Violence and the Inner-City Street Code*

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Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community, none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression. This phenomenon wreaks havoc daily on the lives of community residents and increasingly spills over into downtown and residential middle-class areas. Muggings, burglaries, carjackings, and drug-related shootings, all of which may leave their victims or innocent bystanders dead, are now common enough to concern all urban and many suburban residents. The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future.

Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior. Although there are often forces in the community which can counteract the negative influences—by far the most powerful is a strong, loving, “decent” (as inner-city residents put it) family committed to middle-class values—the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of “the streets,” whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society. These two orientations—decent and street—socially organize the community, and their coexistence has important consequences for residents, particularly for children growing up in the inner city. Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values—and the majority of homes in the community do—must be able to handle themselves in a street-oriented environment.

This is because the street culture has evolved what may be called a "code of the streets," which amounts to a set of informal rules governing

interpersonal public behavior, including violence. The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale which allows those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and are enforced mainly by the street-oriented, but on the streets the distinction between street and decent is often irrelevant; everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive, and it is literally necessary for operating in public. Therefore, even though families with a decency orientation are usually opposed to the values of the code, they often reluctantly encourage their children's familiarity with it to enable them to negotiate the inner-city environment.

At the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated “right” or granted the deference one deserves. However, the troublesome public environment of the inner city, as people increasingly feel buffeted by forces beyond their control, what one deserves in the way of respect becomes more and more problematic and uncertain. This situation in turn further opens the issue of respect to sometimes intense interpersonal negotiation. In the street culture, especially among young people, respect is viewed as almost an external entity that is hard-won but easily lost, and so it must constantly be guarded. The rules of the code in fact provide a framework for negotiating respect. Individuals whose very appearance—including their clothing, demeanor, and way of moving—deter transgressions feel that they possess, and may be considered by others to possess, a measure of respect. With the right amount, for instance, such individuals can avoid being bothered in public. If they are bothered, on the other hand, not only may they be in physical danger, but they will have been disgraced or “dissed” (disrespected). Many of the forms that dissing can take might seem petty to middle-class people (maintaining eye contact for too long, for example), but to those invested in the street code, these actions become serious indications of the other person’s intentions. Consequently, such people become very sensitive to advances and slights, which could well serve as a warning of imminent physical confrontation.

1 This phenomenon is to be distinguished from that described by Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967), who identified and delineated more explicitly a “subculture of violence.” Wolfgang and Ferracuti posited norms which undergirded or even defined the culture of the entire community, whereas the code of the streets applies predominantly to situational public behavior and is normative for only a segment of the community.
This hard reality can be traced to the profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city black people, particularly the young. The code of the streets is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system. The police are most often seen as representing the dominant white society and as not caring enough to protect inner-city residents. When called, they may not respond, which is one reason many residents feel they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined to aggression. Lack of police accountability has in fact been incorporated into the status system: The person who is believed capable of "taking care of himself" is accorded a certain deference, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control. Thus, the street code emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin. Exacerbated by the proliferation of drugs and easy access to guns, this volatile situation results in the ability of the street-oriented minority (or those who effectively "go for bad") to dominate the public spaces.

This study is an ethnographic representation of the workings of this street code in the context of the socioeconomic situation in which the community finds itself. The material it presents was gathered through numerous visits to various inner-city families and neighborhood hangouts and through many in-depth interviews with a wide array of individuals and groups; these interviews included sessions with adolescent boys and young men (some incarcerated, some not), elderly men, teenage mothers, and grandmothers. The structure of the inner-city family, the socialization of its children, the social structure of the community, and that community's extreme poverty, which is in large part the result of structural economic change, will be seen to interact in a way that facilitates the involvement of so many maturing youths in the culture of the streets, in which violence and the way it is regulated are key elements.

The ethnographic approach is to be distinguished from other, equally valid, approaches, most notably the social-psychological. A sensitive and compelling social-psychological analysis of the phenomenon of murder is to be found in Jack Katz's *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Katz's purpose is to make sense of the senseless, that is, to explain the psychic changes a person goes through to become, at a given moment, a murderer. In contrast, the analysis offered here focuses on conscious behavior, which, in the circumstances of the inner-city environment, is sensible (makes sense). Katz explores the moral dimension of violence, whereas I explore its practical aspect.
The Ethnographic Method

A clarifying note on the methodology is perhaps in order for those unfamiliar with the ethnographic method. Ethnography seeks to paint a conceptual picture of the setting under consideration, through the use of observation and in-depth interviews. The researcher’s goal is to illuminate the social and cultural dynamics which characterize the setting by answering such questions as “How do the people in the setting perceive their situation?” “What assumptions do they bring to their decision making?” “What behavior patterns result from their choices?” and “What are the consequences of those behaviors?” An important aspect of the ethnographer’s work is that it be as objective as possible. This is not easy since it requires researchers to set aside their own values and assumptions as to what is and is not morally acceptable—in other words, to jettison that prism through which they typically view a given situation. By definition, one’s own assumptions are so basic to one’s perceptions that it may be difficult to see their influence. Ethnographic researchers, however, have been trained to recognize underlying assumptions, their own and those of their subjects, and to override the former and uncover the latter (see Becker, 1970).

“Decent” Families: Values and Reality

Although almost everyone in the poor inner-city neighborhood is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America, the decent and the street family in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation, two contrasting conceptual categories. The labels decent and street, which the residents themselves use, amount to evaluative judgments that confer status on local residents. The labeling is often the result of a social contest among individuals and families of the neighborhood, and individuals of the two orientations can and often do coexist in the same extended family. Decent residents judge themselves to be so while

judging others to be of the street, whereas street individuals may present themselves as decent, drawing distinctions between themselves and other even more street-oriented people. In any case, street is considered a highly perjorative epithet. In addition, there is quite a bit of circumstantial behavior among individuals — that is, one person may at different times exhibit both decent and street orientations, depending on the circumstances. Although these designations result from so much social jockeying, there do exist concrete features that define each conceptual category.

Generally, so-called decent families accept mainstream values more fully and attempt to instill them in their children. Whether a married couple with children or a single-parent (usually female) household, such families are generally working poor and so tend to be relatively better off financially than their street-oriented neighbors. The adults value hard work and self-reliance and are willing to sacrifice for their children. Because they have a certain amount of faith in mainstream society, they harbor hopes for a better future for their children, if not for themselves. Many of them go to church and take a strong interest in their children’s schooling. Rather than dwell on the real hardships and inequities facing them, many such decent people, particularly the increasing number of grandmothers raising grandchildren, sometimes see their difficult situation as a test from God and derive great support from their faith and from the church community.

Intact families, although in the minority, provide powerful role models in the community. Typically, the husband and wife work at low-paying jobs; possibly, they are aided by the occasional financial contributions of a teenage child who works at a part-time job. At times, the man or woman may work multiple jobs. As the primary breadwinner, the man is usually considered the “head of household,” with the woman as his partner and the children as their subjects. During bouts of unemployment, the man’s dominance may be questioned, but the financially marginal black family with a decency orientation strongly values male authority. Typically, certain male decisions and behavior may be contested by the woman, but very rarely will they be challenged by the children. As they age, however, children, particularly males, may “try” (challenge) the authority of the father, which places some pressure on him to keep his children in line. In public, such a family makes a striking picture as the man appears to be in complete control, with the woman and the children often following his lead. This appearance is to some extent a practical matter, for the streets and other public places are considered dangerous and unpredictable, and it is the man who is most often placed in the public role of protector and defender against danger. In playing this role, the man may exhibit a certain exaggeration of concern,
particularly when anonymous males are near; through his actions and words, and at times speaking loudly and assertively to get his small children in line, he lets strangers know unambiguously, "This is my family, and I am in charge."

Extremely aware of the problematic and often dangerous environment in which they reside, decent parents tend to be strict in their childrearing practices, encouraging children to respect authority and walk a straight moral line. They have an almost obsessive concern with trouble of any kind and remind their children to be on the lookout for people and situations which might lead to such difficulties. When disciplining their children, they tend to be liberal in the use of corporal punishment. But unlike street parents, who are often observed lashing out at their children, they tend to explain the reason for the spanking. Outsiders, however, may not always be able to distinguish between parents who are using corporal punishment as a means to uphold standards of decency and those whose goal is to teach toughness and intimidation or who have no goal. Such confusion of decent motives with behavior that mainstream society generally disapproves of is a source of frustration for many black parents who are attempting to lead mainstream lives. Here is the experience of a 48-year-old man with an intact family:

My boy and this other boy broke into this church, aw right? Stole this ridin' lawnmower, just to ride on, nothin' else. And when I found out, I whupped his behind. Now two weeks after that, he got suspended for fightin', which wasn't his fault - but they suspended him and the other boy. Now he scared to come home and tell me. Now this is two weeks after I done already talked to him. He's cryin' and carryin' on in school. So the school sends a 24-year-old black girl, a 24-year-old white girl to my house. Now the first thing I asked them was did they have kids. None of 'em have kids. But I done raised seven kids. My oldest girl is 30 years old. I have nine grandkids. I'm 48. And I asked them how can they tell me how to raise my kids. And they don't have any of they own. I was so angry I had to leave. My wife made me get out of the house. But they did send me an apology letter, but the point is that I cannot chastise my child unless the government tells me it's OK. That's wrong. I'm not gon' kill my child, but I'm gonna make him know right and wrong. These kids today they know that whatever you do to 'em, first thing you know they call it child abuse. And they gon' lock us up. And it's wrong, it really is.

Consistent with this view, decent families also inspect their children's playmates for behavior problems, and they enforce curfews. For example, they may require their young children to come in by a certain time or simply to go no farther than the front stoop of their house, a vantage point
from which the children attentively watch other children play unsupervised in the street; the obedient children may then endure the street kids’ taunts of “stool children.” As the children become teenagers, these parents make a strong effort to know where they are at night, giving them an unmistakable message of their caring, concern, and love. At the same time, they are vigilant in guarding against the appearance of condoning any kind of delinquent or loose behavior, including violence, drug use, and staying out very late at night; they monitor not only their own children’s behavior but also that of their children’s peers, at times playfully embarrassing their own children by voicing value judgments in front of their children’s friends.

A single mother with children may also form a decent family — indeed, the majority of decent families in the inner city are of this type — but she must work even harder at instilling decent values in her children. She may reside with her mother or other female or male relatives and friends, or she may simply receive help with child care from an extended family. She too may press for deference to her authority, but usually she is at some disadvantage with regard to young men who might “try” her ability to control her household, attempting to date her daughters or to draw her sons into the streets. The importance of having a man of the house to fill the role of protector of the household, a figure boys are prepared to respect, should not be underestimated. A mother on her own often feels that she must be constantly on guard and that she must exhibit a great deal of determination. A single mother of four boys, three of whom are grown, explains:

It really is pretty bad around here. There’s quite a few grandmothers taking care of kids. They mothers out here on crack. There’s quite a few of ’em. The drugs are terrible.

Now I got a 15-year-old boy, and I do everything I can to keep him straight. ’Cause they all on the corner. You can’t say you not in it ’cause we in a bad area. They [drug dealers and users] be all on the corner. They be sittin’ in front of apartments takin’ the crack. And constantly, every day, I have to stay on ‘em and make sure everything’s O.K. Which is real bad, I never seen it this bad. And I been around here since ’81, and I never seen it this bad.

At nights they be roamin’ up and down the streets, and they be droppin’ the caps [used crack vials] all in front of your door. And when the kids out there playin’, you gotta like sweep ’em up.

It’s harder for me now to try to keep my 15-year-old under control. Right now, he likes to do auto mechanics, hook up radios in people’s cars. And long as I keep ‘im interested in that, I’m O.K.
But it's not a day that goes by that I'm not in fear. 'Cause right now, he got friends that's sellin' it (drugs). They, you know, got a whole lot of money and stuff.

And I get him to come and mop floors [she works as a part-time janitor] and I give him a few dollars. I say, "As long as you got a roof over yo' head, son, don't worry about nothin' else."

It's just a constant struggle tryin' to raise yo' kids in this time. It's very hard. They [boys on the street] say to him, "Man, why you got to go in the house?" And they keep sittin' right on the stoop. If he go somewhere, I got to know where he's at and who he's with. And they be tellin' him... He say, "No, man, I got to stay on these steps. I don't want no problem with my mama."

Now I been a single parent for 15 years. So far, I don't have any problems. I have four sons. I got just the one that's not grown, the 15-year-old. Everyone else is grown. My oldest is 35. I'm tryin'. Not that easy. I got just one more, now. Then I'll be all right. If I need help, the older ones'll help me.

Most of the time, I keep track myself. I told him I'll kill him if I catch him out here sellin' [drugs]. And I know most of the drug dealers. He better not. I gon' hurt him. They better not give him nothin' [drugs or money]. He better not do nothin' for them. I tell him, "I know some of your friends are dealers. [You can] speak to 'em, but don't let me catch you hangin' on the corner. I done struggled too hard to try to take care of you. I'm not gon' let you throw your life away."

When me and my husband separated in '79, I figured I had to do it. He was out there drivin' trucks and never home. I had to teach my kids how to play baseball and that. I said, "If I have to be a single parent, I'll do it."

It used to be the gangs, and you fought 'em, and it was over. But now if you fight somebody, they may come back and kill you. It's a whole lot different now. You got to be street smart to get along. My boy doesn't like to fight. I took him out of school, put him in a home course. The staff does what it wants. Just work for a pay check.

You tell the kid, now you can't pick their friends, so you do what you can. I try to tell mine, "You gon' be out there with the bad [street kids], you can't do what they do. You got to use your own mind." Every day, if I don't get up and say a prayer, I can't make it. I can't make it. I watch him closely. If he go somewhere, I have to know where he at. And when I leave him, or if he go to them girlfriends' houses, I tell the parents, "If you not responsible, he can't stay." I'm not gon' have no teenager making no baby.

There are so many kids that don't make 17. Look at that 16-year-old boy that got killed last week. Somebody was looking for his cousin. All this kinda stuff, it don't make sense. These kids can't even make 17. All over drugs. Drugs taken control. Even the parents in it. How a child gon' come home with a $100 sweatshirt on, $200 sneakers. Ain't got no job. A $1,000 in they
pocket. He ain’t gon’ come in my house and do that. Some parents use the 
money. Some of the kids’ll knock they own parents out. The parents afraid 
of the kids. I’ve seen ’em knock the parents the hell down.

Probably the most meaningful expression for describing the mission of 
decent families, as seen by themselves and outsiders, is instilling “back-
bone” in its younger members. In support of its efforts toward this goal, a 
decent family tends to be much more willing and able than the street-
oriented family to ally itself with outside institutions such as school and 
church. The parents in such families have usually had more years of school-
ing than their street-oriented counterparts, which tends to foster in them a 
positive attitude toward their children’s schooling. In addition, they place 
a certain emphasis on spiritual values and principles, and church attend-
dance tends to be a regular family ritual, as noted earlier, although females 
are generally more so inclined than the males.

An important aspect of religious belief for the decent people is their 
conception of death. The intertwined ideas of fate, a judgment day, and an 
afterlife present a marked contrast to the general disorganization and sense 
of immediacy that is known to characterize street-oriented families and 
individuals. The situation of the street-oriented may then result in the 
tendency to be indifferent or oblivious to the probable consequences or 
future meaning of their behavior, including death. People imbued with a 
street orientation tend not to think far beyond the immediate present; their 
orientation toward the future is either very limited or nonexistent. One 
must live for the moment, for they embrace the general belief that “tomor-
row ain’t promised to you.” For religious people, the sometimes literal 
belief in an afterlife and a day of reckoning inspires hope and makes life 
extrremely valuable, and this belief acts to check individuals in potentially 
vilent encounter. While accepting the use of violence in self-defense, they 
are less likely to be initiators of hostilities. Religious beliefs thus can have 
very practical implications. Furthermore, the moral feeling church-going 
instills in many people strengthens their self-esteem and underscores the 
sense that a positive future is possible, thus contributing to a certain emo-
tional stability or “long fuse” in volatile circumstances.

In these decent families, then, there tends to be a real concern with and 
a certain amount of hope for the future. Such attitudes are often expressed 
in a drive to work to have something or to build a good life by working hard 
and saving for material things; raising one’s children — telling them to 
“make something out of yourself” and “make do with what you have” — is an 
important aspect of this attitude. But the concern with material things,
although accepted, often produces a certain strain on the young; often encouraged to covet material things as emblems testifying to social and cultural well-being, they lack the legitimate or legal means for obtaining such things. The presence of this dilemma often causes otherwise decent youths to invest their considerable mental resources in the street.

Involvement with institutions such as school and church has given decent parents a kind of savoir faire that helps them get along in the world. Thus, they often know how to get things done and use that knowledge to help advance themselves and their children. In the face of such overwhelming problems as persistent poverty, AIDS, or drug use, which can beset even the strongest and most promising families, these parents are trying hard to give their children as good a life – if not a better one – as they themselves had. At the same time, they are themselves polite and considerate of others, and they teach their children to be the same way. At home, at work, and in church, they work hard to maintain a positive mental attitude and a spirit of cooperation.

The Street

So-called street parents often show a lack of consideration for other people and have a rather superficial sense of family and community. Though they may love their children, many of them are unable to cope with the physical and emotional demands of parenthood, and they often find it difficult to reconcile their needs with those of their children. These families, who are more fully invested in the code of the streets than the decent people are, may aggressively socialize their children into it in a normative way. They believe in the code and judge themselves and others according to its values.

In fact, the overwhelming majority of families in the inner-city community try to approximate the decent-family model, but there are many others who clearly represent the worst fears of the decent family. Not only are the financial resources of these other families extremely limited, but what little they have may easily be misused. Often suffering the worst effects of social isolation, the lives of the street-oriented are often marked by disorganization. In the most desperate circumstances, people often have a limited understanding of priorities and consequences, and so frustrations mount over bills, food, and, at times, drink, cigarettes, and drugs. Some tend toward self-destructive behavior; many street-oriented women are crack-addicted (“on the pipe”), alcoholic, or repeatedly involved in complicated relationships with men who abuse them. In addition, the seeming intractability of their situation, caused in large part by the lack of well-paying jobs
and the persistence of racial discrimination, has engendered deep-seated bitterness and anger in many of the most desperate and poorest blacks, especially young people. The need both to exercise a measure of control and to lash out at somebody is often played out in the adults’ relations with their children. At the least, the frustrations of persistent poverty shorten the fuse in such people – contributing to a lack of patience with anyone, child or adult, who irritates them.

Many decent people simply view the street-oriented as lowlife or bad people. Even if they display a certain amount of responsibility, such “lowlife” people are generally seen as incapable of being anything but a bad influence on their neighbors. The following field note is germane:

On the fringe of the Village, there are houses of the inner-city black community. On one street is the home of Joe Dickens, a heavy-set, 32-year-old black man. He rents the house and lives there with his three children, who range in age from about 3½ to 7. Dickens’ wife is not around. It is rumored that the two of them were on crack together and his wife’s habit got out of control. As has been happening more and more in this community, she gravitated to the streets and became a prostitute to support her habit. Dickens could not accept this behavior and so he had to let her go. He took over the running of the house and the care of the children as best he could. By doing what he can for his kids, he might be considered the responsible parent, but many of the neighbors do not see him as responsible. They observe him yelling and cursing at the children, as well as with his buddies, and allowing them to “rip and run” up and down the street at all hours. At the same time, Mr. Dickens lacks consideration of others, a lack which is a defining trait of street-oriented people. He often sits on his porch and plays loud music, either unaware of or insensitive to the fact that it disturbs the whole block. Sometimes the neighbors call the police, who do not respond to the complaint, leaving the neighbors frustrated and demoralized.

In general, however, the decent people on the street are afraid to confront Mr. Dickens because they fear getting in trouble with him and his buddies. They know that like all street people, he subscribes to the belief that might makes right, and so he is likely to try to harm anyone who annoys him. In addition, it is believed that Dickens is a crack dealer. His house is always busy, with people coming in and out at all hours, often driving up in their cars, running in, and quickly emerging and driving off. Dickens’ children, of course, are witnesses to all this activity, and one can only imagine what they see inside the house. They are growing up in a family, but it is a street-oriented family, and it is obvious to the neighbors that these children are learning the values of toughness and self-absorption from their father and the social environment in which he is raising them.
The decent people firmly believe that it is this general set of cultural deficits – that is, a certain fundamental lack of social polish and commitment to norms of civility, which they refer to as "ignorance" – which makes the street-oriented quick to resort to violence to resolve almost any dispute. To those who hold this view, such street people seem to carry about them an aura of danger. Thus, during public interactions, the decent people may readily defer to the street-oriented, especially when they are strangers, out of fear of their ignorance. For instance, when street people are encountered at theaters or other public places talking loudly or making excessive noise, many decent people are reluctant to correct them for fear of verbal abuse that could lead to violence. Similarly, the decent people will often avoid a confrontation over a parking space or traffic error for fear of a verbal or physical confrontation. Under their breaths they may utter disapprovingly to a companion, "street niggers," thereby drawing a sharp cultural distinction between themselves and such persons. But there are also times when the decent people will try to approach the level of the "ignorant" ones by what they refer to as "getting ignorant" (see Anderson, 1990). In these circumstances, they may appear in battle dress, more than ready to face down the ignorant ones, indicating they have reached their limit, or threshold, for violent confrontation. And from this, an actual fight can erupt.

Thus, the fact that generally civilly disposed, socially conscious, and largely self-reliant men and women share the streets and other public institutions with the inconsiderate, the ignorant, and the extremely desperate puts them at special risk. In order to live and to function in the community, they must adapt to a street reality that is often dominated by the presence of those who at best are suffering severely in some way and who are likely to resort quickly to violence to settle disputes.

Coming Up in Street Families

In the street-oriented family, the development of an aggressive mentality can be seen from the beginning, even in the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. In circumstances of persistent poverty, the mother is often little more than a child herself and without many resources or a consistent source of support; she is often getting by with public assistance or the help of kin. She may be ambivalent with respect to the child: On the one hand, she may look at the child as a heavenly gift; but on the other hand, as she begins to care for it, she is apt to realize that it is a burden, and sometimes a profound burden. These are the years she wants to be free to
date and otherwise consort with men, to have a social life, and she discovers
that the child slows her down (see Anderson, 1989). Thus, she sometimes
leans on others, including family members, to enable her to satisfy her
social needs for getting out nights and being with male and female friends.

In these circumstances, a woman — or a man, although men are less
consistently present in children's lives — can be quite aggressive with chil-
dren, yelling at and striking them for the least little infraction of the rules
she has set down. Often little if any serious explanation follows the verbal
and physical punishment. This response teaches children a particular les-
son. They learn that to solve any kind of interpersonal problem, one must
quickly resort to hitting or other violent behavior. Actual peace and quiet
— and also the appearance of calm, respectful children that can be conveyed
to her neighbors and friends — are often what the young mother most
desires, but at times she will be very aggressive in trying to achieve these
goals. Thus, she may be quick to beat her children, especially if they defy
her law, not because she hates them but because this is the way she knows
how to control them. In fact, many street-oriented women love their chil-
dren dearly. Many mothers in the community subscribe to the notion that
there is a "devil in the boy" that must be beaten out of him or that socially
"fast girls need to be whipped." Thus, much of what borders on child abuse
in the view of social authorities is acceptable parental punishment in the
view of these mothers.

Many street-oriented women are weak and ineffective mothers whose
children learn to fend for themselves when necessary, foraging for food
and money and getting them any way they can. These children are some-
times employed by drug dealers or become addicted themselves. These
children of the street, growing up with little supervision, are said to "come
up hard." In the interest of survival, they often learn to fight at an early age,
sometimes using short-tempered adults around them as role models. The
street-oriented home may be fraught with anger, verbal disputes, physical
agression, and even mayhem. The children observe these goings-on, learning
the lesson that might makes right. They quickly learn to hit those who
cross them, and the dog-eat-dog mentality prevails. In order to survive, to
protect oneself, it is necessary to marshal inner resources and be ready to
deal with adversity in a hands-on way. In these circumstances, physical
prowess takes on great significance.

In some of the most desperate cases, a street-oriented mother may simply
leave her young children alone and unattended while she goes out. The
most irresponsible women can be found at local bars and crack houses,
getting high and socializing with other adults. Sometimes a troubled
woman will leave very young children alone for days at a time. Reports of crack addicts abandoning their children have become common in drug-infested inner-city communities. Neighbors or relatives discover the abandoned children, often hungry and distraught over the absence of their mother. After repeated absences, a friend or relative, particularly a grandmother, will often step in to care for the young children, sometimes petitioning the authorities to send her, as guardian of the children, the mother's welfare check, if the mother gets one. By this time, however, the children may well have learned the first lesson of the streets: Survival itself, let alone respect, cannot be taken for granted; you have to fight for your place in the world.

The Shuffling Process

As indicated earlier, in order to carry on their everyday lives in poor inner-city neighborhoods, children from even the most decent homes must come to terms with the streets. This means that they must learn to deal with the various and sundry influences of the streets, including their more street-oriented peers. Indeed, as children grow up and their parents' control wanes, they go through a social shuffling process that can undermine, or at least test, much of the socialization they have received at home. In other words, the street serves as a mediating influence under which children may come to reconsider and rearrange their personal orientations. This is a time of status passage (see Glaser & Strauss, 1972), when social identity can become very uncertain as children sort out their ways of being. It is a tricky time because a child can go either way. For children from decent homes, for example, the immediate and present reality of the street situation can overcome the compulsions against tough behavior that their parents taught them, so that the lessons of the home are slowly forgotten and the child "goes for bad." Or a talented child from a street-oriented family may discover ways of gaining respect without unduly resorting to aggressive and violent responses—by becoming a rapper or athlete, for example, or, rarely, a good student. Thus, the kind of home a child comes from becomes influential but not determinative of the way he or she will ultimately turn out.

By the age of ten, all children from both decent and street-oriented families are mingling on the neighborhood streets and figuring out their identities. Here they try out certain roles and scripts—which are sometimes actively opposed to the wishes of parents—in a process that challenges both their talents and their socialization and may involve more than a little luck.
good or bad. In this volatile environment, they learn to watch their backs and to anticipate and negotiate those situations that might lead to troubles with others. The successful outcomes of these cumulative interactions with the streets ultimately determine every child’s life chances.

Herein lies the real meaning of so many fights and altercations, despite the ostensible, usually petty, precipitating causes, including the competitions over girlfriends and boyfriends and the “he say, she say” conflicts of personal attribution. Adolescents are insecure and are trying to establish their identities. Children from the middle- and upper-classes, however, usually have more ways to express themselves as worthwhile and so have more avenues to explore. The negotiations they engage in among themselves may also include aggression, but they tend to be more verbal in a way that includes a greater use of other options – options that require resources not available to those of more limited resources, such as showing off with things, connections, and so on. In poor inner-city neighborhoods, physicality is a fairly common way of asserting oneself. It is also unambiguous. If you punch someone out, if you succeed in keeping someone from walking down your block, “you did it.” It is a fait accompli. And the evidence that you prevailed is there for all to see.

During this campaign for respect, through these various conflicts, those connections between actually being respected and the need for being in physical control of at least a portion of the environment become internalized, and the germ of the code of the streets emerges. As children mature, they obtain an increasingly more sophisticated understanding of the code, and it becomes part of their working conception of the world, so that by the time they reach adulthood, it comes to define the social order. In time, the rules of physical engagement and their personal implications become crystallized. Children learn the conditions under which violence is appropriate, and they also learn how the code defines the individual’s relationship to his or her peers. They thus come to appreciate the give-and-take of public life, the process of negotiation.

The ethic of violence is in part a class phenomenon (see Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). Children are more inclined to be physical than adults (because they have fewer alternatives for settling disputes), and lower-class adults tend to be more physical than middle- or upper-middle-class adults. Poor and lower-class adults more often find themselves in disputes that lead to violence. Because they are more often alienated from the agents and agencies of social control, such as the police and the courts, they are left alone more often to settle disputes on their own. And such parents, in turn, tend to socialize their kids into this reality.
But this reality of inner-city life is largely absorbed on the streets. At an
early age, often even before they start school and without much in the way
of adult supervision, children from such street-oriented families gravitate to
the streets, where they must be ready "to hang," to socialize with peers.
Children from these generally permissive homes have a great deal of lati-
dude and are allowed to "rip and run" up and down the street. They often
come home from school, put their books down, and go right back out the
door. For the most severely compromised, on school nights, eight- and
nine-year-olds remain out until nine or ten o'clock (and the teenagers
come in whenever they want to). On the streets, they play in groups that
often become the source of their primary social bonds. Children from
decent homes tend to be more carefully supervised and are thus likely to
have curfews and to be taught how to stay out of trouble.

In the street, through their play, children pour their individual life
experiences into a common knowledge pool, affirming, confirming, and
elaborating on what they have observed in the home and matching their
skills against those of others. And they learn to fight. Even small children
test one another, pushing and shoving others, and are ready to hit other
children over circumstances not to their liking. In turn, they are readily hit
by other children, and the child who is toughest prevails. Thus, the violent
resolution of disputes — the hitting and cursing — gains social reinforce-
ment. The child in effect is initiated into a system that is really a way of
campaigning for self-respect.

There is a critical sense in which violent behavior is determined by
situations, thus giving importance to the various ways in which individuals
define and interpret such situations. In meeting the various exigencies of
immediate situations, which become so many public trials, the individual
builds patterns as outcomes are repeated over time. Behaviors, violent or
civil, which work for a young person and are reinforced by peers whose
reactions to such behavior come to shape the person's outlook, will likely
be repeated.

In addition, younger children witness the disputes of older children,
which are often resolved through cursing and abusive talk, and sometimes
through aggression or outright violence. They see that one child succumbs
to the greater physical and mental abilities of the other. They are also alert
and attentive witnesses to the verbal and physical fights of adults, after
which they compare notes and share their own interpretations of the event.
In almost every case, the victor is the person who physically won the
altercation, and this person often enjoys the esteem and respect of onlook-
ers. These experiences reinforce the lessons the children have learned at
home: Might makes right and toughness is a virtue; humility is not. In effect, they learn the social meaning of fighting. When it is left virtually unchallenged, this understanding becomes an ever more important part of a child’s working conception of the world. Over time, the code of the streets becomes refined. Those street-oriented adults with whom children come in contact—including mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, boyfriends, cousins, neighbors, and friends—help them along in forming this understanding by verbalizing the messages they are getting through experience: “Watch your back.” “Protect yourself.” “Don’t punk out.” “If somebody messes with you, you got to pay them back.” “If someone disses you, you got to straighten them out.” Many parents actually impose sanctions if a child is not sufficiently aggressive. For example, if a child loses a fight and comes home upset, the parent might respond, “Don’t you come in here crying that somebody beat you up; you better get back out there and whup his ass. I didn’t raise no punks! Get back out there and whup his ass. If you don’t whup his ass, I’ll whup yo’ ass when you come home.” Thus, the child obtains reinforcement for being tough and showing nerve.

While fighting, some children cry as though they are doing something they are ambivalent about. The fight may be against their wishes, yet they may feel constrained to fight or face the consequences—not just from peers but also from caretakers or their parents, who may administer another beating if they back down. Some adults recall receiving such lessons from their own parents and justify repeating them to their children as a way to toughen them up. Appearing capable of taking care of oneself as a form of self-defense is a dominant theme among both street-oriented and decent adults, who worry about the safety of their children. There is thus at times a convergence in their child-rearing practices, although the rationales behind them may differ.

The following field note graphically illustrates both the efficacy of these informal lessons and the early age at which they are learned:

Casey is four years old and attends a local nursery school. He lives with his mom and stepfather. Casey’s family is considered to be a street family in the neighborhood. At home, his mother will curse at him and, at times, will beat him for misbehavior. At times, his stepfather will spank him as well. Casey has attracted the attention of the staff of the nursery school because of his behavior. Of particular concern is Casey’s cursing and hitting of other children. When Casey wants something, he will curse and hit other children, causing many there to refer to him as bad. He now has that reputation of “bad” around the center. He regularly refers to members of the staff as “bitches” and “motherfuckers.” For instance, he will say to his teacher,
“Cathy, you bitch” or “What that bitch want?” At times this seems funny coming from the mouth of a four-year-old, but it reflects on Casey’s home situation. Around the center, he knows that such behavior is disapproved of because of the way the teachers and others react to it, though he may get reinforcement for it because of its humorous character. Once when his teacher upset him, Casey promptly slapped her and called her a “bitch.”

Upon hearing of this incident, the bus driver refused to take Casey home, or even to let him on his bus. The next day, when Casey saw the bus driver again, he said, “Norman, you left me. Why’d you leave me? You a trip, man.” When Casey desires a toy or some other item from a playmate, he will demand it and sometimes hit the child and try to take it. Members of the staff fear that Casey has a bad influence on other children at the center, for he curses at them “like a sailor,” though “they don’t know what he’s talking about.” In these ways, Casey acts somewhat grown up, or “mannish,” in the words of the bus driver, who sometimes glares at him, wanting to treat him as another man, since he seems to act that way. Staff members at the center have found they can control Casey by threatening to report his behavior to his stepfather, to which he replies, “Oh, please don’t tell him. I’ll be good. Please don’t tell him.” It seems that Casey fears this man and that telling him might mean a beating for Casey. Other local decent blacks say his home life corresponds to that of the typical street family, which is rife with cursing, yelling, physical abuse of children, and limited financial resources.

Many of these parents do not want Casey to be a playmate for one of their own children. They think he would be a bad influence on their own children, particularly in encouraging them toward assuming a street identity. This is something most want to guard against, and children “like this one” worry them generally. They feel such children help to make their own children more unruly. They also feel that certain neighborhoods breed such children, and the decent children are at some risk when placed in an environment with the street kids.

In the minds of many decent parents, children from street families, because of their general ignorance and lack of opportunities, are considered at great risk of eventually getting into serious trouble.

Self-Image Based on Juice

By the time they are teenagers, most youths have either internalized the code of the streets or at least learned the need to comport themselves in accordance with its rules, which chiefly have to do with interpersonal communication. The code revolves around the presentation of self. Its basic requirement is the display of a certain predisposition to violence. Accordingly, one’s bearing must send the unmistakable if sometimes subtle
message to “the next person” in public that one is capable of violence and mayhem when the situation requires it – that one can take care of oneself. The nature of this communication is largely determined by the demands of the circumstances but can include facial expressions, gait, and verbal expressions – all of which are geared mainly to deterring aggression. Physical appearance, including clothes, jewelry, and grooming, also plays an important part in how a person is viewed; to be respected, you have to have the right look.

Even so, there are no guarantees against challenges, because there are always people around looking for a fight to increase their share of respect – or “juice,” as it is sometimes called on the street. Moreover, if a male is assaulted, it is important, not only in the eyes of his opponent but also in the eyes of his “running buddies,” for him to avenge himself. Otherwise, he risks being “tried” or “rolled on” (physically assaulted) by any number of others. To maintain his honor, he must show he is not someone to be “messed with” or “dissed.” In general, the person must “keep himself straight” by maintaining his position of respect among others; this involves in part his self-image, which is shaped by what he thinks others are thinking of him in relation to his peers.

Objects play an important and complicated role in establishing self-image. Jackets, sneakers, and gold jewelry reflect not just a person’s taste, which tends to be tightly regulated among adolescents of all social classes, but also a willingness to possess things that may require defending. A boy wearing a fashionable, expensive jacket, for example, is vulnerable to attack by another who covets the jacket and either cannot afford to buy one or wants the added satisfaction of depriving someone else of his. However, if a boy forgoes the desirable jacket and wears one that isn’t hip, he runs the risk of being teased and possibly even assaulted as an unworthy person. A youth with a decency orientation describes the situation:

Here go another thing. If you outside, right, and your mom’s on welfare and she on crack, the persons you tryin’ to be with dress [in] like purple sweatpants and white sneakers, but it’s all decent, right, and you got on some bummy jeans and a pair of dull sneakers, they won’t – some of the people out there sellin’ drugs won’t let you hang with them unless you dress like [in] purple sweatpants and decent sneakers every day . . .

They tease ‘em. First they’ll tease ‘em and then they’ll try to say they stink, like they smell like pig or something like that, and then they’ll be like, “Get out of here. Get out. We don’t want you near us. You stink. You dirty.” All that stuff. And I don’t think that’s right. If he’s young, it ain’t his fault or her fault that she dressin’ like that. It’s her mother and her dad’s fault.
To be allowed to hang with certain prestigious crowds, a boy must wear a different set of expensive clothes – sneakers and an athletic outfit – every day. Not to be able to do so might make him appear socially deficient. The youth may come to covet such items – especially when he sees easy prey wearing them. The youth continues:

You can even get hurt off your own clothes: Like, say, I'm walkin' down the street and somebody try to take my hat from me and I won't let 'em take it and they got a gun. You can get killed over one little simple hat. Or if I got a gold ring and a gold necklace on and they see me one dark night on a dark street, and they stick me up and I won't let 'em, and they shoot me. I'm dead and they hide me. I'm dead and won't nobody ever know [who did it].

In acquiring valued things, therefore, a person shores up his or her identity – but since it is an identity based on having something, it is highly precarious. This very precariousness gives a heightened sense of urgency to staying even with peers, with whom the person is actually competing. Young men and women who are able to command respect through their presentation of self – by allowing their possessions and their body language to speak for them – may not have to campaign for regard but may, rather, gain it by the force of their manner. Those who are unable to command respect in this way must actively campaign for it. The following incident, which I witnessed, is a good example of the way one's things can be used to establish status in a given situation:

It was a warm spring day, and my twelve-year-old son and I were in a local Foot Locker shoe store about a mile north of the community. We were being waited on when a brand-new purple BMW pulled up in front of the store, music blaring out of its stereo system. Leaving the engine running, two young black males of about 21 or 22 jumped out and swaggered into the store. They were dressed in stylish sweatsuits, had close-cropped hair, and sported shades and gold chains and rings. One of them had an earring. Ignoring the two white salesmen, who deferred to them, they went straight to the wall where the shoes were stacked in boxes. In an obviously demonstrative way, they snatched three or four boxes of shoes, swaggered over to the counter, and threw down a few hundred dollars. Then, without waiting for their change or carrying on any verbal exchange, they walked out with their shoes.

The most striking aspect of this episode was the way in which these young men exhibited control over the resource of money. By their appearance, which was dominated by expensive clothing and jewelry; by the aplomb with which they moved; by the ease with which they threw large bills around; by not only leaving their keys in the car but even keeping the engine running
and the music playing enticingly, thus daring anyone to tamper with it - by all these means, they were demonstrating their total control over their possessions. And this display did make an impression. After the youths made their exit, they left a certain presence behind, a residue of their self-assurance. In their wake, the feeling in the store was, "What was that?" My son nodded knowingly, aware that these are the successful "homeboys."

Indeed, these two unorthodox customers exuded success, albeit a deviant sort of success. Their gaudy car roared off, and things in the store slowly drifted back to normal.

One way of campaigning for status is by taking the possessions of others. In this context, seemingly ordinary objects can become trophies imbued with symbolic value that far exceeds their monetary worth. Possession of the trophy can symbolize the ability to violate somebody - to "get in his face," to take something of value from him, to diss him, and thus to enhance one's own worth by stealing that which belongs to someone else. Though it often is, the trophy does not have to be something material. It can be another person's sense of honor, snatched away with a derogatory remark or action. It can be the outcome of a fight. It can be the imposition of a certain standard, such as a girl getting herself recognized as the most beautiful. Material things, however, fit easily into the pattern. Sneakers or a pistol - even somebody else's boyfriend or girlfriend - can become a trophy. When individuals can take something from another and then flaunt it, they gain a certain regard by being the owner, or the controller, of that thing. But this display of ownership can then provoke other people to challenge him or her. This game of who controls what is thus constantly being played out on inner-city streets, and the trophy - extrinsic or intrinsic, tangible or intangible - identifies the current winner.

An important aspect of this often violent give-and-take is its zero-sum quality. That is, the extent to which one person can rise depends on his or her ability to put another person down. This situation underscores the alienation that permeates the inner-city ghetto community. There is a generalized sense that very little respect is to be had, and therefore everyone competes to get what little affirmation is actually available. The craving for respect that results often gives people thin skins. It is generally believed that true respect provides an aura of protection. Thus, shows of deference by others can be highly soothing, contributing to a sense of security, comfort, self-confidence, and self-respect. Transgressions by others that go unanswered diminish these feelings and are believed to encourage further transgressions. Hence, one must be ever vigilant against the transgressions of others; one cannot even allow the appearance of transgressions to be
tolerated. Among young people, whose sense of self-esteem is particularly vulnerable, there is an especially heightened concern with being "disrespected." Many inner-city young men in particular crave respect to such a degree that they will risk their lives to attain and maintain it.

The issue of respect is thus closely tied to whether a person has an inclination to be violent, even as a victim. In the wider society, people may not feel the need to retaliate physically after an attack, even though they are aware that they have been degraded or taken advantage of. They may feel a great need to defend themselves during an attack or to behave in such a way as to deter aggression (middle-class people certainly can and do become victims of street-oriented youths), but they are much more likely than street-oriented people to feel they can walk away from a possible altercation with their self-esteem intact. Some people may even have the strength of character to flee, without any thought that their self-respect or esteem will be diminished.

In impoverished inner-city black communities, however, particularly among young males and perhaps increasingly among females, such flight would be extremely difficult. To run away would likely leave one's self-esteem in tatters. Hence, people often feel constrained not only to stand up during and at least attempt to resist an assault but also to "pay back" — to seek revenge — after a successful assault on their person. This may include going to get a weapon. One young man described a typical scenario:

So he'll [the victim] ask somebody do they got a gun for sale or somethin' like that. And they'll say yeah and they say they want a buck [a hundred dollars] for it or somethin' like that. So he'll go and get a hundred dollars and buy that gun off of him and then wait until he see the boy that he was fightin' or got into an argument [with] or somethin' like that. He'll sneak and shoot 'im or somethin' like that and then move away from his old neighborhood....

Or if they already have a gun, they gonna just go get their gun and buy a bullet. And then they gonna shoot the person, whoever they was fightin', or whoever did somethin' to 'im. Then they'll probably keep the gun and get into a couple more rumbles and shoot people. And the gun'll probably have like nine bodies on it. Then they decide to sell the gun, and the other person'll get caught with it.

Or one's relatives might get involved, willingly or not. The youth continues:

For instance, me. I was livin' in the projects [public housing] on Grant Street, right, and I think my brother is fightin' one of the other person's brother or cousin. Me and my brother look just alike — they thought I was my
brother — and they try to throw me down the elevator shaft, but they threw me down three flights of steps. And I hit my face on a concrete rung, chipped my tooth, and got five stitches in my lip. And see, [later] my uncle killed one of them, and that's why he don't time in jail now. Because they tried to kill me.

The very identity and self respect — the honor — of many inner-city youths is often intricately tied up with the way they perform on the streets during and after such encounters. Moreover, this outlook reflects the circumscribed opportunities of the inner-city poor. Generally, people outside the ghetto have other ways of gaining status and regard, and thus, they do not feel so dependent on such physical displays.

By Trial of Manhood

Among males on the street, these concerns about things and identity have come to be expressed in the concept of "manhood." Manhood in the inner-city street means taking the prerogatives of men with respect to strangers, other men, and women — being distinguished as a man. It implies physicality and a certain ruthlessness. Respect and respect are associated with this concept in large part because of its practical application: If others have little or no regard for a person's manhood, his very life and that of his loved ones could be in jeopardy. But there is a chicken-and-egg aspect to this situation: One's physical safety is more likely to be jeopardized in public because manhood is associated with respect. The "man" becomes the target of others who want to prove their own manhood. In other words, an existential link has been created between the idea of manhood and one's self-esteem, so that it has become hard to say which is primary. For many inner-city youths, manhood and respect are flip sides of the same coin; physical and psychological well-being are inseparable, and both require a sense of control, of being in charge.

The operating assumption is that a man, especially a real man, knows what other men know — the code of the streets. And if one is not a real man, one is somehow diminished as a person, and there are certain valued things one simply does not deserve. There is thus believed to be a certain justice to the code, since it is presumed that everyone has the opportunity to know it. Implicit in this presumption is the belief that everybody is held responsible for being familiar with the code. If the victim of a mugging, for example, does not know the code and so responds "wrong," the perpetrator may feel justified even in killing him and may feel no remorse. He may think, "Too bad, but it's his fault. He should have known better." At the
same time, it is assumed that, if attacked, a victim is entitled to retribution and may feel no compunction about retaliating even with deadly force. According to one youth who tries to avoid such encounters:

They ain’t got no conscience. They ain’t got no kind of conscience. Like, say, what happens if you punch me, and I’m a devious person, and I’m mad and I see you again on the street and I got a gun. I’ll shoot you and I won’t have no kind of conscience because I shot you ‘cause I’m payin’ back for what you done did to me.

So when a boy or man ventures outside, he must adopt the code — a kind of shield, really — to prevent others from messing with him. In these circumstances, it is easy for people to think they are being tried or tested by others even when this is not the case. In such a climate, it is sensed that something extremely valuable is at stake in every interaction, and people are thus encouraged to rise to the occasion, particularly with strangers. For people who are unfamiliar with the code — generally people who live outside the inner city — the concern with respect in the most ordinary interactions can be frightening and incomprehensible. But for those who are invested in the code, the clear object of their demeanor is to discourage strangers from even thinking about challenging them or testing their manhood. And the sense of power that attends the ability to deter others can be alluring even to those who know the code without being heavily invested in it — the decent inner-city youths. Thus, a boy who has been leading a basically decent life can, in trying circumstances, suddenly resort to deadly force.

Central to the issue of manhood is the widespread belief that one of the most effective ways of gaining respect is to manifest "nerve." Nerve is shown when someone takes a person’s possessions (the more valuable, the better), messes with someone’s woman, throws the first punch, gets in someone’s face, or pulls a trigger. Its proper display helps on the spot to check others who would violate one’s person and also helps to build a reputation that works to prevent future challenges. But since such a show of nerve is a forceful expression of disrespect toward the person on the receiving end, the victim may be greatly offended and seek to retaliate with equal if not greater force. A display of nerve, therefore, can easily provoke a life-threatening response, and the background knowledge of that possibility has often been incorporated into the concept of nerve.

True nerve exposes a lack of fear of dying. Many feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over the principle of respect. In fact, among the hard-core street-oriented, the clear risk of violent death may be preferable to being
dissed by another. The youths who have internalized this attitude and convincingly display it in their public bearing are among the most threatening people of all, for it is commonly assumed that they fear no man. As the people of the community say, "They are the baddest dudes on the street." They often 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 somebody else's life. Not to be afraid to die is the quid pro quo of being able to take somebody else's life— for the right reasons, if the situation demands it. When others believe this is one's position, it gives one a real sense of power on the streets. Such credibility is what many inner-city youths strive to achieve, whether they are decent or street-oriented, both because of its practical defensive value and because of the positive way it makes them feel about themselves. The difference between the decent and the street-oriented youth is that the decent youth makes a conscious decision to appear tough and manly; in another setting—with teachers, say, or at his part-time job—he can be polite and deferential. The street-oriented youth, on the other hand, has made the concept of manhood a part of his very identity; he has difficulty manipulating it—it often controls him instead.

Girls and Boys

Increasingly, teenage girls are mimicking the males and trying to have their own version of "manhood." Their goal is the same—to get respect, to be recognized as capable of setting or maintaining a certain standard. They try to achieve this end in the ways that have been established by the males, including posturing, abusive language, and the use of violence to resolve disputes; but the issues for the girls are different. Although conflicts over turf and status exist among the girls, the majority of disputes seem rooted in assessments of beauty (which girl in a group is the cutest?), competition over boyfriends, and the attempts to regulate other people's knowledge of and opinions about a girl's behavior or that of someone close to her, especially her mother.

A major cause of conflicts among girls is "he say, she say." This practice begins in the early school years and continues through high school. It occurs when "people," particularly girls, talk about others, thus putting their "business in the streets." Usually, one girl will say something negative about another in the group, most often behind the person's back. The remarks will then get back to the person talked about. She may retaliate or her friends may feel required to "take up for" her. In essence, this is a form
of group gossiping in which individuals are negatively assessed and evaluated. As with much gossip, the things said may or may not be true, but the point is that such imputations can cast aspersions on a person's good name. The accused is required to defend herself against the slander, which can result in arguments and fights, often over little of real substance. Here again is the problem of low self-esteem, which encourages youngsters to be highly sensitive to slights and to be vulnerable to feeling easily disdled. To avenge the dising, a fight is usually necessary.

Because boys are believed to control violence, girls tend to defer to them in situations of conflict. Often, if a girl is attacked or feels slighted, she will get a brother, uncle, or cousin to do her fighting for her. Increasingly, however, girls are doing their own fighting and are even asking their male relatives to teach them how to fight. Some girls form groups that attack other girls or take things from them. A hard-core segment of inner-city girls inclined to violence seems to be developing. As one thirteen-year-old girl in a detention center for youths who have committed violent acts told me, "To get people to leave you alone, you gotta fight. Talking don't always get you out of stuff." One major difference between girls and boys is that girls rarely use guns. Their fights are therefore not life-or-death struggles. Girls are not often willing to put their lives on the line for their version of manhood. The ultimate form of respect on the male-dominated inner-city streets is thus reserved for men.

"Going for Bad"

In the most fearsome youths, such a cavalier attitude toward death grows out of a very limited view of life. Many are uncertain about how long they are going to live and believe they could die violently at any time. They accept this fate; they live on the edge. Their manner conveys the message that nothing intimidates them; whatever turns the encounter takes, they maintain their attack — rather like a pit bull, whose spirit many such boys admire. The demonstration of such tenacity shows "heart" and earns their respect.

This fearlessness has implications for law enforcement. Many street-oriented boys are much more concerned about the threat of "justice" at the hands of a peer than at the hands of the police. According to one young man trying to lead a decent life, "When they shoot somebody, they have so much confidence that they gonna get away from the cop, you see. If they don't, then they be all mad and sad and cryin' and all that 'cause they got time in jail." At the same time, however, many feel not only that they have
little to lose by going to prison but that they have something to gain. The toughening-up one experiences in prison can actually enhance one's reputation on the streets. Hence, the system loses influence over the hard core who are without jobs and who have little perceptible stake in the system. If mainstream society has done nothing for them, they counter by making sure it can likewise do nothing to them.

At the same time, however, a competing view maintains that true nerve consists in backing down, walking away from a fight, and going on with one's business. One fights only in self-defense. This view emerges from the decent philosophy that life is precious, and it is an important part of the socialization process common in decent homes. A strategy strongly associated with hope, it discourages violence as the primary means of resolving disputes and encourages youngsters to accept nonviolence and talk as confrontational strategies. But if "the deal goes down," self-defense is greatly encouraged. When there is enough positive support for this orientation, either in the home or among one's peers, then nonviolence has a chance to prevail. But it prevails at the cost of relinquishing a claim to being bad and tough, and it therefore sets a young person up as at the very least alienated from street-oriented peers and quite possibly a target of derision or even violence.

Although the nonviolent orientation rarely overcomes the impulse to strike back in an encounter, it does introduce a certain confusion and so can prompt a measure of soul-searching — or even profound ambivalence. Did the person back down with his or her respect intact or did he or she back down only to be judged a "punk" — a person lacking manhood? Should he or she have acted? Should he or she have hit the other person in the mouth? These questions beset many young men and women during public confrontations. What is the right thing to do? In the quest for honor, respect, and local status — which few young people are uninterested in — common sense most often prevails, thus leading many to opt for the tough approach, in which they enact their own particular versions of the display of nerve. The presentation of oneself as rough and tough is very often quite acceptable until one is tested. And then that presentation may help individuals pass the test, because it will cause fewer questions to be asked about what they did and why. It is hard for people to explain why they lost the fight or why they backed down. Hence many will strive to appear to go for bad, while hoping they will never be tested. But when they are tested, the outcome of the situation may quickly be out of their hands, as they become wrapped up in the circumstances of the moment.
Conclusion

The attitudes of the wider society are deeply implicated in the code of the streets. Most people in inner-city communities are not totally invested in the code; but the significant minority of hard-core street youths who do embrace it have to maintain the code in order to establish reputations, because they have—or feel they have—few other ways to assert themselves. For these young people, the standards of the street code are the only game in town. The extent to which some children—particularly those who through upbringing have become most alienated and lack strong and conventional social support—experience, feel, and internalize racist rejection and contempt from mainstream society may strongly encourage them to express contempt for the more conventional society in turn. In dealing with this contempt and rejection, some youngsters will consciously invest themselves and their considerable mental resources in what amounts to an oppositional culture to preserve themselves and their self-respect. Once they do this, any respect they might be able to garner in the wider system pales in comparison with the respect available in the local system; thus, they often lose interest in even attempting to negotiate the mainstream system.

At the same time, many less-alienated young blacks have assumed a street-oriented demeanor as a way of expressing their blackness while really embracing a much more moderate way of life; they, too, want a nonviolent setting in which to live and raise a family. These decent people are trying hard to be a part of the mainstream culture, but the racism—both real and perceived—that they encounter helps to legitimate the oppositional culture; and so, on occasion, they adopt street behavior. In fact, depending on the demands of the situation, many people in the community slip back and forth between decent and street behavior.

A vicious cycle has thus been formed. The hopelessness and alienation that many young inner-city black men and women feel, largely because of endemic joblessness and persistent racism, fuel the violence they engage in. This violence serves to confirm the negative feelings many whites and some middle-class blacks harbor toward the ghetto poor, further legitimating the oppositional culture and the code of the streets in the eyes of many poor young blacks. Unless this cycle is broken, attitudes on both sides will become increasingly entrenched, and the violence—which claims victims black and white, poor and affluent—will only escalate.
REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL SOURCES


