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Mean Streets is a field study of young people who have left home and school and are living on the streets of Toronto and Vancouver. This book includes the personal narratives and explanatory accounts, in their own words, of some of the more than four hundred young people who participated in the summer-long study, which featured intensive personal interviews. The study examines why youth take to the streets, their struggles to survive on the street, their victimization and involvement in crime, their associations with other street youth, especially within "street families," their contacts with the police, and their efforts to leave the street and rejoin conventional society. Major theories of youth crime are analyzed and reappraised in the context of a new social capital theory of crime.

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Mean Streets

YOUTH CRIME AND HOMELESSNESS

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University of Toronto

Bill McCarthy
University of Victoria

in collaboration with Patricia Parker and Jo-Ann Climenhage

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Foreword: Measuring and Interpreting Social Reality – the Case of Homeless Youth

Mean Streets is the first study of its kind, a careful examination of samples of homeless children, *in situ* – that is, on the streets of two Canadian cities, Toronto and Vancouver. Although "runaways" have been much publicized – even advertised – no previous study has systematically located children on the street and looked at their social worlds, comparing them with samples of in-home and in-school children, from the perspective of the children.

Mean Streets is also an all-too-rare combination of rigorous theoretical and empirical inquiry applied to a significant research problem. The problem is more complex than is implied in the book's title – that is, the relationship between youth homelessness and crime – though that surely is complex enough. John Hagan, Bill McCarthy, and their colleagues Patricia Parker and Jo-Ann Climenhage must first convince us that homeless youth are a sufficiently important population to warrant serious attention. They do that convincingly in Chapter One and in the book's Appendix, which I recommend reading in tandem.

Importantly, the two cities differ significantly in their approaches to handling homeless youth, with Toronto providing a more fully developed safety net for them and Vancouver relying to a greater extent on a crime-control model. Although law enforcement plays an important role in both cities, Vancouver youth, without the support services and shelters of Toronto's social welfare model, experience greater exposure to the traumas of street life and to criminal opportunities.

Extensive interviews of street youth and surveys of both street youth and youth in Toronto schools provide rich information on family and school

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backgrounds associated with youth homelessness. Interviews and field observations inform the nature of life on the streets of both cities. The research design of the study is imaginative, complex, and demanding. The focus throughout is on the 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.

We learn a great deal about the extreme conditions experienced by young people while living away from family and other conventional institutions. The data are compelling that harsh, coercive, often explosive family discipline alienates children, sometimes to the point of driving them into the street. We learn of the seductions of street life, too, but most of all we learn of its privations and dangers and how it pushes young people toward crime as a means of securing basic necessities.

The book is replete with stimulating questions as well as answers. I am led to wonder, for example, about the relative merits of situational and group process perspectives in understanding differences between youth gangs and homeless youth (some of whom have been gang members, who when asked deny that their street "families" are gangs and take exception to the comparison). It appears that the microsocial level of explanation is less important to the explanation of behavior among the homeless than it is to behavior within gang contexts. Group processes seem less important to homeless youth. The gang situation lends itself to group processes in ways that most youth rarely experience. Conversely, foreground variables (related to the immediate street situation) such as those identified by Hagan and McCarthy (hunger, inadequate shelter, unemployment, and safety) clearly are less important to the explanation of gang delinquency than they are to street youth. They are almost certainly less important to the explanation of most youth crime than they are to crimes committed by homeless youth. Nevertheless, the authors make a strong case that, *in extremis*, foreground needs for food, shelter, and currency are fundamental to the explanation of behavioral adaptation.

Street life exposes both gang members and homeless youth to violence, however, as the discussion of "reciprocal violence" in Chapter Five makes clear. Clearly, also, the microsocial level of explanation is important to understanding the conditions under which some homeless youth are driven from their homes or choose to leave.

Ironically, these homeless youth often form street "families" that recreate familiar family roles and serve familiar purposes – safety, food, shelter, and protection, as well as social and emotional needs. The familial

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analogies invoked by homeless youth often appear, however, to reflect wishful thinking more than reality. Individual youth spend a lot of time wandering around, alone, searching for food, shelter, and some means of acquiring currency. And street families appear to be more transitory and even less cohesive than street gangs.

In this era of large available data sets, when we often settle for data less because they are appropriate to the task at hand than because they are available, this book is refreshing. Large data sets also carry the day often because they are more amenable to quantitative analysis than are field studies, yet Hagan and McCarthy provide ample and sophisticated quantitative analyses of their data. And surely no one would argue that scientific pursuit should be limited to data that are convenient, or that theory should be compromised by the difficulty of data production or analysis.

Hagan and McCarthy are to be congratulated for facing up to the complexity of their research problem, for daring to break new ground methodologically, and for doing the hard work necessary to fulfill their carefully thought-out research design. Moreover, they are successful in overcoming what is perhaps the most glaring weakness of disciplinary specialization: the insularity of theory and interpretation of data within narrow confines of specialized inquiry.

Criminology, long a captive of its special data sets and theoretical constructions, has emerged in recent years as a truly interdisciplinary specialization, with ties to all of the social and behavioral sciences. Though pockets of resistance remain, we no longer cringe at the thought that fundamental biological processes and other individual-level phenomena may be relevant to criminal and other forms of deviant behavior. Increasingly, we seek out the work of specialists in a variety of related disciplines, and we adopt comparative research designs and learn from inquiries in other cultures and societies. Again, Hagan and McCarthy are exemplary. More power to them, and good reading to all!

JAMES F. SHORT JR.
Washington State University

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Acknowledgments

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In our Appendix we refer to the various social service agencies that supported this project. These agencies provided us with interview space, helped us establish connections with youth, and were enthusiastic advocates of our research. Agency staff gave us help and guidance and kept our spirits up when the data collection was difficult. The staff members are too numerous to list here, but we thank them for their kindness and support. Although their efforts greatly enhanced the success of our research, their contributions are most evident in the lives of the youth who leave the street.

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