Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice & Criminology

Book Review | On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City

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Published on: Apr 01, 2014

DOI: 10.21428/88de04a1.05052808

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Alice Goffman. *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. University of Chicago Press, 2014; 277 pp.; ISBN: 9780226136714.

Alice Goffman's *On the Run* is an ethnographic study of the impacts of the war on drugs and policing in an American urban neighborhood. Her research started during her sophomore year at the University of Pennsylvania in Dr. David Grazian's urban ethnography class. As a part of the class, Goffman's assignment was to pick a site to observe and take notes, and she got a job at a cafeteria at the west edge of Penn's campus with Miss Deena, a Black woman in her sixties who managed the staff. Through this job, Goffman was introduced to Miss Deena's family and their local Black community. These connections made it possible for Goffman to spend six years in a segregated Black neighborhood in Philadelphia (pseudonymously called 6th Street). During her years of intensive research, Goffman explored the impact of mass incarceration in the United States, and tough on crime policies on this poor Black community, particularly on the lives of young Black men who circulate in and out of prisons and the lives of their loved ones.

On the Run focuses mostly on participants Mike, Anthony, Chuck, Reggie, and Tim, individuals in their late adolescence and early adulthood. Chapter by chapter, Goffman details their legal entanglements, drug dealing involvement, arrests (some of which occurred at an early age) and negotiations with the penal system. These young men constantly flee from search warrants, parole violations, and/or unpaid court fees. As detailed in Chapter 2 ("The Art of Running") evasion becomes an important part of their daily routine. As the author writes, "For young men around 6th Street who worry that police will take them into custody, the everyday relations, localities, and activities that others rely on for their basic needs become a net of entrapment" (p. 52). By evading the criminal justice system, these participants subsequently avoid work, funerals, and hospitals (which would necessitate turning to illegal or illegitimate means for medical attention when injured).

In Chapters 3 and 5, Goffman describes the social life of the fugitives and how their family members are affected by their legal problems. Since these young men may become involved with the criminal justice system early on, courtrooms, probation centers, prisons, and juvenile detention centers replace the educational system for most of them. As a result, relationships between participants and their family members are tested through attendance at court hearings, visits in jail, and efforts to hide fugitives from police. For example, sometimes a mother may help hide her son from police and, when caught, she may visit him regularly in prison, give him money for commissary items, write letters, and organize parties for her son's return from prison. In addition to their mothers, their girlfriends' loyalty and dedication are also tested through these repeated visits in jail, phone calls, and support at court hearings.

These chapters also reveal how relatives became targets for police who seek information on the fugitives' locations and status. The techniques that are used by police to pressure the family members can be brutal: they may destroy property, physically hurt family, and present threats of eviction. Indeed, Goffman herself became a victim of police brutality and was interrogated as well. All these events together reflect how much collateral damage follows the legal troubles of these young men.

Throughout the book, Goffman repeatedly reflects on the heavy police presence in the neighborhood. However, she stresses that these poor people on the 6th Street cannot turn to police for help, since for them police present more danger than a reliable source of justice. These circumstances encourage the participants to settle disputes among themselves instead of turning to police. In addition, prior incarceration also presents difficulties for the young men; criminal records prevent them from getting a job, having a bank account, or obtaining a valid driver's license. As a result, they repeatedly get in trouble with law for using fake IDs or selling marijuana, since no other employment is available for them.

Although most of the book is devoted to examining the lives of a small group of young men with legal troubles and their dealings with police and courts, Chapter 7 talks about "Clean People." By "Clean People" Goffman describes those who generally avoid trouble, keep their distance from the legally precarious young men, or help these young men in some ways but still manage to stay clean themselves. This chapter echoes the discussion of "street" and "decent" families from Elijah Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street*, in which residents label themselves as either being decent or from the street.

This book may leave many readers with feelings of guilt or resentment about the state of race and poverty in America, particularly in regard to crime and criminal justice. Goffman does an incredible job detailing the everyday lives of young Black men and the price they pay for their legal entanglements. Despite the overall strength of the book, there are some weaknesses worth acknowledging. For instance, Goffman's research sample was small; it was limited to this one Black neighborhood. This issue, however, is not Goffman's alone, for it reflects a limitation of ethnographic research generally. In addition, there are times where Goffman's writing comes off as overly negative toward the denizens of 6th Street. The entire book talks about not only criminal actions of young Black men, but their failures in personal life. Because relatively little time is afforded to discussing so-called "clean people," one may come away with the impression that almost all young black men in this area are criminal and "dirty." Regardless of these weaknesses, *On the Run* stands as a remarkable work exploring the lived consequences of tough on crime policies and the devastating effects of war on drugs in urban settings.

References

Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the street*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.