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Book Review | Falling Back: Incarceration and Transitions to Adulthood among Urban Youth

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Jamie J. Fader. *Falling Back: Incarceration and Transitions to Adulthood among Urban Youth*. Rutgers University Press, 2013; 256 pp.; ISBN: 9780813560748.

In her first book, Jamie J. Fader presents an account of a group of young black males attempting to “fall back,” or stay out of trouble, as they return from a juvenile residential corrections facility to their communities in Philadelphia. Prior to the study, Fader spent six years evaluating delinquency programs for the city of Philadelphia and over a year working at a community-based aftercare program that assisted youth returning to the city from reform schools. Fader gained access and insight to the structure and processes of the juvenile court system, which facilitated her research.

This book contributes to the fields of sociology and criminal justice, particularly on the topic of minority youth involved in the juvenile justice system. In a longitudinal ethnographic study between 2004-2007, Fader conducted intensive participant observation and interviews with 15 young men of color who were adjudicated delinquent for drug offenses, sent to the pseudonymous “Mountain Ridge Academy,” and returned to their communities. At the reform school, Fader attended a training session for staff members and interviewed the study participants. For approximately three years after their release from the residential facility, Fader maintained close relationships with the young men, checked criminal records, and spoke with probation officers and reintegration workers. The participants were given tape-recorders for weekly responses to questions that they could answer when and where they felt comfortable, thus eliminating interviewer bias. By establishing strong relationships and trust with the subjects Fader was provided with information that would be unattainable through other methods. The findings of her research are not generalizable to other times or places, but that was not the purpose of the study. The objective was to provide a detailed account of the unique worldviews and experiences of young black men who were simultaneously transitioning from adolescence to adulthood and from incarceration to their communities.

This book is suitable for scholars or students interested in qualitative ethnographic research methods, race, corrections, or community reentry. Fader’s in-depth exploration of the inner-city criminogenic environment and minority culture presents the underrepresented view of the people who are most affected by mass incarceration and correctional policy. Criminal justice practitioners and policy makers should read this book as well. The text elucidates the largely undocumented effects of residential programs on young black males, information which is valuable for constructing corrections and reentry programs and for crafting legislation. The readability of this text makes it accessible to general audiences; it is not bogged down with technical jargon.

The chapters are well organized and flow logically. Fader begins with an introduction of the research design and methods. The study is put into context with a discussion of the social and cultural climate

of endemic poverty, violence, and racial segregation in Philadelphia. Then, the reader is introduced to the study participants and their life histories. The next chapter presents the philosophy and procedures of Mountain Ridge Academy from the perspectives of the staff and residents. With a thorough understanding of the people and place to be studied, the book transitions to the focal substance of the piece: reentry. Fader details the obstacles that young black men face when returning home to Philadelphia; there are threats to masculinity, gender dynamics come into play, lack of services and meaningful employment are hurdles to be faced, fatherhood puts added pressure on them, and they must defend themselves from attacks on their cultural identity in the face of racial, class, and criminal stigmas. After a lucid discussion of the problems with reentry, Fader proposes alternatives that balance public safety with the needs of vulnerable youth.

Fader identifies factors associated with desistance as a combination of individual personality, social bonds, stakes in conformity, and masculine gender role expectations. Since Mountain Ridge Academy only addressed reform of character, it failed to effectively decrease the risk of reoffending. The staff at Mountain Ridge measured success as staying out of jail and living long enough to attend the annual graduation ceremony held after release. This outcome indicator ignores the detrimental effects that incarceration and cumulative social disadvantage have on the young men and their families. Fader's findings demonstrate that an effective correctional program must address the sociocultural impediments that minority communities confront.

Throughout the book, Fader eloquently alludes to the structural disadvantage that young black men and their families encounter with the criminal justice system, employment, poverty, violence, guns, education, failing schools, mass incarceration, residential segregation, and discrimination. With all of the complex social maladies that urban black youth face, Fader does an exceptional job getting the point across in a well-articulated manner. In sum, this prominent text contributes to the dearth of literature focused on youth reentry from residential facilities and is an excellent example of a longitudinal ethnographic study.