drugs actively get them hooked in order to expand their markets—but they then become victimizers, robbing others to support their habits. Although some of the violence is focused and some is not, the result is a constant sense of uncertainty, a belief that anything can happen at any time. The successful dealer must be ever vigilant, but of course this makes him jittery and prone to react violently at the slightest perceived provocation. Furthermore, under the influence of drugs people's behavior may become unpredictable or truly dangerous. In these situations innocent bystanders, sometimes small children, can be shot or killed. Since drug trafficking permeates so much of the inner-city community, all its residents, whether involved with drugs or not, are at risk of finding themselves the unintended target of a stray bullet. The awareness of this constant danger fosters anxiety and skittishness even among the decent people, who therefore become more likely themselves to overreact in an uncertain encounter; these people may move, if they can.

Also fueling the violence that attends the drug trade is the proliferation of guns, which have become for many people easily accessible. Guns were in the community in the past, but mostly in the hands of adults. Today kids fourteen and younger have guns, or they know how and where to get them. In the inner-city community, one can often hear gunshots in the distance but no sirens afterward. The likelihood is that the shots are being fired by young boys playing with guns, at times just shooting them off for the fun of it, usually in the middle of the night. Guns can have personality and status attached to them; they even have records. The price of a used gun indicates its history. A gun that “has a body on it” (was used to kill someone) is cheap because the person who is ultimately caught with it might be held responsible for murder. Moreover, in a society where so much economic inequality exists, for the severely alienated and desperate a gun can become like a bank card—an equalizer. Such a boy—or, increasingly, girl—who desperately needs money may use a gun to stick somebody up without a second thought. In a peculiar way, however, the prevalence of and ready access to guns may keep certain strangers honest and more careful in how they approach others. In these circumstances a kind of Wild West mentality obtains in some of the more dangerous neighborhoods, in which the fear of getting shot can constrain people from violating others.

As a result of the general atmosphere of danger, even people with a nonviolent orientation buy guns for protection. In Philadelphia not long ago, a black minister and resident of an inner-city community shot and killed an intruder. The incident sparked a good deal of discussion, but the general reaction of his blacks neighbors was, “Well, he did what he had to do.” In fact, such incidents do not occur just in the inner city. In the gentrified neighborhood adjacent to the minister's, a white doctor going to bed one night heard a rumbling downstairs. He came down with his gun and in the darkness announced, “I have a gun.” The rumbling continued, so he fired, killing an intruder in his kitchen with a bullet to the back of the head. He and his wife went to the police station, returned home at two in the morning, and cleaned up the blood. It turned out that the intruder was apparently trying to steal the small kitchen television set to sell on the street, which could have brought a few dollars for crack. But

this white doctor was so disturbed at having killed a young black man in those circumstances that he immediately moved out of his house and left the community. Thus the casualties of violence include people who simply get caught up in it—not just those who get shot but sometimes those who perpetrate the violence as well.

THE CRACK CULTURE: RATIONALE AND CONSEQUENCES

It must be continually underscored that much of this violence and drug activity is a reflection of the dislocations brought about by economic transformations, shifts that are occurring in the context of the new global economy. As was indicated above, where the wider economy is not receptive to these dislocated people, the underground economy is. That does not mean that anyone without a job is suddenly going to become a drug dealer; the process is not that simple. But the facts of race relations, unemployment, dislocation, and desecration create alienation, and alienation allows for a certain receptivity to overtures made by people seeking youthful new recruits for the drug trade.

Numerous inner-city black people continue to be locked out of many working-class occupations. Lack of education and training are often at issue, but, as Du Bois noted long ago, so is the problem of employers' racial preferences and social connections with prospective co-workers. For example, the building trades—plumbing, carpentry, roofing, and so forth—are often organized around family connections: fathers and uncles bring in their sons and nephews. To get a certificate to work in these trades, a young man requires a mentor, who not only teaches him skills but legitimizes him as a member of the trade. So the system perpetuates the dominance of ethnic groups that have been organized a long time. Now, the inner-city drug trade is composed of uncles and nephews too. From this perspective working-class Italians and Irish and others have their niche, and many severely alienated and desperate young blacks, at least those who are enterprising, can be said to have their niche too—in the drug trade.

As Du Bois would have appreciated, such behavior, while not to be condoned, is understandable as a manifestation of racism and persistent poverty.

In the inner-city community, drug dealing thus becomes recognized as work, though it is an occupation that overwhelming numbers of residents surely despise. Yet there are Robin Hood types among the drug dealers, who distribute some of their profits in the community, buying things for people, financially helping out their friends and relatives, as well as complete strangers. One drug dealer told me how bad he felt when he found out that a woman who had bought crack from one of his underlings had kids and had used all her welfare money for the drugs. He sought the woman out and gave her half her money back. His rationale was that business is business but that the kids shouldn't go hungry.

Crack's addictive quality has led to the rapid establishment of a crack culture and makes it easy to maintain a clientele.¹² The belief in the community is that crack addiction is immediate and permanent. Once you try crack, it is said, you're always "chasing the ghost"—the high that you get the first time is so intense that you can never achieve it again, but the desire to do so is strong enough that you keep pursuing it. One drug dealer told me that he has never seen anybody walk away from crack permanently; even if a user gets off it for two years, he said, the right drug dealer can easily hook him again by talking to him in the right way. I said to this dealer, "Knowing this, why do you sell crack? Isn't this like killing people, annihilating your own people?" He replied nonchalantly, "Well, if I wasn't doing it, somebody else would." To many inner-city residents, crack has become a seemingly permanent fixture of life, and dealing is a way to earn a living—even, for a few, to become rich.

ALVIN AND JOYCE

When the young man obtains money, life can be very sweet. First, when it gets to be known in the neighborhood that he is clocking or "rolling," it is said that everyone wants to be his friend. Why?

Because he has money, but also because he is a "pusher-man," a man with the drugs. In the impoverished and distressed community, these two items are very powerful. They often signify the fast life, "what's happenin'"—the latest and hippest thing. And if he has charisma, the style, and the material things to go with this new status, such as a new Jeep Cherokee or Bronco, or the right clothes, then many people want to be associated with him. As Don Moses said, "The kids are making the money off of the drugs—they're the only ones who have money. Everybody wants to be associated with somebody who has money, and they're the only ones who have the money to really show the girls a good time. A lot of the nice girls that are looking for something, you'll find a lot of times that they end up with the drug addicts, and the drug addicts are about turning them on to that stuff. Then they move on to the next one. And it's sad, really sad. All part of the streets. The street is like a vacuum."

The drug dealer style impresses many young women. It signifies the fast life, but also the café life. These women may expect to be wined and dined, clothed, and showered with various material things. For many young women to have such a boyfriend is the next best thing to hitting the lottery; he competes very effectively with other young men who may possess much more decency but little cash.

Joyce was seventeen when she and Alvin began going together. Alvin, twenty-six and handsome, was a "big-time drug dealer." Joyce lived with her mother and two sisters in one of the poorest communities in the city. Joyce's mother, a hardworking woman whose husband had been killed in an automobile accident a few years earlier, was not on welfare. She worked as a cleaning woman in a downtown office building.

When Joyce began seeing Alvin, her mother worried, for she knew Alvin lived the fast life. He worked at a downtown hotel but seemed always to be around the neighborhood. There were rumors that he was "in the life," and he had the props and money to prove it. He never denied it; he would just smile and walk away.

After they had been going out for about six weeks, Alvin announced to Joyce's mother, Johnnie, "You ain't got to worry about her. I'll take care of her. You ain't got to worry about her, hear." It was almost

as though Alvin had bought himself a wife, although they had not married—but were "going to." Johnnie felt she could do nothing. Alvin was good to her daughter, and she did not want to jeopardize the relationship. He continued to shower Joyce with love and affection and gave her almost anything she wanted. He moved her from her mother's house into their own apartment, although he was there only sporadically, because he divided his time between this place and a place he needed for "space."

Alvin bought Joyce a brand-new white Nissan automobile for her birthday, and this made her very happy. It indicated his commitment to her, and she liked that. She needed to be reassured, for it was known that Alvin had "other ladies" he liked to see. But even though there were rumors, it was clear to many that Joyce was Alvin's heart—the love of his life. She was a very attractive woman who knew how to dress and had style and a certain class that Alvin appreciated. He continued to dress her in expensive clothes and take her out to fancy downtown restaurants. The relationship was about two years old, the couple was much admired and the talk of the community, and everyone knew about Alvin's involvement in drugs.

One day Alvin brought home a large diamond engagement ring that blew Joyce's mind. She was beside herself with joy, she said. And they set an actual date to be married. But about a month afterward, Alvin was gunned down in a dispute over drugs. His death left Joyce embittered and sad, but with a car, some furs, and a diamond ring. To support herself, she sold or pawned everything and made out as best she could. Now she is reluctant to revisit their old haunts and places, not because she fears for herself but because the people there remind her of things she would rather put behind her.

In the impoverished neighborhood, many of the young women aspire to have such a man, at times thinking and hoping things will work out: it is to approach easy street, particularly if the woman can feel she has the love and the respect of the man. A streetwise young woman is likely to require that the man in her life "have something" before he "spends her time." He must be prepared to show his love by buying her material things, by paying for her to have her hair tracked (corn rows) or her nails done, and generally by being ready

to give something up for her. Hence many young men become strongly motivated to obtain "crazy" money, and legal means of doing so may be too slow or nonexistent.

Under these conditions law-abiding and decent youths will imitate aspects of the fast life. In waging their campaigns for status and identity, they pretend to have money, pretend to have freedom and independence, and pretend to be violent: they go for bad. Unfortunately, as has been noted often, prospective employers and decent law-abiding people, including white people and black middle-class people who live in adjacent communities, are easily confused about who is a drug dealer and who is not. Out of a perceived need for protection, they are reluctant to employ these youths, and they may try to avoid anyone who resembles them. Such responses in turn further alienate inner-city young people.

It is worth noting that imitating the fast life is not peculiar to black inner-city teenagers. White middle-class teenagers also emulate this style. Images of hipness grounded in the inner-city subculture, which is so driven by the drug trade, move by cultural diffusion through the system into the middle class, white and black. But the middle-class versions are usually not so deadly. Middle-class youths have other forms of capital—more money and many more ways of effectively expressing themselves. When it comes to violence, such youth generally are much more willing to back down than to engage in a fight to the death. In situations involving the wrong mix of people and a large amount of posturing, there exists a slippery slope that can quickly turn make-believe into the real thing.

THE STICKUP

The stickup is a variation on the code of the street, and often at issue are two elements that give the code its meaning and resonance: respect and alienation. The common street mugging involves a profound degree of alienation, but also requires a certain commitment to criminality, nerve, cunning, and even what young men of the street call heart. As a victim, a person with "street knowledge" may have a

certain edge on one who lacks it. The edge here is simply the potential ability to behave or act ad lib in accordance with the demands and emergent expectations of the stickup man. In effect, such knowledge may provide the victim with the background knowledge of "how to get robbed"; it may even allow him or her the presence of mind to assist the assailant in his task, thus defusing a dangerous situation.

Stickups are particularly feared by law-abiding people in the ghetto, decent or street. They may occur in one manner in areas of concentrated poverty but in another in middle-class or "changing" neighborhoods. Perhaps the crucial difference is whether the victim is willing and able to defer or is bound by his or her own socialization to respond in kind. It may be that a stickup between peers requires a model different from the one for a stickup between culturally different parties. But wherever they occur, stickups have two major elements in common. The first is a radical redefinition of the situation—of who has the power—for everyone concerned, especially if a gun is involved. A drawn gun is a blunt display of power. The victim immediately realizes that he must give something up or, as the corner boys say, "pay some dues," because otherwise the perpetrator will hurt him. The second is social exchange—"your money or your life."

The code holds that might makes right and that if qualified, a person who needs anything may be moved simply to take it by force or stealth. Only the strongest, the wildest, the most streetwise will survive, and so when people see an opportunity, they go for it. A generalized belief in the inner-city ghetto is that perpetrators choose their victims according to certain known factors and that it is therefore up to the individual to avoid placing him or herself in a vulnerable position. There is some truth to this notion, although in reality many people often find themselves at the wrong end of a stickup no matter what precautions they take. But if inner-city residents accepted the notion that assaults are utterly random, they would feel they had little control and would likely become too overwhelmed by fear to go out at all. So the belief that they can avoid stickups is an important defensive mechanism for people who are besieged by violence on a daily basis; this belief allows them to salvage a sense of freedom in a seemingly inexorable environment.

This section attempts to delineate the social processes involved in the stickup—how the deed is done.¹³ These processes encompass both choice of victim and the etiquette of the event itself. One view is that if a streetwise person is foolish enough to allow himself to be robbed, he will understand that the assailant has power over him and so will defer to that power. When both parties thoroughly understand the situation, the stickup can resemble a ballet, in which each side smoothly performs a choreographed part. In such cases the victim's life is usually safe. If one person is street-dumb, however, or loses his head, things can easily go amiss and the victim may pay with his life or suffer a serious injury.

Most often in the inner-city community, the perpetrator of the crime and the victim are both black, so they have limited confidence in the agencies and agents of social control. The criminal transaction is often a matter for them to deal with on their own and on the spot. They must negotiate with each other, settling the score in the best way they know.

The potential perpetrator's first consideration is the selection of the right social setting and victim. He must assess the general surroundings, such as how secluded and dark the spot is and whether the potential victim appears able to handle himself. He may size up his prey. In the right circumstances a seemingly ordinary individual can become a predator.

In the holdup a profound power transaction occurs. The holdup man wants first to relieve the victim of his property. The victim often does not want to give it up, despite the holdup man's demands. Some stickup men use language calculated to override resistance. "Give it up," they say, "I got to have it." The streetwise victim fully cooperates with this command and may even help the perpetrator rob him. He knows the chances are good that the perpetrator is quite nervous about this whole transaction. In fact, the adrenaline is flowing strongly for both individuals, and so things can very easily go amiss. The wise victim knows this and so may seek to help the person attain his objective.

So the victim says, "All right. There it is. Please don't hurt me." In saying this, he is effectively submitting to the power of the holdup man and giving him his props. Such deferential behavior is itself often

a large part of what the stickup man wants. He wants the person "with something" to recognize him, to acknowledge his power resources and what he can do to the victim. The wise victim, recognizing this, submits.

This submission is what the perpetrator wants, but it is also what he understands. After all, he has the power in these circumstances, a power that anyone should perceive. He has a gun and is pointing it at the victim, threatening to shoot. Or he may have a knife, threatening serious bodily harm. He further knows—as does the victim—that he is an anonymous stranger and more than likely will get away. Here the perpetrator often makes assumptions based on race and the concentrated poverty all around him. Also built into his act is the assumption that the police will not expend very much energy trying to bring him to justice, and he may assume that any thinking black person would assume the same thing. Therefore, he reasons, it is certainly easier for the person to give it up. The perpetrator's need to remain anonymous is acknowledged by the street-smart victim when the victim goes out of his way not to look at the perpetrator. Such a victim will absolutely not look the assailant in the eye, for though it is unlikely that the victim could actually recognize the perpetrator again, the look in the eye both introduces a certain level of ambiguity into the situation and could be taken as a direct challenge to the perpetrator's newly won authority. Once the victim and the perpetrator lock eyes, a bond that could be deadly has been established, and the event takes on the quality of being memorable. In that event, what started as a simple effort to relieve the victim of his money turns into an ambiguous transaction that may now require the victim's life.

At issue here are the participants' claims on human dignity, claims that have been thrown into furious competition. In order to get out of the situation unscathed, the victim must find a way to allow his assailant to exit with his (the assailant's) dignity intact—which in these circumstances is a goal quite difficult to accomplish. Not only are there competing notions of what constitutes enough dignity, but there is also the problem of just how to grant it—insofar as the vehicle for granting it can become part of its definition, shaping how little or how much is being granted. The wisest victim in such circum-

stances simply defers, agreeing with and "yessing" the assailant beyond reason. Yet even then it is not clear that the victim can avoid harm. The victim is clearly at the mercy of the assailant, who holds the power in this situation.

After the stickup the perpetrator may even attempt to "cool out" the victim of the crime. A stickup man with style and willness might go so far as to give the victim a big hug, mainly for the benefit of potential onlookers, in an attempt to give the impression that a stickup has *not* just occurred, that "we're all right." Some will make excuses or even offer apologies for their behavior, explaining that they or a relative was just robbed.

Thus there is an etiquette of the stickup. Assailant and victim must both know and play their roles. At issue is a core tenet of the code of the street: respect. Primarily, the assailant wants his victim's money, but he also wants things to go smoothly. He wants to wield his power undisputed; he wants his possession of that power to be recognized. Nothing conveys this recognition better than the clear act of total deference. Not to defer is to question the authority, the worth, the status, even the respectability of the assailant in a way that easily suggests contempt or even arrogance. Such a resistant victim is "acting uppity" (for the moment), and such behavior can utterly confuse the assailant. In these circumstances the assailant usually wants a simple way out of the situation: he may use his gun or knife, or he may simply flee. The victim's resistance—or inability to play along—thus may "flood out" the situation with too much information, rendering it unpredictable. If the assailant is not ready to "raise the ante," he may turn tail and run—or he may shoot. Few victims, streetwise or not, take this risk by flooding out the situation intentionally. If they do so inadvertently and survive, they have good fortune or luck to thank for it. It may be much safer to acquire the street knowledge of the etiquette and then help the assailant carry out his job of robbery.

Of course, the victim is most often surprised by the robbery and has no time to act deliberately. In fact, most stickup men greatly appreciate the element of surprise in pulling off their jobs. They may approach from the dark shadows of the street or from another car in

a parking lot, or they may stalk their victim, choosing an opportune moment to announce, "Give it up."

The phenomenology of the stickup allows us to see that the assailant is not always identifiable as such; at most times and in most circumstances, he is part of the cultural "woodwork," revealing himself only at the opportune moment. Up to the point at which the stickup begins, the assailant has managed to be taken as a "law-abiding" citizen, someone who might even offer a helping hand to a person in distress. However, not everyone can pull off such deception. Young black, Hispanic, or even white men are often second-guessed in public, making it difficult for them to "get the drop" on a victim. To get the drop requires a certain cunning and stealth. The argument can be made that given the greater defensiveness of the potential victims, the assailants, in order to survive as a species, have had to adapt, becoming ever more creative in the manner in which they pull off their jobs.

Robert Hayes, a thirty-year-old black security guard who works at a Center City CVS, lives in the West Oak Lane section of Philadelphia. On a warm June day, on a busy section of Girard Avenue, he had just left a "cash exchange" after cashing a check. It was the middle of the afternoon, and people were all about. As he began walking away from the cash exchange, he heard a voice say, "Hey, excuse me, wait up." As Robert looked up, he saw a young black man trotting toward him holding up a brown paper sack, as if he had something to show him. Robert, suspecting nothing amiss and curious about what might be in the bag, waited for the man. As the man approached Robert, he directed him to look into the bag. Robert complied with the man's request and saw a black 9-millimeter pistol with the man's finger on the trigger. The man then said, "Give it up. Don't be no fool." Robert replied, "Well, I don't have any money." The man then said, "I just saw you leave the cash exchange. Le' me hold that fat wallet in your back pocket." Robert complied. And the man smiled at him and said, "Have a nice day," and went on about his business, clearing out of the area very quickly. In these circumstances Robert knew better than to resist, though a part of him wanted to. He says that he thought of his two young children and his wife and that he

could always get more money and a wallet. What most upset him was the fact that this "young boy" had chumped him, had gotten the drop on him, and made a fool of him. "That hurt more than anything else," he says. But he adds, "I know in my heart that I did the right thing."

One of the greatest fears of people in the inner-city community is to be on the wrong end of a stickup, and they fear the stickup man, or, as he is known in the community, the stickup boy. (The term "stickup boy" initially referred to those who held up drug dealers, but it has come to refer to young holdup men in general.) In dealing with this fear, residents have developed a working conception of the proclivities of the stickup boy. As was indicated above, their belief that he "picks his people," allows residents to move at least some of the responsibility for a successful robbery from the stickup man to the victim by averring that it is up to those who use the streets—particularly themselves—not to be "picked" for a stickup. So residents, especially those who present themselves as streetwise, try to behave in ways that let potential stickup boys, as well as anyone else, know that they are not "the one" to be targeted for a stickup. They become preoccupied with giving the right signal to people with whom they share the neighborhood streets and other public spaces.

For young people this means being prepared to meet challenges with counteractions. When they are hit or otherwise violated, they may hit back. Or they may even "pay back" later on by avenging transgressions. An important part of the code is not to allow others to chump you, to let them know that you are "about serious business" and not to be trifled with. The message that you are not a pushover must be sent loudly and clearly.

Of course, this does not always work. There are circumstances in which the stickup boy will try anyone, including those who have proved they do not deserve to be tested. For instance, the victim could be absentmindedly walking down a street at the wrong time or simply be unlucky. But the belief on the street is that the stickup boy generally knows who is vulnerable and who is not.

Around the streetcorners and carryouts—the staging areas—where so many drug dealers and corner boys hang out, the would-be stickup boys generally know who is who, who "can fight" and who cannot,

who has nerve and heart and who is a chump. Around such places, in various social arenas, and on the streets more generally, the chump gets little or no respect, and those who resemble him are the ones who most often get picked on, tried or tested, and become victims of robbery and gratuitous violence. Some people so labeled readily report such offenses to the police, a cardinal sin among those strongly invested in the street code.

Stereotypically, the chump is the "quiet" person who, as they say on the corner, "minds his business and don't bother no one. Dresses nice." He is also often "decent" and kind. But in this area of so much deprivation, onlookers are very inclined to take his displays of kindness for weakness, thus degrading a positive force in the public community. However, for personal security and standing around the carryout, it is important to demonstrate to all others that one is not a chump; but in order to do so a man must often present a street front, moving and acting in certain ways that more clearly identify him with the street. One common way is to swagger, display a quick temper, and a foul mouth, but also to let others know in no uncertain terms that he is prepared and able to defend himself or, as the young men say, to show them he "can hold his hands." The person must be ready and willing to fight, to "get physical," if the situation demands it, or to display the nerve and heart to engage in a standoff when necessary. In a word, he must be able through his demeanor to send the message that he will stand up to others and not let others roll on him. Such an image may require wearing the latest styles, including the "drug dealer look," and having a hip and ready "conversation"—knowing just what to say to keep others from moving on him verbally (the proper reply to someone who tests you)—although actions almost always speak louder than words. The posture at the opposite extreme of that associated with the chump has come to be described as "thorough" or being "a thorough dude"—knowing "what time it is," or being exceptionally streetwise. But for many, such an image is often just that—a front, a posture, a representation—and it is very difficult to enact so as to convince or fool those who are streetwise.

The smarter stickup boys, however, are increasingly coming to fear the chump because of the likelihood that he is precisely not down or knowledgeable about the code of the street. Such a person out of

fear, so the reasoning goes, could cause a stickup to go wrong by carrying a gun or knife or by losing his composure and physically contesting the dominance of the stickup boy during a robbery. When a stickup has progressed to a certain point, the chump, through his inexperience with the streets, may misread the situation and believe he is in more danger than he actually is. He may then panic, flooding the situation out and effectively bringing what began nonviolently to a violent end. If the chump becomes nervous and tries aggressively to protect himself and/or his loved one, he may in reality be raising the stakes to a dangerous level.

The thorough dude, in contrast, may understand intuitively when the assailant is in control, but until the moment when there is a shift in who controls the situation, he may be able to alter the outcome. Such a person is seldom a passive player, rather, he knows what time it is; and at the right time, he defers to the power of the assailant. He understands that when a gun is put in your face, you do what you can to defer to or appease the person with the gun. You then "give it up," saying something like, "Here it is. It's all yours. Please don't hurt me." Effectively, he cuts his losses, saying, "You got me that time," and he tries to learn from his mistake and to make sure that this never happens to him again.

SEE BUT DON'T SEE

People residing in the drug-infested, depressed inner-city community may understand the economic need for the drug trade. Many residents become demoralized yet often try to coexist with it, rationalizing that the boys who deal drugs are not necessarily bad boys but are simply doing what they think they need to do to make money. They themselves, however, don't want to be victimized by the trade, nor do they want their friends and loved ones to be harmed. Many have come to believe that the police and the public officials don't care about their communities, and this belief encourages them to give up any hope of doing something about the drug trade. As a result, they may condemn the dealing but also tolerate it. They become injured

to it. They also understand that some local people rely on it for financial support. The Robin Hood phenomenon helps the justification process. As was mentioned above, some dealers try to assist their community by surreptitiously donating money to various organizations and helping to support their families and friends with drug profits. One drug dealer told me he paid for his aunt's surgery as well as for all his mother's bills, and he was very proud of having done that. He was proud of having taken his girlfriend out to fancy restaurants, proud of everything he had become. He knew drug dealing was wrong, but he accepted his role in it. Of course, not everybody in the community is so accepting of the drug trade. Most people have very, very negative feelings about dealing, feelings that are most obviously on display when violence occurs. That is an important point—some people object only when violence erupts.

Another reason for seeing and yet not seeing drug transactions is that as people walk the streets of the community, they cannot help seeing what's going on, but are afraid to get involved. Concerned for their own safety, they don't even want people to notice them witnessing what is going on. After an incident like a shooting or a gang war, people tend to clam up for fear of retribution, especially where the authorities are concerned. If a bust occurs, anyone who is considered to have been paying too much attention to the drug activity might be suspected of having told the police about it. The way people deal with this fear and the need to protect themselves is by seeing but not seeing.

Many parents see but don't see for another reason: they realize that their own son is probably involved in the trade. They disapprove of it, but they also benefit from it. A mother who receives money, sometimes even large sums of money, from her son may not ask too many questions about its source. She just accepts the fact that the money is there somehow. Since it is sorely needed, there is a strong incentive not to interrupt the flow. Some people are so torn over what they are tolerating that they pray and ask forgiveness from the Lord for their de facto approval. Yet they cannot bring themselves to intervene.

The economic unraveling in so many of these communities puts people up against the wall and encourages them to do things that

they would otherwise be morally reluctant to do. A boy who can't get a job in the regular economy becomes a drug dealer not all at once but by increments. These boys make a whole set of choices and decisions based in part on what they are able to do successfully. A boy who grows up on the streets thoroughly invested in the code of the street is also closer to the underground economy. Once mastered, the *savoir faire* of the street world—knowing how to deal coolly with people, how to move, look, act, dress—is a form of capital, not a form middle-class people would respect, but capital that can nonetheless be cashed in.

Since the code of the street is sanctioned primarily by violence and the threat of violent retribution (an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth), the more inner-city youths choose this route in life, the more normative the code of the street becomes in the neighborhood. Neighbors are encouraged to choose between an abstract code of justice that is disparaged by the most dangerous people on the streets and a practical code that is geared toward survival in the public spaces of their community.

Children growing up in these circumstances learn early in life that this is the way things are and that the lessons of those who might teach them otherwise become less and less relevant. Surrounded by violence and by indifference to the innocent victims of drug dealers and users alike, the decent people are finding it harder and harder to maintain a sense of community. Thus violence comes to regulate life in the drug-infested neighborhoods and the putative neighborhood leaders are increasingly the people who control the violence.

The ramifications of this state of affairs reach far beyond inner-city communities. A startling study by the Sentencing Project revealed that 33 percent of young black men in their twenties are under the supervision of the criminal justice system—in jail, in prison, on probation, or on parole. This astounding figure must be considered partly responsible for the widespread perception of young black men as dangerous and not to be trusted. This kind of demonization affects all young blacks—those of the middle class, those of the dwindling working class, as well as the street element.

One might ask, "What can account for the disproportionate percentage of blacks among the adjudicated?" African Americans have

been overrepresented in the prison population since the first studies were done, but the jump in their numbers over the past generation has been exponential. Part of the answer would have to be crack cocaine. The prison terms for the possession and sale of crack cocaine are stiffer than those for powder cocaine, a drug that is more expensive and more prevalent in the middle class. Another factor is that proportionately more blacks are dealers, and this speaks to the overall inability of young black men to get into the workforce. The glamorous hipness of dealing that certifies one as firmly in the oppositional culture is also a factor. When jobs disappear, leaving people poor and concentrated, the drug economy becomes an unforgiving way of life, organized around violence and predatory activity.

THE VIOLENT DEATH

Television images portray and even glamorize the fast life, and movies such as *The Godfather*, *Set It Off*, *Boyz n the Hood*, and *Mentace II Society* that feature gratuitous violence help legitimize violence for many young men.¹⁴ The films have a certain realism and deal with the complex problems that emerge every day on the ghetto streets. When young men see a leading man resort to violence to settle a dispute, they can ask, "What does it do for him? Was he right? Did the victim deserve what he got?" The answers help them deal with their own problems: "How bad should I be? Should I take that jacket off that guy?"

But probably most important, the films, along with rap music as well as their everyday experiences, help youths become inured to violence and, perhaps, death itself. Those residing in some of the most troubled areas typically have witnessed much street violence that has at times resulted in maiming or death. All of this contributes to the posture that dying "ain't no big deal." One must understand that some young people bereft of hope for the future have made their peace with death and talk about planning their own funerals. They sometimes speak in euphemistic phrases like "going out" or "checking out." After experiencing the deaths of so many young friends, the

hopeless conclude that life is bound to be short "for the way I'm living," or "if the deal go down, dying ain't no big thing." The high death rate among their peers keeps many from expecting to live beyond age twenty-five.

With such an outlook, "living fast and large" in the present makes sense, for "tomorrow ain't promised to you." Young men like this tend to lead an existential life that may acquire meaning only when faced with the possibility of imminent death. Not to be afraid to die is by implication to have few compunctions about taking another's life, for the right reasons, if the situation demands it. The youths who have internalized such attitudes and convincingly display them in their bearing are among the most threatening people of all. The most aggressive develop "beefs," and harbor grudges, at times with complete strangers, and gain a reputation for being "touchy" or "crazy." And they convey the message that they fear no one. With credibility for this position, supported by words and deeds, a young man can gain a sense of respect and power on the streets. This is what many youths strive to achieve, whether they emerge from a decent or a street-oriented background, for its practical defensive value, but also for the positive way it makes them feel about themselves as men.

At times a parent, particularly one steeped in the teachings of the church, will say to the young person directly, "Son, you living too fast. You living too fast. Better slow down. You gon' die." Some young people take it as a kind of warning, even as a sign from above, that "Mother would speak to me that way. Maybe I better heed what she is saying." But for this kind of message to be taken seriously, other events generally have to come together so that it seems prudent and wise for the young man to try to make a change. Of particular importance is the support or example of friends. If they have suffered severe setbacks like arrests, assaults, or serious drug-related health problems, their example may serve as a sign—and it can be a powerful influence in encouraging the person to try to change. What he needs then is a serious helping hand: a caring old head can make a real difference. Without such support the young person may simply muddle along, perhaps hitting on or missing an opportunity to be saved from the streets.

Sometimes young people are looking for an excuse to change, and a sign can be enough. They are often strongly if passively religious, at times invoking "God" or "the Lord" in conversations with peers. They may reflect on the notion that there is a higher power to be reckoned with, and that can be a support in the effort to change. Such people may also invoke the notion of fate, particularly when confronting things they cannot fathom or fully understand. Fate can be used to explain failure in a way that cushions disappointment. A young man can respond to a love affair that does not work out, a loss in the lottery, a fight that does not go his way, or material things that are totally out of reach by simply saying, "That wasn't meant for me," or "That wasn't for me." With feelings of deep resignation, he may let go of the desire to acquire or to achieve the particular objective, at least for the present.

On the other hand, the notion of fate can also encourage a person to be reckless in meeting out violence. The belief that whatever one does or says was meant to be allows one to take chances that are not perceived as chances, risks that are not seen as risks, because what will be will be. Hence the person is able to walk the streets almost fearlessly, knowing that "when my time is here, it is here, and there's nothing I can do about it." Thus one can live life to the fullest, believing that it is just not "my time"—for now. In the heat of the moment, during an altercation, this belief can determine the outcome of a fight to the death, giving an individual the advantage that only profound faith in his or her ability to prevail can provide.

When a violent death does occur, it affects not just the victim and his or her family but the entire community. Something terrible has happened, and the community grieves and mourns. Many ask, "Why?" Johnny, Robert, Marcel, Kevin, or Rashawn was such a wonderful person, with so much promise, so much to give. Why was he "taken out like this"? The family often tries to accept the explanation that it is "the Creator's will." Its members may question "the Supreme Being," but always with the understanding that His authority is legitimate. For them, the fact that the young boy died must say something about the living, but also about the way the young boy lived his life. There is a strong belief in fate and the notion that a person has a time to be on the planet, but that

people can "rush" their time by "living fast" or "running in the fast lane."

THE AFTERMATH OF DEATH

When a young life is cut down, almost everyone goes into mourning. The first thing that happens is that a crowd gathers about the site of the shooting or the incident. The police then arrive, drawing more of a crowd. Since such a death often occurs close to the victim's home, his mother or his close relatives and friends may be on the scene of the killing. When they arrive, the women and girls often wail and moan, crying out their grief for all to hear, while the young men simply look on, in studied silence; they are there to help the young women if they require assistance. Soon the ambulance arrives and takes the person to the nearest hospital. If he is still alive, the mother or a relative or a neighbor will ride along inside the ambulance. At times, though, it is too late, and the ambulance will go to the morgue.

The next day, the relatives and neighbors and friends look for a report of the crime in the local newspaper. Friends and relatives may already be angry, and they sometimes vent this anger at the newspaper for not running a long enough story of the shooting or the death of their loved one. They sometimes vent at the police, calling them incompetent, racist, or worse. They may wonder why the person responsible for this deed has not been brought to justice. In the community there is profound sadness. People talk about the victim. "It is such a shame." "Why did he have to go this way?" "All he wanted was a decent life in this world." And there are many questions. Some people begin to question their faith. "Is there a God?" People who haven't spoken to one another in many months now find something to talk about. They speak of the deceased. Community residents develop a bond based on their links to this person.

The younger people take it especially hard. They wonder aloud why this happened, but in fact they know why. They know the boy was a drug dealer. They know that he violated in some way the code of the street and possibly messed up someone's money. "He did

somebody wrong," or he "thought he was slick." It was something. Otherwise, the youth's death simply makes no sense. "Why do people have to be like that?" they ask. The girls sit on their stoops and cry. Some people pass by and say not a word. Everyone knows that the community is in mourning. Nothing has to be said. All is communicated by the sad looks on people's faces. Girls and boys, friends of the deceased, hug one another spontaneously. Again they bond. This is a terrible thing, a tragedy.

These feelings persist all week. Then there is the wake, as friends and relatives gather at the boy's home. They sit with the family members and try to comfort them. They recall the boy's positive points. Even though they all know the negative things about him, they almost never mention them. It is widely known that the boy was a drug dealer, but nobody will speak about his drug dealing or how it might have led to his death. They all know the boy was involved in "the life," yet at this moment they deny it. It is not good to speak of the boy's negative attributes, even though, deep down inside, everyone is aware of them. They may even know who killed him. But no one comes forward to tell the authorities, because the police are not to be trusted; they are alien forces in the community. The people in the community discuss this among themselves. The boys, his homies, make oblique threats to the people who did this. It is their obligation to get even, to deal with the assassin, and they say as much by their looks. But in reality, over the next days and weeks, nothing is done. Most people leave it to the police, the authorities, although it is important to act as though they will get the person who did this. Around the stoops, they talk big. At the spot where this "went down," they talk big. Over time, though, nothing happens, and they really want to leave it alone.

Of course, whether they do in fact leave it alone depends on what kind of homie the boy was. If he was very popular, then a group might try to do something to pay back, and a deadly feud can start. More often, there is just talk about getting even. They say, "This wasn't the first shooting, and this won't be the last on these streets." As they are saying these things, gathering together and bonding, various graffiti artists of the neighborhood erect memorials for the young man. Some will paint their car windows with messages of hope

like "Rock, RIP." Some make T-shirts with the boy's picture emblazoned across the front as a memorial to him.

The day of the funeral arrives. At 11 A.M. on a Monday, the community of friends and relatives gathers at the local funeral parlor. Many are dressed in black; the young people are mainly in black leather. Most people are young, from fifteen to twenty-eight or so, but there are also older women and men, some very well dressed, others not. Some of the people appear to be quite poor. There are ladies with big gold earrings and girls whose hair needs fixing. There are girls with babies in tow. A two-year-old walks about the lobby of the funeral home, and the mother has to run after him as others look on. A number of homeboys in Timberland boots and black leather jackets stand outside in the light rain, suspiciously eyeing everyone who arrives. They talk to one another and mill about. Two or three police cars are also there, just in case of trouble. It is the police's job to protect the peace, to maintain order, and the cops sit and watch the crowd come and go. They ask no questions, but people think they are there to investigate, too. Both the cops and the residents have seen this all before, and everyone knows what to expect.

An old head in the community says,

I knew the boy well. I always warned him about these drugs, but he couldn't resist. He knew. I told him I'd come to his funeral. And this is what I'm doing. It is a shame. But you know, it is the system. It is the system. No jobs. No education. And the drugs are all about. You realize what amount of drugs come in here [the neighborhood]. That's not us. It is them. The white people. They bring the drugs in here. They don't want us to have nothing. But this is what they give us. All this death and destruction. I know a boy did shoot him, but it was really the system. The system.

Inside, it is standing room only. This must give the young man's mother and other family members some support. His father is nowhere to be seen, however, and the old head says, "He's in jail." The old head adds that most of the men are in jail. That's where they are. That's what happens to the men. The victim was just nineteen

years old. His friends are here, his homeboys and-girls. The girls wail and cry. The boy's mother cries and wails; this is a "drama for his mama," as community residents say. People whisper. A number of girls become so distraught that they get up and walk out of the service, tears streaming down their faces. The minister preaches about the young man. People sing sweet songs. There are testimonials about the boy's life, but here, too, nothing is said about the drugs or any of the other negative things he was involved with. Only the positive is accentuated.