The Labeling Hype

Coming of Age in the Era of Mass Incarceration

The disparaging view of young people has promulgated the rise of a punishing and (in)security industry whose discourses, technologies, and practices have become visible across a wide range of spaces and institutions.

—Henry Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society*, 2009

Overall, ethnic minority youths, gang or non-gang, resent the “dissing” (disrespect) meted out by patrol officers. . . . Once youths have begun to reject the law and its underlying values, they often develop a resistance orientation and take a defiant and destructive stance.


Tyrell, a Black youth, and Jose, a Latino youth, both sixteen years old, sat on a splintered wood bench at the bus stop on the corner of 35th and International, in front of Hernandez Meat Market. Right above them, a pig and the head of a cow, painted on the meat-market wall, stared straight down at them. A street sign, adjacent to the bus stop, read, “All activity on this block is being recorded.” I leaned back on the sign, as I observed and listened to Tyrell and Jose. They looked around: Jose stared
at people in cars, while Tyrell looked at a group of four teenage Black boys walking across the street.

I was shadowing Tyrell and Jose as they made their way home from school. Tyrell lived close to 65th Avenue; and Jose, past 80th Avenue. They were having a conversation about their principal. “Man! Mr. Schwartz is an asshole! He be on one, man [gets crazy]!” Tyrell told Jose. Jose rubbed his head and replied, “Dude just called the police on me today.” When I asked why, he answered, “Cause he said I was threatening him. But all I did was tell him that if he called the police, they had nothing on me. . . . He said, ‘Oh, yeah, all right. Let’s see.’ And then he called them.” Jose dug into the baggy black jeans’ pocket that sat close to his knee and handed me a yellow citation given to him by the police officer. At the top it read, “Notice to Appear,” with the number 0188546XX. In the middle was Jose’s violation: “CPC 647 Dist. Peace.” “Dude [police officer] came by and just started writing me a ticket. He said he would arrest me, but he had some other shit to do.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Shit, disturbed the peace at school. . . . I talked back to the principal. That’s what I get.”

Tyrell responded, “Homey, that’s nothing. You should see all the times they’ve stopped me for little shit, like looking at them crazy or walking down the street.”

During three years of observations I counted forty-two citations imposed on the boys. Loitering, disturbing the peace, drinking in public, not wearing a properly fitted bicycle helmet, and violating curfew were among the violations they received citations for. Minor citations for “little shit” played a crucial role in pipelining many of the young men in this study deeper into the criminal justice system. Some of the boys missed their court dates; others appeared in court but could not pay their citations. This led to warrants for arrest or probation. Warrants and probationary status marked the young men for further criminalization. Police, school personnel, and probation officers would graduate the boys to a new level of policing and harassment. Being on probation, for instance, meant that the boys could be stopped, searched, or reported, at any given moment. Probation status provided the youth control complex a carte blanche in its endeavor to
stigmatize, punish, and exclude young people. When a young person is on probation, he is left with few rights; he can be stopped and searched for no reason, and he can be arrested for noncriminal transgressions such as hanging out with his friends or walking in the wrong part of the neighborhood.

In this chapter, I argue that labeling is not just a process whereby schools, police, probation officers, and families stigmatize the boys, and, in turn, their delinquency persists or increases. In the era of mass incarceration, labeling is also a process by which agencies of social control further stigmatize and mark the boys in response to their original label. This in turn creates a vicious cycle that multiplies the boys’ experiences with criminalization, what I call a labeling hype. I found that the boys in this study felt outcast, shamed, and unaccepted, sometimes leading them to a sense of hopelessness and a “deviant self-concept.” In addition, I also found that the young men were caught in a spiral of punitive responses imposed by institutions which labeled them as deviant. Being labeled or marked for minor transgressions would place the boys at risk for being granted additional, more serious labels.

Institutions became involved in a spiral of criminalization that began with informal, trivial labels, such as “This kid comes from a bad family and is at-risk.” This label alone would sometimes lead to more detrimental labels, such as “This kid is delinquent, and he is a risk.” Criminologist Paul Hirschfield argues that labels have little impact on the individual identities of marginalized black males, but they have a big effect on young people’s social mobility. He posits that “mass criminalization” is responsible for “social exclusion” and “diminished social expectations.” In the era of mass incarceration, labeling not only generates criminality; it also perpetuates criminalization.

Previous studies in urban ethnography have done an exceptional job at describing blocked opportunity and its consequences. However, criminalization as a system that contributes to this blocked opportunity has yet to be analyzed. This system had such an extensive influence on the lives of the boys in this study that many of them were criminalized even when they were victims of crime. Criminalization became internalized by many of the boys, even leading some to believe that they did not deserve protection from the police. Tyrell’s and Jose’s life stories show the process by which young men come of age in Oakland being labeled as deviant.
and eventually being treated like criminals. In this respect, they are representative of many of the other boys in this study.

Historian Robin Kelley argues that academics have contributed to society’s understanding of poor Black populations as pathological and nihilistic, by creating stories that only focus on compensatory behaviors. Sometimes, Kelley argues, researchers overemphasize and exaggerate the resistant and adaptive strategies of the poor and present them to the mainstream world as indicators of pathologies or as negative responses to a system that victimizes them. By focusing on the boys’ worldviews about their negative encounters with social control agents and by looking at the creative responses they develop, I hope to move beyond understanding marginalized populations as only victims, or pathological, or compensatory conduct driven. This endeavor begins by paying close attention to the life stories of these young people and their perspectives on the structural predicaments in which they live.

The bus arrived. Tyrell and Jose changed their conversation about police and citations. Tyrell asked me, “So you still wanna go to the Ville?” I told him I did. The “Ville” was a low-income housing project located on 66th Avenue and International. Tyrell spent most of his childhood there. Although he had recently moved out, he hung out there every day with his friends, in an alley that residents refer to as “Death Alley.” We got on the bus and remained silent, observing the twenty or so other teenagers sardined inside. Tyrell and I got off the bus and silently nodded to Jose, who remained on the bus heading further down International. When we arrived at the Ville, I asked Tyrell to give me a tour, from his perspective, and tell me about growing up in this environment.

Tyrell’s Too Tall

Since the late 1980s, the Ville housing project has been notorious for its crime rate. Famous former residents include Felix Mitchell, who established one of the most influential crack-cocaine gang empires in the country there during the ’80s. Mitchell was killed in prison in 1986, but he is still a legend in this community. The 1991 film *New Jack City* used Mitchell’s life as the basis for one of its main characters, Nino Brown.
Tyrell and his friends still talk about Mitchell: “Mitchell was a true G [gangster]. . . . He is like the only role model we got,” said Tyrell. This statement is indicative of the lack of programs in schools or in the community, which could have exposed young people to professional and college-educated role models.

The Ville, notorious for its drug trafficking and violence, consisted of rows and rows of two-story, shoebox-shaped apartment buildings, with metal window and door gates—the epitome of West Coast housing projects. The new two-tone light-beige and pink paint and fancy geometric trim on the top of some of the recently remodeled buildings belied the bullet holes in apartment windows, the homemade tin-foil crack pipes laying on the lawns, and the dire poverty of little kids fighting to ride the only neighborhood bike. The city had recently demolished similar buildings down the street and in their place developed modern townhouse-style projects, shaped like squares, with attractive geometrical rooftops and three-tone light-beige, yellow, and green paint jobs. These new housing developments were juxtaposed with drug dealers standing at the corner, with middle-aged crack addicts pacing about in desperation and the bloody street fights that constantly took place in the Ville. The millions of dollars spent on physical upgrades could not bandage the persistence of violence, crime, and criminalization that could only be transformed by implementing programs which could change the social order and social control of the neighborhood, not just its physical appearance. If certain social contexts breed criminality, then certain social contexts breed criminalization. The cycle of crime and violence cannot be addressed by changing the appearance of a place and incarcerating its denizens; we must start by changing the social contexts that provide actors the resources for partaking in specific behaviors and by transforming the ways in which we perceive and treat—criminalize or incorporate—these populations.

As we walked around the Ville, Tyrell pointed to different locations that ignited his memory: where he first got high, where he first witnessed a murder in Death Alley, and where the police brutalized him for the very first time. Tyrell looked at me when we got to “death alley,” an alley that residents understood as a space where deadly violence was a regular presence, and asked, “What do you want to know?” The space seemed to spark a desire in Tyrell to share his story. We sat on a giant piece of bro-
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ken concrete which was used to form a retaining wall between the alley and a now-abandoned house.

Tyrell was raised by his father, John. According to Tyrell, his mother had left them for a man who made a good living selling crack. “She told my dad, ‘You ain’t shit, can’t even get a job,’ so she bounced.” Soon after, she became addicted to crack. According to Tyrell, his mother’s boyfriend was also a crack user and passed the addiction on to her. Tyrell’s mother showed up sporadically, asking him and his grandmother for money to support her addiction. “She smokes so much crack, she calls herself ‘Bubbles,’” Tyrell told me. On another day, when I was hanging out with Tyrell in Death Alley, where he and his friends would convene every afternoon, Tyrell’s mother came around the corner. She asked him, “Have you seen Mo?” Tyrell nodded, looking embarrassed. She asked me for money, and I told her I would give Tyrell some money on her behalf. She thanked me for what she perceived as my helping her son and walked off, through an alley onto an adjacent block. This situation was not unique to Tyrell: eighteen of the boys in the study reported having at least one parent who had problems with drugs or alcohol.

Tyrell was homeless for part of his childhood, sleeping in cars, shelters, crack houses, and in the parking lot of the Ville. In Tyrell’s account, the housing authority did not want to provide his father housing. “Because he was not a woman . . . they told him that he had no reason for not having a job.” Tyrell’s dad was a mechanic but could not find work at the time:

He worked on other people’s cars, but they were broke too. They gave him five, ten dollars, but he couldn’t pay rent with this. So we ended up at other people’s houses or in our car most of the time. . . . One day a crack head [addict] told us she was moving back to Atlanta. She said that we could live in her apartment if we wanted, but we had to pay rent. This is when we got our own place. I was hella happy knowing that I would have my own place. That’s crazy, I was happy, ’cause I was gonna live in the projects. . . . It was hella fun living there.

Despite the surrounding violence, drug abuse, and poverty—as well as the consequential trauma, homelessness, and hunger—Tyrell remem-
bers having a fun childhood. His father taught him about being respectful to others and obeying the law no matter how poor they were. “Pops wouldn’t steal from nobody. He would rather starve than steal,” Tyrell told me. John attempted to keep Tyrell sheltered from the effects of poverty; sometimes it worked. John taught him that some police officers were good and encouraged him to be the cop when he played cops and robbers. By the second or third grade, all his friends made fun of him for playing the cop. By then, most of his peers believed that the police were a negative force in the community, but Tyrell still believed that police had the power to “take the bad people away from the Ville.”

Despite not having the resources to provide “proper” parenting, such as help with homework or money for school trips or work clothes, the majority of the boys’ parents attempted to instill positive values in their children, even if some of them did not have a standard definition of mainstream values. Often, parents became desperate in their failed attempts to guide their children. This led some parents to ask probation, police, or school officials to teach them strategies for parenting their children. As these institutions advised desperate individuals on how to parent their children, they passed on their punitive approaches to treating deviant and delinquent behavior. In a sense, they taught parents how to criminalize their own children.

Sociologist Ross Matsueda finds that informal labels, negative treatment, and stigma derived from a perception of criminality are imposed on individuals who have committed crime but also are imposed on individuals who are from a group or community perceived to be criminogenic. Matsueda finds that these informal labels have an effect on the labeled individual’s perceptions of how others see him. Matsueda also finds that some parents actively participate in the process of labeling their children. 9

In chapter 4, I discuss the ways in which some parents label and criminalize their children, often under the influence of the criminal justice system.

In fourth grade, an older Tyrell and his homies would walk a few miles to the Oakland Coliseum, located two miles from the Ville, when the Oakland Athletics or Oakland Raiders played games. “We would walk like twenty blocks to the Coliseum to watch the games. They wouldn’t let us in, so we stood outside on the very top and looked through the cracks between the fence. The guys [players] were this little [he measures about an inch with his thumb and index finger], but we still got to see ‘em, they hit
a homerun.” Police chased Tyrell and his friends off the Coliseum grounds. He could not understand why they were so aggressive toward him, when he was “just trying to watch a game.” According to Tyrell, police threatened him and his friends with arrest if they continued to loiter at the Coliseum.

By the sixth grade, Tyrell felt that he could no longer exist outside the violence that defined the Ville. “Sixth grade is where it all went down. Cops started beating on me, fools [peers] started getting hyphy [crazy] with me. I had to get into, um, lots of fights,” Tyrell said. He told me that his height contributed to his forced entry into street life. In the sixth grade, Tyrell was the tallest student in school. He remembered going into class on the first day of sixth grade, and his teacher, Mrs. Turpin, would not stop staring at him. Tyrell became bothered and asked her, “What you lookin’ at?” She used his comment as a lesson to the class that everyone was to respect the teacher. She kicked him out of class and told the principal she was “threatened” by Tyrell. Twenty-two of the boys reported feeling as if their teachers were scared of them.

Tyrell believes that the teacher was not the only person who saw him as a threat, because of his height, when he was younger. In his account, because he looked like a man by age twelve, he also became a target of constant police surveillance and random checks for drugs or criminal suspicions:

The five-o [police] stopped me all the time. They checked me for drugs and guns most of the time. At first I was scared and told them I was only twelve. They didn’t believe me and kept asking me where I was hiding the drugs. That made me hella mad ’cause I wasn’t slanging [selling drugs] or anything. On mama’s [I promise] I wasn’t slanging. I said, fuck it. So a few months later I started selling weed.

Tyrell’s perspective was that he could not control his height, physical appearance, or the perceptions that others had of him. The one thing he could control was making the choice to sell drugs to support himself. Tyrell’s decision to sell drugs is representative of the patterns that I found among all the boys during their first arrest. They chose to commit a crime, consciously calculating the potential risk of arrest and incarceration. Many of the boys came to this assessment after believing that they had no other choice, that they had nothing to lose.
In my observations, I noticed that Tyrell had a compelling presence. Police officers whom he had never encountered before targeted Tyrell more often than the other Black and Latino youths I hung out with. Over the course of three years, I watched or heard from Tyrell about being stopped by police twenty-one times, more than any other youth in this study. Most of the time, these stops ended with just a short conversation. But sometimes, police officers seemed threatened by Tyrell, and they either handcuffed him, pulled a gun on him, or put him in the patrol car.

Meanwhile, according to Tyrell, his father increasingly took his stress and anger out on Tyrell. John grew frustrated at his inability to find a steady job. Despite his charisma and exceptional mechanic skills, he could not find regular work. He was only able to find employment in the local informal economy: poor local residents would bring their cars to him for repairs but were not able to pay enough for him to make a living. In the Ville, no matter what time of day, I always saw John working on someone’s car. He was always cheerful and joked around with everyone in the neighborhood. While John had all the characteristics of a supportive father, his lack of economic resources led Tyrell to realize that he would have to “hustle” for his own money:

I told him I had a little money, and he knew where I got it from. He got hella mad and beat me down. He told me he did not want me selling that shit. I told him it was only weed, but he didn’t care. He told me that I would end up selling crack. I think he didn’t want me to start smoking that . . . I stopped selling it for a while, but we both were broke. This is when I started selling at school again but just didn’t tell him.

In Tyrell’s worldview, he made a conscious choice to commit crime within the context of the limited resources available to him and the vilification he encountered at school and with police. To the extent that material resources became scarce, and he became constructed as a deviant, he calculated that his only choice was to sell drugs. His father’s inability to provide for him, and the stigma that school officials and police officers imposed on him, left Tyrell feeling trapped. In this constricted location, Tyrell’s options were few, and one of the only lucrative options available at the time was to sell drugs. He dropped out of school and dedicated
himself to making money on the streets. Breaking the law was his decision, yet his hand was largely forced by overdetermined structural conditions. In Tyrell’s perspective, poverty and criminalization “pushed” him into selling drugs, but he also consciously took this “jump,” knowing that this was one of the only ways he could make some money.¹⁰

Tyrell had agency to decide whether he would commit crime or not. But a system of punitive social control established a context for Tyrell in which he felt disconnected from his community, stigmatized, and socially outcast, leading him to see criminality as almost inevitable. As such, Tyrell was punished into believing something external to his sense of self: that he was a criminal, that he had nothing at stake, and that he “might as well handle business”—sell drugs and victimize others—since he has “nothing to lose.” All the young men in this study believed that they were inherently criminal: their interactions with the world around them had led them to internalize a foreign concept, that criminality was part of their persona. Tyrell, like many other marginalized youth, experienced a life-course process in which he was systematically punished into believing that he had nothing to lose. In the context of punitive social control, some marginalized boys are fostered by punishment, at every stage in their development, encountering a social world that, in their account, treats them as suspects and criminals.

Although I was not present during the boys’ various stages of childhood development, the three years I spent in the field taught me that their perceptions of a punitive social order were rational and reasonable. One only needs to spend a few hours with marginalized young people in their everyday settings to realize how much they are policed, stigmatized, and treated differently from other citizens. Their stories were corroborated by observations of similar events that took place during my time in the field.

Jose Learns the Code

Three days after that day with Tyrell, I repeated my bus-stop routine of catching up with Jose and Tyrell. I met them at the same bus stop, conversed with them, and rode the bus. This time, I got off the bus with Jose. We walked to a liquor store on the corner of 80th and International, purchased two Coca-Colas and two bags of Flamin’ Hot Fries, and leaned against the
store’s wall outside, staring at a 1980s white delivery truck that had been used as a canvas by the neighborhood youth to tag their street names and territories. Jose proudly stared at his tag name, “Topo,” written in black spray paint on the belly of the delivery truck. We walked a few blocks to his apartment complex, where we sat on the concrete steps. After we sat idly for about twenty minutes, I asked Jose to tell me about growing up there.

Jose had lived his whole life in the heart of the neighborhood that hosted one of Oakland’s largest gangs, which I will call the East Side Gangsters (ESG). A few times in his early teenage years, his mother attempted to move him to Berkeley, a neighboring city she thought might be safer. However, the high rent prices always forced the family to return to the same apartment in Oakland. Their apartment complex was the main hangout for the gang. The complex sat adjacent to a neighborhood liquor store, where drug dealers, drug addicts, and gang members congregated. The apartment complex was shaped like a horseshoe, with three floors on each of the three sides. Clothes were hung to dry on the building’s loose metal rails; old tennis shoes hung from the electric lines that ran in front of the complex; and the small parking lot served as a soccer field for little kids, a car-repair area for unemployed men, a drug-stashing area for dealers, and, on the weekends, a dance ballroom for families celebrating baptisms, birthday parties, and quinceaneras. For as long as Jose could remember, the gang loitered in the parking lot of his apartment complex, often blocking the steps that led to Jose’s apartment. “They would, like, just do stupid stuff, like scare us [the apartment-building families], like shoot their guns and break shit and fight. I used to be hella scared of them,” explained Jose.

Jose remembered being terrified of the gang at age six or seven. He yearned for the police to protect him and his family from the gang. One day, when he was about ten years old, a teenage gang member pushed him as he returned home from buying a gallon of milk from the liquor store for his family. Jose fell back, landing on the gallon of milk. White fluid splattered everywhere. The teenage boys laughed at him. He began to cry. Soaked, he returned home to tell his mother. She yelled at him, “Pendejo [idiot], don’t you know we don’t have money for more milk?” Jose wanted the gang members to pay for another gallon of milk. He left the house and walked the neighborhood, looking for a police officer. When he found a patrol car, he told the officer about the incident and
wanted the officer to talk to the gang members and ask them to buy his family another gallon of milk. According to Jose, the officer laughed at him and told him, “I got better things to do.”

In my observations, I counted twenty-two instances when police were called to solve “minor” community problems such as disputes, bullying, harassment, and vandalism. In these twenty-two instances, police were only able or willing to intervene in these “minor” issues one time. In the other twenty-one cases, the officers either ignored residents who called or took down information and left the scene. This is indicative of the underpolicing that I found in this study. It may seem contradictory to say that young people are hypercriminalized by law enforcement but that their communities are also underpoliced. However, Jose’s experience and my observations confirm what many of the other boys reported: officers consistently police certain kinds of deviance and crime, while neglecting or ignoring other instances when their help is needed. One reason for this may be that officers follow the path of least resistance. They police easy targets, such as youth who visibly display their deviance and delinquency. These kids, whom police have come to criminalize, are sometimes the same ones who need help when they are victimized. Officers may be less sympathetic to those populations that they have rendered criminal. This process I refer to as the overpolicing-underpolicing paradox. Policing seemed to be a ubiquitous part of the lives of many of these marginalized young people; however, the law was rarely there to protect them when they encountered victimization.

Jose remembered the milk incident as a moment when he decided he would begin to take justice into his own hands. Jose recounted that after this incident, he began to develop a tough demeanor and increasingly turned to violence in an attempt to prevent victimization. He even joined the same gang that harassed him as a child.

VR: Being tough at a young age, did that protect you from being attacked?
JOSE: [Smacks his lips] You know, Vic, I tried to be hella hard, and I ended up getting beat down even more.
VR: Like, what were some things that you remember happening to you after trying to be tough?
Jose: So, that one time with the milk, I went and got a bat and went up to the dude that pushed me. He grabbed the bat from me and pushed me to the ground. I thought he was gonna crack me in the head. But he thought I was too little. I went home hella pissed off.

Sociologist Elijah Anderson finds that appearing aggressive and willing to commit violence is a self-defense process for some inner-city residents, part of what he calls “the code of the street.” This code offers individuals a way to protect themselves from victimization in violent communities and to build respect from others: “In service to this ethic, repeated displays of ‘nerve’ and ‘heart’ build or reinforce a credible reputation for vengeance that works to deter aggression and disrespect, which are sources of great anxiety on the inner-city street.”

Anderson goes on to show that the code of the street is embedded in everyday interaction across various institutions in the community: “The ‘code of the street’ is not the goal or product of any individual’s actions but is the fabric of everyday life, a vivid and pressing milieu within which all local residents must shape their personal routines, income strategies, and orientations to schooling, as well as their mating, parenting, and neighbor relations.”

Preemptively attacking an enemy to prevent future victimization is a key element of the code. Jose’s story is representative of the other boys who reported using the code in attempts to protect themselves. The code became amplified when Jose joined the gang, because now he became part of a group whose central motive was to collectively attack others to prevent and avenge victimization. Jose joined because he wanted to prevent being victimized by the neighborhood gang. A double bind became apparent in Jose’s endeavor to protect himself: while the gang protected Jose from specific kinds of victimization, such as being attacked by non-gang members, he experienced more victimization by rival gang members after joining the gang. The boys seemed to understand that preemptively attacking others would lead to further victimization. However, they chose to do so as a means of feeling a sense of justice for crimes that had been committed against them and gone unresolved. The code of the street was used as a form of street justice when the formal justice system had failed them.
Some of this victimization was at best ignored and at worst condoned by the police. Jose explained, for instance, that when he was a child he could not understand why the police wouldn’t just take all the gang members to jail since they all carried weapons. When he became a gang member, he came to his own conclusion. Jose explained that the police allowed them to loiter and sell drugs within the confines of their apartment complex because they were not visible to the public and therefore were not a problem the police would be held accountable for. During my time observing the complex while hanging out with Jose and his friends, I found a pattern that affirmed this assumption. Police were often stationed at the street corner but would never enter the complex, even when fights and drug use were clearly visible. However, once young people walked to the street corner, police would proceed to harass and arrest them, as is evident in the following story from one of the forty boys in the study, J.T., whom I met through Jose and who lived in the same complex: “When I was young, we didn’t know nothing about the laws, so they always tried to scare us when we were little, telling us they would take us to juvenile hall. ’Cause, like, we would throw rocks at cars or do lil’ things or even just hanging out on the corner. They would tell us to go home, and they would handcuff us if we didn’t listen. . . . We were like six [years old].” Thus, in this apartment complex, young boys, as early as age six, learned from police the spatial terrain in which they could be deviant and commit crime. Criminalization created spatial demarcation; police set parameters for where individuals could loiter or commit crime. The consequences of “playing” or “hanging out” beyond the established limits of invisible and marginalized spaces included brutalization, harassment, and arrest. For the older boys, this spatial demarcation structured the rules governing the code of the street: gang members were allowed to commit violence and victimize others, as long as the acts were committed within the confines of the apartment complex, which law enforcement underpoliced.

Residents suffered from the concentration of gang members who had been contained in these invisible spaces by police. Often, families—women and children—became the victims of a small handful of predatory gang members whom police neglected to apprehend. In this apartment complex, out of a group of about thirty boys, two of them were the ones that incited, provoked, and caused most of the assaults and crimes that
occurred while I was there. Everyone in the complex knew who they were, and many residents seemed anxious when these two boys came around. A mother who lived in the complex told me one day, as one of the boys, nicknamed Psycho, greeted us and walked up the street with a sharpened, broken metal table leg in his hand, “When that boy is locked up, the whole neighborhood is at peace. But now that he is out, all the boys have gone crazy.” The only party that did not seem to know that these two boys were responsible for most of the havoc in the complex was the police. By criminalizing all of the boys, the police, it seemed, could not tell the difference between predatory criminals and innocent young people trying to live their lives. By policing and harassing youth who stepped into the public sphere looking like a “gang member” or a “drug dealer,” and not learning from the community about the small group responsible for most crimes, police allowed a few predatory criminals to reign inside the marginalized space of the apartment complex. Police failed to intervene in crime that took place on the property, as if this area were outside their purview.

Police in School

For all the boys in the study, negative encounters with police were not restricted to the streets. When asked “What was your first experience with police?” all the boys commented that their first encounters with police took place in or near school. In Oakland, probation and police officers were stationed at or near many schools. A few of the boys attended a middle school that I visited while I shadowed them. On a few occasions, when I was invited to talk to some students about college, I noticed a police officer advising parents and students on academic matters, including courses to choose in preparation for high school, studying strategies, and career options. This example is representative of some of the many ways in which police and probation officers became involved in non-criminal-justice matters at school and in the community.

For Jose, police seemed to always be part of his school experience. His first encounter happened at school when he was eight years old. “The first time was in third grade. I had set the bathroom garbage can on fire. We ran away, and they caught us and handcuffed us. . . . I was just trying to do something funny. Police came and arrested me and my friends.
They only had a pair of handcuffs, and they handcuffed me and my friend together. This is the first time I got arrested. I also flunked that year.” Jose was not taken to jail; instead, his mother picked him up from the custody of the police office. However, his parents, his friends, and the school staff started to view him as a kid who had been arrested. Jose returned to school after the incident and remembers being treated differently by teachers and friends: “Teachers would tell me that if I kept messing up, they would have to call the cops again. I was really scared, so I tried to do good, but then [long pause] I don’t know what happened. I just started messing up anyway. . . . My friends started to respect me more, and they looked up to me. That kinda felt good. . . . That is probably why I messed up even more.”

From fourth to sixth grade, Jose consistently failed in his academic endeavors. He spent most of his time in detention rooms and “opportunity” classes designed to house the most disruptive students at school: “I would just sit there and stare at the wall or lay my head down to rest. The teacher would give me good grades just as long as I didn’t flash [go crazy].” The school-stationed police officer regularly checked on Jose. Over time, Jose says, school began to serve as a site of punishment and control, a space where teachers, police, probation officers, and administrators alike “just waited” for him “to fuck up.”

Jose believed that school served as a space that systematically denied him what sociologists call a “positive rite”—the universal human need to be perceived by others in a positive light, with consideration instead of degradation. In other words, in Jose’s account, school functioned as a space where his personal need to feel acknowledged and respected was systematically denied, and instead he was treated with indignity and disdain. In the context of juvenile crime, researchers have found that shame is an integral component of criminalization and is part of the vicious cycle that creates lifelong lawbreakers. Being shamed and feeling stigmatized often leads young people into crime. For Jose, this cycle may have begun when he was taken through the ritual of being handcuffed and walked out of school at eight years of age, an event that publicly identified him as a criminal. The stigma produced by this ritual helped to generate a self-fulfilling prophecy that shaped his ensuing relationships with teachers, police, and probation officers. Because Jose believed they were all collaborating to criminalize and punish him, he treated them with hostility, an attitude that led adults to
act punitively toward him. I noticed similar events countless times during my observations at Jose’s middle school and continuation high school.

I observed Jose react to teachers, school security officers, and police with defiance, and in return they responded by intensifying their punitive treatment of him. One day, I asked a school security supervisor why she treated Jose so “tough.” She replied, “Listen, man, when these kids get to the point where they start talking back, you gotta regulate. You gotta make sure they know that you’re in command—no matter what it takes.” I later asked Jose what he thought about this statement. Jose was not surprised. He told me that most security guards, school police, and school officials had treated him with this attitude. In this context, Jose recalls losing interest in school by the time he started fifth grade.

He stopped wearing a backpack, stopped actively participating in class, and eventually received an “age promotion” into middle school. Jose failed fourth and fifth grade, but the school promoted him because he was too old to stay in elementary school.

Jose recounted being beaten by police a week after he started middle school. He was twelve years old. The same police that patrolled his neighborhood since he was a small child, the same officer who had refused to help him recover his family’s gallon of milk, gave him his first police beating:

Sometimes, they be trying to jack me and stuff. Like they be trying to mess with us, like play around. They’ll . . . they’ll try to play around with us: “We got calls saying that you guys are doing this and that.” Cause sometimes we wouldn’t be doing nothing; they would just blurb us [light and siren signals of police vehicles]. One day they just got me for doing too much [messing around]. I was looking at the cop like crazy and stuck my tongue out him. He got out and whipped my ass.

By sixth grade Jose began to flirt with gang life. Middle school provided him with the resources to become a “wannabe,” a youth who has displayed interest in becoming part of the gang. A major reason for wanting to join the gang, at least initially, was for protection from violence.

I was . . . was by the house . . . So some, uhh, Sureños [Southerners—rival gang members] . . . —I seen them when they were in the car—they had a gun. I was walking. I was by my house [apartment], and I see my lil’ sister in
front of the house; my older sister, she was walking on the other side. And then out of nowhere they just like started shooting. And I told my sisters to duck. I started ducking. And then I... I... I hopped over the fence, and they left. I wasn’t really scared to get shot, but I was scared for my sisters.

No one was hurt that day. Jose, however, knew that, based solely on the apartment building he lived in, he had become a target for other gangs. Based on previous experience with the police, he believed they were not going to find the shooters. When officers asked him for information, he did not say a word. Jose explained that he was afraid that telling the officers would lead to the people who shot at him finding out and retaliating. Jose had good reason for these suspicions, as many young men in this study provided stories of police officers giving them information about rival gang members. I myself witnessed this process three times. During one observation, an officer arrived at the street corner where we were standing. He called us over and got out of the car. He told the boys, “You know, the Scraps [derogatory name for Sureños] just ratted one of your boys out. They say that he was involved in a shooting on Friday night. Where is he?”

The culture of criminalization that affects many communities of color has created a corresponding culture that forbids “snitching.” In this study, the sense that community members and homies were regularly incarcerated through false accusations, police “setups,” entrapment, and forced testimonies led many of the boys to declare a vow against ever providing information to police, even when they were the victims. The “don’t snitch” campaign among the boys in this study was not a commitment to allow murderers to remain free; it was an attempt to avoid further criminalization and unjust arrests and sentencing and to protect themselves from being “ratted out” by police. One can make sense of the perceivably senseless “don’t snitch campaign” as a collective attempt to resist the overpolicing-underpolicing paradox and mass incarceration. At such a young age, Jose already had a keen sense that the police would do more harm than good with the information he provided. Meanwhile, another cast of characters provided Jose with the support denied by law enforcement that he felt he needed: the neighborhood gang members.

The older gang members from the neighborhood acknowledged Jose for having experienced an attack on his family. They told him that they
would back him up. “Even though I was little, they was like, ‘You got a lot of heart.’ I told them, ‘Yeah,’ and they said, ‘All right then, you gotta put in work.’” For Jose, putting in work meant attacking rival gang members to avenge the attack on his family. At the time, Jose was fourteen years old and had unofficially been accepted into the gang for taking a hit from rivals. Jose went on “missions” with his homeboys to find and beat up rival gang members. He also began to smoke marijuana and to “love it.” This led to his first stint in juvenile hall.

One day, an officer stopped him in front of the neighborhood liquor store, searched him, and arrested him for a ten-dollar bag of marijuana he had in his pocket. After two days in “juvy,” Jose returned to his neighborhood. This time, he figured that if he was going to take risks and be arrested for minor drug possession, he “might as well grind big thangs and make some money.” He attempted to become a crack-cocaine dealer. He had big dreams that he would become rich and buy his mother a house so that he could move away from the apartment complex. He learned how to cook up powder cocaine with baking soda to produce crack rocks. He learned how to wrap the rocks in balloons and keep them in his mouth. This way, if the police stopped him, he would swallow the rocks to hide the evidence. Jose even shadowed a group of older guys from six in the morning to three the next morning, twenty-one entire hours, just to learn how “business was handled.” Sixteen of the youths in this study had sold drugs at one point, and all these boys described making a lot of money while they sold drugs. After more probing, I realized that their notion of “lots of money” was relative. Some of them made five hundred dollars in one day. However, there were also days when they only made twenty dollars. Overall, their “salaries” averaged out to less than forty dollars a day. However, their working day sometimes lasted up to twenty-one hours. In other words, it is quite possible that the majority of drug-dealing young people in Oakland make less than minimum wage, all while risking incarceration, violence, and addiction by selling drugs on the street. Despite all Jose’s hard work and training, on his first day selling crack, the police arrested him.

I was about like at East 15th, and five-o [police] blurbed me. And . . . I was by myself before they grabbed me by my neck. And, like, they tried to make me spit out the, um, rocks. And, like, I didn’t want to spit them out.
They, like—he was holding my neck for like . . . for like twenty seconds or less. And after that, I spit them out myself. ’Cause, I thought he was gonna choke me, hard, harder.

The police arrested Jose and placed him in a gang database, CalGang, a statewide documentation system that officers use to maintain information on people they deem gang members. I later verified that Jose was in the database when he and I were stopped and they conducted a search on our records. One of the officers said to another, “Yeah, he’s in the database.” He turned to Jose and, referring to his nickname, “Topo,” said, “Tapo, Tipo, Taco? What is your nickname?” Jose ignored him, knowing that he was being mocked. The officer turned to me and told me, “Jose is a crazy little dude. He’s been a player ever since he was little, . . . no trouble, but we got him in the gang database just in case.” Being placed on the gang database can add five, ten, fifteen, and even twenty-five years to a felony sentence, since under the 1988 Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, a prosecutor can charge a youth for committing a crime to further a gang’s criminal activity. Six of the boys in this study were eventually charged with gang enhancements.

Soon after I met Jose and interviewed him about his life story, he was arrested again. This time the police spotted him in the middle of a street fight and found a knife on him. Jose explained that while he was fighting, his opponent pulled out a knife, and he knocked the knife out of the other kid’s hand and grabbed it, with no intention of using it. He claimed that he had the knife on him for a long time before the police arrived, just trying to keep it off the street. Jose spent three weeks in juvenile hall following this arrest.

A few months later, Jose was arrested again for stealing a bicycle. The officer arrested him even though Jose did not have the bicycle in his possession. According to Jose, he knew the group of Black youths who had stolen the bicycle, but he did not want to “snitch” on them. When the judge told Jose that he was not going to lock him up but that he would have to follow a strict program with his probation officer, Jose thought that he might get help and turn his life around. His main concern was to stay away from the people he associated with on the street, because he wanted to escape the pressures to prove himself through violence and criminality:
I just wanted to start doing better, so I told my probation officer to help me. He said that I had to stay away from all those crazy kids I hung around with. He also told me that if I got caught with them, I would go back to jail. He told me to tell them that I would go to jail if I talked to them, but they didn’t believe me. . . . I think that for Mr. Bryan [his probation officer] it is easy to tell me to change, but I hella try and he doesn’t see what happens when I try.

At first glance, one might believe that Jose was a violent, drug-pushing thief. However, when we take a closer look at Jose’s understanding of his environment, we uncover the process by which Jose was criminalized; his interactions with authority figures set part of the stage on which he performed illicit activity, and this illicit activity generated further punitive treatment. Jose’s criminal trajectory may have been instrumentally determined by his negative interactions with agents of social control.

Tyrell Gets Marked

Eventually, Jose and Tyrell became marked as criminals. When Tyrell was fourteen, he was caught with an ounce of marijuana and spent three weeks in juvenile hall. When he returned home after release, his father attempted to beat him. Tyrell fought back, wrestling his father to the ground. After the fight, his father disregarded him, saying that if Tyrell thought he was a man, he should take care of himself. He refused to speak to Tyrell for weeks at a time, and, as a consequence, their relationship more or less shifted to that of roommates: “I do my own thing, and he does his own thing. He can’t say shit to me anymore, and I don’t trip off of him.”

The combination of stigma at school, harassment from police on the street, and Tyrell’s resentment of his defunct relationship with his father may have led him to develop the attitude to “not give a fuck.” In Tyrell’s frame of reference, the implications of breaking the law were imposed on him daily. In such situations, getting incarcerated might begin to feel like a viable option. The irony of Tyrell’s mentality was that the stress of being criminalized in the neighborhood led him to believe that juvenile hall might serve as an escape. In some sense, he was willing to trade one punitive community for another: “In juvy,” Tyrell explained, “at least if I follow the rules, I’ll be left alone.” When incarcerated, Tyrell could predict
when he would be treated punitively: if he broke the rules. On the street, however, even if he followed the rules, he felt he would still be punished. For Tyrell and many of the boys, detention facilities became preferred social contexts because they provided structure, discipline, and predictability—rare attributes in the punitive context of the streets. Although the boys did not want to be incarcerated, detention facilities were the only spaces where they felt that they could predict cause and effect. Tyrell described it this way: “If I do my program, then I know I will be straight [good]. . . . If I don’t follow directions, then I’ll be stuck.” We can make sense of why many young people who decide to violate their probation or parole do so, to seek shelter from a punitive social order, a youth control complex, that to many is worse than being incarcerated.

Hypercriminalization creates conditions in which young people actually seek more predictable, albeit more restrictive, forms of punishment. Many of the boys talked about liking the structure of incarceration because it dictated a clear set of rules. In the community, police, probation officers, schools, businesses, and families were perceived as unpredictable; the youths reported frustration with not knowing when their teachers, parents, or police would criminalize them.

Compelled to become a man on his own, to act and maneuver as an adult, and to take responsibility for himself, Tyrell faced the wrath of peer violence and police oppression. By the time he was fifteen, Tyrell became a bona-fide target for police. The police could pick him out easily because of his height, and they harassed him every time they saw him: “Man, they wouldn’t stop messing with me. One day I pushed a cop, and he fell. They grabbed me and whooped my ass. They beat me so bad that they let me go. They felt bad for me. I have a scar here and here [he points to two small scars on his scalp and forehead].” Instead of dealing drugs in fear of being arrested again, Tyrell chose a different specialization. He went to the drug dealers in the neighborhood and offered to collect from people who owed them money. The drug dealers began paying him to recover debts. With this work Tyrell became extremely violent, as he recovered amounts owed that ranged from ten to five hundred dollars:

I had to send the message that I was not fucking around, so I ran into a crack head that owed my nigga [friend] some money. I grabbed his ass and
whooped him so hard he's been limping ever since. . . . That was all I had to do. Most of the time people paid me what they owed. One day, though, I had to whoop some fool's ass. I hit him on the leg with a golf club, so they charged me with aggravated assault and assault with a deadly weapon, but they dropped the deadly weapon charge. I still did three months in juvy.

At sixteen, Tyrell was placed on two years’ probation. He was also placed on electronic monitoring (EM) as a condition of his release. EM is a program that probation officers use to keep track of juvenile offenders. A black, square-shaped device, about the size of a large cellular phone, is strapped around the youth's ankle. Whenever Tyrell went over a few hundred feet from his house, the device would send a message to his probation officer. The probation officer then could arrest him for violating probation. In the beginning, Tyrell was arrested and held for two days for going outside his area limit. Afterward, however, he got the hang of the monitoring device and completed his six-month program:

I did it, but it was hecka hard. I couldn't leave home, and then that shit started itching me all the time. [He shows me his leg, scarred from the scratching.] My boys thought that shit was tight [appealing], but I told them it wasn't cool at all. They would come visit me and kick it at my house, since I couldn't go anywhere. We set up shop [a hangout space] there and just chilled there until they let me off.

Tyrell and his friends were confined to a small apartment because of his requirement to remain at home. The consequence of the electronic monitoring device was that it created a new “kick-it spot” for the boys in Tyrell's apartment building. This new hangout concentrated a large group of delinquent boys in a private space where they became invisible. The possibility of their receiving support or services from adults in the public sphere who wanted to help them was now diminished. Yet Tyrell and his friends believed this to be a safe haven from the criminalizing interactions they endured in the public sphere: suspicion in stores, automatic searches by police and probation officers, denial of employment for having a criminal record, and stigma imposed by school authorities and other adults.
Jose Internalizes Violence

One day I caught up with Jose at his apartment. When I arrived, his mother told me that he had taken off to the Indoor Flea Market, a popular warehouse with twenty or so booths, where residents found cheap clothing, expensive tennis shoes, and jewelry. I drove down International to go look for Jose. Halfway to the “Indoor,” I noticed Jose standing at the corner of International Boulevard and High Street, one of the busiest intersections in Oakland. I parked my car and walked over to Jose. Smacking meat out of his teeth, Jose told me he stopped there to get a taco from his favorite truck, El Taco Zamorano. We sat on a cement divider in front of All Mufflers, a mechanic shop situated on the corner. The hot yellow color of the square concrete building served as a canvas for Black and Latino bodies, painting a picture of local residents as they stood waiting for the bus to make their way through town. An old, white pickup truck, with an open hood and a Latino mechanic hunched over the engine trying to fix it, sat adjacent to us.

I started asking Jose about his week. He seemed distracted. He looked around and ignored my questions. And then it dawned on me: we were in the heart of rival gang territory. As I started asking him another question, he interrupted me and said, “Hold up, hold up, man!” I turned in the direction he was looking and noticed another young man walking toward us. Jose ran up to him and, without warning, punched him in the face and knocked him down. When he hit the ground, Jose started kicking him in the stomach. I yelled at Jose, “Get off!” but he did not listen. The young man on the ground looked at me with despair, his head leaning on the concrete. I wrapped my arms around Jose and pulled him back. He forcefully shook me off and went back to kick his rival. I rolled my wrists into the kid’s XXL-size white T-shirt and yanked him up from the ground and away from Jose, who followed us, shouting, “You little bitch! . . . Punk-ass coward!” I told Jose to go home, and I drove the beaten kid home. The boy refused to answer any more questions after telling me, “I’m okay.”

I found Jose a few days later and asked him about the assault. He told me that the other kid, Puppet, a member of a rival gang, 37th Street, lived in Jose’s neighborhood. Jose and the rest of his gang were upset about this and were determined to drive Puppet out of their neighborhood. Every
time Jose or his friends saw Puppet, they immediately attacked him. Jose was also upset because Puppet had, in his view, caused him to go to jail.

Like, we were on International [Boulevard], and we seen Puppet. I chased him on a bike and pulled him off the bike. And, uh, he started running; he got away. I guess the Black dudes that kick it at the corner, they took his bike. And I got, like, at the park, ’cause I ran to the park because I seen a lotta po-police! So I ran to the park, and they got me at the park for robbery, me and another homey.

Jose served two weeks in juvenile hall and afterward was sent to a group home (a reform program managed from a private residence) for six months. Some of the youth at the group home did not like him, and Jose made more enemies during his stay there. Jose described getting into a fight with two youths from San Francisco because they picked on him.

So I’m not no punk. I just told them I went to the garage, and they told me it was gonna be a one-on-one [fight]. And I was winning, so they jumped me. . . . The people from the group home, they called the police. They was like, “You gonna . . . you gonna do a couple months in the hall.” This is just a punishment. I didn’t want to do that. So I just grabbed my stuff, and I left. And it’s a regular house; you can just leave from the front door. So I just grabbed my stuff, and I ran out. And I got caught a month later.

Jose served two months in juvenile hall and then was sent to another group home. He ran away once more. I checked on Jose a few weeks later. His mother told me he’d been arrested and was facing six months in the California Youth Authority (the state prison for minors) for carrying an unloaded gun.

Jose’s mother, Rosario, was in despair. She was an undocumented, single mother of two, Jose and his thirteen-year-old sister, Rosa. Rosario worked as a maid in Walnut Creek, an affluent suburb on the other side of the hill from Oakland. She was paid sixty dollars a day, working ten- to twelve-hour shifts. Her employer officially paid her as a part-time worker but pressured her to work more hours for no pay. She left home at six in the morning, and after taking a BART train and two buses—a
three-hour commute in all—she arrived at work at nine. By the time she returned home, it was eight o’clock at night. Rosario had received welfare to help her with the rent. However, after being pressured to obtain a job by her social worker at the welfare office, she took the house-cleaning job. The family continued to struggle financially, despite Rosario’s employment. Rosario told me that she made less money when working than when she was receiving welfare. She was stressed because she could no longer be there to watch over her children. During my observations at the apartment complex, I often found Rosa sitting on the steps talking to a nineteen-year-old gang member. Rosario’s absence exposed Rosa and Jose, even more, to the vulnerabilities and vices of the streets. Punished and abandoned by the welfare state for being poor, Rosa was forced to work and abandon her own children, leaving them vulnerable to the violence of the streets and criminalization of the state (and civil society).

I went to Jose’s court date with Rosario. The judge made it clear to Jose that if the gun had been loaded, he would have sent him to be tried as an adult, where he would face a minimum of five years in prison. The judge said to Jose, “You are living on the brink of self-destruction. This is probably your last chance in life. If you don’t follow your program at camp, and I see you in here again, I will make sure you never get out again. You understand?” Jose nodded and looked down. He looked ashamed and scared. After the judge’s statement, Jose turned and looked at his mother and me with a slight smile, celebrating the fact that his fear of being sent to adult court did not materialize.

Jose’s Life at Age Seventeen

By age seventeen, Jose had served time at Camp Sweeney, an Alameda County juvenile justice facility which detained young offenders during the week and attempted to provide them with a structured, camp-style program that included academic courses, counseling, and health-awareness workshops. Despite Camp Sweeney’s ideal of rehabilitating nonviolent criminals, Jose understood it this way: as a place where they “put all the crazy fools together and makes us fight or plot some shit that will get us in hella even more trouble.”
Jose was allowed to leave the camp on weekends and return to his family, as long as he did not leave home. When I visited him over the weekend, Jose told me he felt ashamed of himself. He said that he wanted to change but did not know how. “Being locked up, even at camp,” he explained, “was making me have to do crazy shit to put my name out [to gain a reputation] even more.” Jose felt that he had to prove himself to his peers at camp or become a victim. If he did not act tough and get into fights, he might be seen as a punk and face attacks from the rest of his camp mates. Three of the boys in this study had been to this same camp. They all reported that the guards at camp did not protect them from victimization, that the guards even encouraged a culture of street justice in which young men who were victimized had to learn, as Jose described one of the guards saying, to “be a grown man and defend yourself.”

Once released, Jose inhabited the same streets; this time, however, he claimed to have an understanding of his environment. He now articulated a deep desire to change his life around, whereas in the past, he saw his environment only as a place in which to prove his manhood. But the streets were not forgiving, and Jose had to pretend that he was still street oriented and that he was willing to continue to put in work: “If I go out there and pretend to be someone else, they [friends and peers] won’t look at me the same way. They will see weakness in me and try to take advantage. That’s why it’s hella hard to change.” I followed Jose as he attempted to find support for his endeavor to change, and I witnessed as school and community centers were unable to provide him the support he believed he needed: help looking for a job, a mentoring program, and somewhere to hang out where he did not have to feel forced to prove himself.

Jose’s probation officer served as the only possible source of support for change. Mr. Bryan talked to Jose repeatedly about finding a non-violent way to manage conflict and told him that only “silly little punks” folded to the pressure of peers. According to Jose, Mr. Bryan expected positive behavior from him regardless of the situation he was in. “What if I get messed with, and other kids try to beat me up?” Jose asked. “You just tell them that your PO is gonna kick your and their ass,” Mr. Bryan responded. Jose realized that this kind of response was unrealistic and that it did not help him. Not having a realistic and viable alternative to resolving conflict on the street, Jose defaulted to the only skills he
believed were proven to work in the past in managing conflict: posturing as if he was ready to commit violence and “flash” in response to any threats posed by peers. Although Jose reasoned that he no longer wanted to participate in this ritual, the streets reminded him that following the “code of the street,” despite its many drawbacks, was the only problem-solving and survival strategy available to him. For many of the boys in this study, using the “code of the street” was like flipping a coin. Sometimes their gamble paid off, and the code would protect them and make them feel protected. Other times, the wrong side of the coin appeared, and their confrontational demeanor would render them victims.

Many of the young people in this study said that they expected probation and police officers to help them find alternative ways of coping with violence but that these adults did not realize their advice had little practical application on the street, as Mr. Bryan’s perspective on Jose suggested: “Jose is a good kid, but he folds to peer pressure really easy. As soon as one of his friends tells him to do something, he does it. He just has to be strong and tell his little friends that he is not messing with negativity anymore. He needs to be responsible for himself and show his friends that he can be a man and not fold to peer pressure.” When I asked Jose about peer pressure, he told me that it had an influence but that he was his “own man.” He articulated a desire to change yet acknowledged that his friends would be an obstacle. I asked him, “What would you do if you had all the resources you needed to change?” He replied,

If I could, I would finish my diploma and go to community college and get some kind of certificate to work on cars. I want to own my own shop one day. I am already good with cars, and I think I would be a good mechanic. But I don’t know, I still got a long ways to go. . . . Maybe a lawyer, maybe helping the community, those in my position now or those who will be in my position. People who get in trouble, I like to help them. I wouldn’t be doing half of the shit I’m doing now, if I had a better environment. . . . I think I need a program that comes to me, you know, like, you—like, people that call you and come over and check up on you. Sometimes I don’t have money to take the bus to go to a program, or the programs they have are whack [inadequate or boring]. You know, like, “Don’t do drugs—this is your brain on drugs—just say no” type of shit.

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The disjuncture between Jose’s expectations of a supportive, nurturing, resource-savvy probation officer and his negative interactions with his probation officer’s unrealistic expectations of him resulted in a belief that resources to change were not available, despite his aspiration to do so.

To make matters worse, Jose’s commentary on wanting to change and his actions sometimes did not correspond with one another. For example, one afternoon Jose told me that he would no longer hang out with his homies; later that night, he called a few of his friends to visit him at his house, despite being prohibited to hang out with them, according to the terms of his probation. Sociologist Elliot Liebow calls the difference between what people say and what they do a “half-truth.” Jose’s half-truth was this articulation of wanting to change but acting in ways that would limit his ability to do so. I don’t believe that Jose was attempting to “play the system” when he began to articulate that he was ready to change. Instead, Jose had developed an illusion of change in which he thought that wanting to change would translate into real change. Jose’s belief in change did not necessarily mean that he would receive the necessary resources—help with job applications, help reenrolling in school, mentoring, counseling, and so on—to change his life around.

Sociologist Alice Goffman argues that young, Black, male felons “maintain self respect in the face of failure” by telling “half-truths,” by using their wanted status as an excuse not to provide for their families or show responsibility: “Being wanted serves as an excuse for a variety of unfulfilled obligations and expectations.” I did not find this to be true with the boys in my study, even when they were “on the run.” The boys in my study did not blame the system to maintain self-respect or to create excuses for their unfulfilled obligations and expectations. These boys were more than willing to confess that they had “fucked up,” that they were responsible for their social conditions. While the boys believed that the police beatings, excessive sentences, harassment, and heavy surveillance were unjust, they also acknowledged that they had made some wrong choices and that they were accountable for not completing school, not providing for their children (six of the boys were fathers), or not having a job. In an era of “personal responsibility” when schools, police, and community members could not guarantee the boys success, nurturing, or security, the one thing that these agencies of social control could do
was to inculcate in the boys a sense of self-blame. The boys were taught that poverty, victimization, criminalization, and neglect were products of their own actions. The boys internalized these messages, and in turn they all reported feeling personally responsible for their plight.

Code of the Street, Code of the State

Schools, police, and probation officers helped to perpetuate the code of the street. They did so either by assuming that all the boys were actively engaged in criminal and violent activity or by providing the boys little choice but to engage in the code. In refusing to protect residents, and in encouraging young men to take care of themselves, authority figures, including police and probation officers, explicitly encouraged young men to engage in the code. In Oakland, police officers encouraged young men to apply the code of the street in two main ways. First, officers purposely refused to provide protection. Second, the police diverted resources to policing youths who were easy targets in the public sphere and often ignored predatory criminal activity that happened right below the surface, in areas that they had chosen not to police, such as apartment complexes, parks, and “death alleys” that they might have perceived as dangerous. Police operated under a demographic rather than a criminological model of threat. In doing so, they missed countless opportunities to protect innocent people from being victimized.

Many events in this study demonstrated that police were involved in magnifying the code of the street. Another example is Slick, who, like Jose, reported that police encouraged residents to take justice into their own hands. Slick was brutally attacked by a group of gang members during the time when he became a “wannabe.” When the police showed up to conduct an investigation, Slick and his friends told the officer the name of the gang members who attacked them: “The pigs told us where we could find them. They told us they had just seen them hanging out at the corner of 9th and e-one-four (East 14th). They said to us, ‘You gotta do what you gotta do.’ So we did.”

The code of the street allowed the police to justify harassment and arrest, schools to punish and suspend students for defiance, and community members to fear young people. In responding to the code of the
street, authority figures in Oakland created a labeling hype and culture of punishment that criminalized young people’s everyday style and pursuit of happiness, even when these did not involve breaking the law. I found that it was not only important to understand how the boys used the code of the street but also to understand how the community responded to young people who were associated with the code of the street. Seeing how others responded to the code of the street allowed me to understand how institutions such as the criminal justice system and schools were also responsible for creating a social order, a code of conduct that inculcated criminality and victimization among marginalized youths. By operating in the belief that the code of the street was rampant among marginalized youths, despite the fact that a minority of these youths lived by this code, institutions created a social order that managed every young person it encountered as a threat who followed a code that victimized others. Alford Young argues that social scientists have focused too much of their attention on marginalized black men’s behaviors on the streets. This has enabled schools, law enforcement, and policy makers to treat marginalized young black men as if the streets determine all of their codes of conduct and worldviews. The boys in this study believed that some agents of social control, the family, school administrators, and police, interacted with them as if at any given moment they would engage in crime or violence. As the boys came of age, they experienced being treated as criminal risks in need of constant, ubiquitous surveillance and control across social contexts.