

Testimony before the  
**House** Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families  
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Good morning. I would like to tell you about the research that I have conducted with young, inner-city males concerning their careers in schooling, employment, and criminal activity. I am a socio-cultural anthropologist by training and my studies have used intensive case study methods relying on in-depth interviews and participant observation. I have conducted a number of such **studies** with inner-city teenagers in New York City over the past fifteen years, but the study I want to concentrate on this morning was conducted in the early 1980's under a grant from the National Institute of Justice. We identified and built rapport with criminally involved young males in three low-income neighborhoods of Brooklyn and developed profiles of their involvements with crime and drugs as they aged from their early teens to their early twenties. The research results I am going to describe pertain to about a dozen young males in each of the three neighborhoods.

The three neighborhoods differed in **race** and ethnicity, one being predominantly black, one predominantly Puerto Rican, and one predominantly white. I understand that this **committee** is particularly interesting in trying understand the high rates of crime among young black males, and I will focus on them.

However, since the value of our studies is that they are comparative, I will explain both similarities and differences between the young minority males we studied and their non-minority peers.

Before I describe our findings, let me briefly describe the existing state of social research on juvenile delinquency, its relation to public policy, and the kinds of new insights into these questions that I think are made possible by the rather unique nature of our comparative, neighborhood-based studies.

It used to be widely accepted both among social scientists and among the general public that poverty, racial discrimination, and residence in deteriorated inner-city environments were major causes of crime. During the 1960's, many social programs based on these premises were enacted which provided a wide range of innovative services attempting to reverse these assumed causal linkages. I think that many among the public still share these assumptions, but some influential academics have challenged the idea that poverty, discrimination, and segregation cause crime and other pathologies. At the same time, public support for crime prevention programs based on enhancing economic opportunities within inner-city neighborhoods has declined significantly.

The reasons for these changes are too complex for me to describe in detail here, but I would like to note one characteristic of most of the recent research that has been cited to

debunk these previously widely held assumptions. Most of this research has focused on the characteristics of individuals to the almost total neglect of the characteristics of communities. Without looking at the communities in which people grow up, it is impossible to assess their behavior, such as their supposed "choices" to work or engage in crime as a means of obtaining income. It is only by examining the choices that are actually present within given local environments that we can validly understand the behavior of individuals. It is from this perspective that I will now describe our findings.

The two minority neighborhoods we studied had much lower income levels and much higher crime rates than the white neighborhood, which was basically working class rather than poor. What we found, however, was that the crime careers of youths in all three neighborhoods started off very similarly and diverged over time as these youths confronted very basic differences in economic opportunity as well as differences in local-level social control.

Both the white and the minority youths we studied engaged in acts of non-violent theft and in extensive and sometimes deadly street-fighting while in their early and mid-teens. As they grew older, however, many of the minority youths became much more heavily involved in crime as a source of fairly regular income. Their crimes grew increasingly systematic and violent as they passed from their middle to their late teens.

The white youths we studied did not follow this route as much, for two reasons, both related to characteristics of their local neighborhood. First, they had much more access to youth employment, usually part-time and off-the-books and almost entirely located through family members and neighbors who were already employed in these businesses. Remember, we are talking about persons still of school age. Their access to this employment had nothing whatever to do with superior educational achievement. In fact, some of them had basic literacy problems and fully half of them left school without diplomas.

Not only did these white youths have better access to employment than their minority peers, they also encountered much stricter local-level social control. Teenagers who steal and sell drugs tend to begin doing so close to home. In this white, working-class neighborhood, such behavior was not tolerated. Local adults either retaliated themselves directly, vigilante-style, against local youths who got too far out of hand, or they called the police. Their close relationship with the local police precinct was often based on ties between family and neighbors, since a number of police officers lived in the neighborhood.

In contrast, the minority youths faced a much different situation with respect both to employment opportunities and the local social control environment. They had few family or neighborhood-based connections to part-time jobs. About half the households in their neighborhoods lived in poverty and were

supported by welfare. Those residents who did work usually worked at very insecure and low-paying jobs. High rates of female-headed households in these areas were another result of the unavailability of decent employment in these areas, since adult males without stable employment do not make very desirable heads of households. This household pattern had profound consequences for the control of local youths who became involved in crime. There were simply not enough adult males attached to households to control predatory youths, with the result that violent youths controlled the streets to a significant extent. At a certain point, however, they did encounter resistance, in the form either of an armed adult male resident of the neighborhood or of an authorized representative of the law. At this point, they began to move outside their own neighborhoods to prey upon people in the subways and in downtown commercial districts.

As they reached their later teens, many of these youths had learned to rely on crime as a fairly regular source of income, but most eventually also encountered consequences: violent retaliations, arrests and jail and prison sentences. At this point, many began to cease or at least deintensify their criminal involvements. It is well known that crime rates decline sharply with age, for members of all racial and ethnic groups.

I have not had time to describe in detail patterns of drug use and sales among these youths, but I should note that, while

use patterns did not differ so strikingly among the neighborhoods, reliance on drug-selling as a primary source of income did and was much more common in the minority neighborhoods. The advent of crack in the mid-1980's has led to a significant increase in violence and dependence on the illegal economy in all three neighborhoods but has intensified the disparity in the quality of life between the minority neighborhoods and the white working-class area even further.

I think these findings have some important implications for social policy. It has been traditional to think of crime control strategies based on opportunity enhancement as fundamentally opposed to those based on tougher criminal justice sanctions. Yet, when we look at the dynamics of local neighborhoods such as those I have described, I think it is apparent that communities that have effective local-level social control are those that have a stable employment base. Decent jobs make possible intact families with sufficient resources to build and maintain safe environments. Even the poor, minority residents we studied did attempt to raise their children properly and control their environments, yet they lacked the means to do so.

The policies I think most appropriate for dealing with high rates of youth crime in the inner cities include innovative youth service policies which attempt to improve families' connections with schools and other services; the provision of extensive pre-employment and employment services linked to local schools; and the development of criminal justice policies

which allow local residents to work with the police and other authorities to create safer environments for raising children.