

## Mean streets Youth crime and homelessness

John Hagan and Bill McCarthy

Cambridge University Press, 1998

In his foreword to this book, which is in fact a substantial research report, James Short Jr. says:

'Mean Streets' is an all too rare combination of rigorous theoretical and empirical inquiry applied to a significant research problem. ... The research design of the study is imaginative, complex, and demanding. The focus throughout is on young people, on their perspectives of family life and school experiences, on why some leave their homes – some flee, others are 'kicked out' – and on life on the streets and in the parks, malls, abandoned buildings, and shelters of Toronto and Vancouver (vii).

The research involved two studies, a cross-sectional comparative examination of street and school youth in Toronto in 1987-88 and a summer long panel study of street youth in 1992 in Toronto and Vancouver. It was clearly a team effort. It employs a sophisticated yet practical qualitative and quantitative design which includes considerable attention to reaching and retaining contact with a purposive sample of street youth, a notoriously difficult population to reach and keep in touch with. In the first study 390 young people participated in the survey and in the second 485. The second study had three waves of contact commencing at intervals of three weeks; approximately three-quarters were reached in the second wave and more than half in the third. A good account is given of methodology throughout the book with a useful summary by Climenhage and Parker as an appendix. In spite of the acknowledged limitations of the non probability design and individually various components of the research, the combined outcome of the elements has both power and rigour. Operational definitions of youth, homelessness and crime make good sense in the study context and for more general application. Attention is focused on the 15-24 age band, those who have left home and lack a permanent

address. The type of crime explored includes minor and more serious theft, prostitution, drug selling and assault.

The study successfully explores a range of antecedent, particularly family and school, factors and much detail of street life, issues related to entry, embeddedness and exit. It is especially rich with verbatim expressions concerning events, motivations and aspirations. The analysis draws out detail of embeddedness and dissonant contexts. It paints a picture of the attractions, demands attached to street life and 'street family' in conflict with participation in the legal economy, especially employment and other lifestyle opportunities. Although not all street youth offend and some want to stay on the streets, the overall picture is one of the amplification of crime for many as victims and offenders, and the desire of most ultimately for release from it.

The book contains an interesting discussion of the theory of crime and some of the directions criminology has taken in North America. Its exploration of the notions of criminal capital and social capital are particularly interesting. Social capital as a concept overarching control, strain, differential association and aspects of labelling theory appears to be a useful theoretical breakthrough.

It is a useful book for students and researchers interested in youth welfare, homelessness and street crime. The rich accounts make it a palatable read for anyone interested in contemporary society.

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