

## C H A P T E R O N E

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## Street and School Criminologies

THE DEPICTION OF SOCIAL EXPERIENCE is most revealing when it considers people in extreme circumstances. The homeless youth who live on the streets of our cities confront desperate situations on a daily basis. Often without money, lacking shelter, hungry, and jobless, they frequently are involved in crime as onlookers, victims, and perpetrators.<sup>1</sup> Yet, unlike homeless adults, who are more visible casualties of the cumulative toll of living on the street, homeless youth are difficult to distinguish from their better protected peers. Their youthfulness frequently obscures the seriousness of their problems. Fictional and media accounts rarely or sufficiently document the experiences of these youth, who are often overlooked in academic writing and research about the urban poor.

North American criminology also neglects street youth. Despite the adversity of street life and the prevalence of crime, contemporary criminology concentrates more extensively on youth living at home and attending school. This focus limits the study of more extreme social and economic situations, implying that the influence of adverse backgrounds is exaggerated and that problems of crime are sufficiently represented by the experiences of more ordinary young people.

In this book, we begin to address this neglect of street youth.<sup>2</sup> We use observational, survey, and interview data gathered in two of the largest cities in Canada, Toronto and Vancouver, to document the family and school histories, living conditions, and, in particular, criminal experiences of youth who live on the streets. Our purpose is to bring into theoretical view the ways in which the background and developmental experiences of homeless youth and the foreground conditions of urban street life influence involvement in

crime. Our approach draws on several criminological traditions, including strain, control, differential association, and labeling theories. These orientations can be effectively integrated, even though they are sometimes treated as incompatible.

Throughout this book, we make extensive use of our respondents' victimization and offending histories. These personal accounts are often detailed and revealing, so we use pseudonyms to protect our respondents' identities. We begin with Janet, whose experiences illustrate a degree of involvement in crime that is disturbingly common among street youth.<sup>3</sup>

Janet left her rural home in a maritime province at the age of 14 after her stepfather hit her "one time too many." She spent some time at her cousins' home and on the street in a city "back East" before heading to Toronto in search of her older sister Kathy. Kathy was selling hallucinogens, marijuana, and small amounts of other drugs from her downtown apartment. After a quarrel about one of her sister's "acid parties," Janet left Kathy's apartment for the street. The following discussion began when we asked Janet about her involvement in crime since leaving home:

JANET: When I was 14, that's when I started doing crack. I got the money from my friend. I was kind of watching out for her, taking licence plate numbers.

INTERVIEWER: She was hooking?

JANET: Yeah, and she'd give me half her money to go buy rock. . . . I was staying in hotels with my friends, partied all the time, and that's when I started doing coke. . . . I tried everything. I tried needles. . . . I was so scared it wasn't funny. . . . I go up there, and like there's two big bags of coke there. I said give me one of the syringes and like, I said to somebody else, like go ahead, do it. And as soon as they were doing it, it was, oh God. You feel like rubber.

INTERVIEWER: Did you end up with a lot of tracks?

JANET: No, I don't have any marks there, only little scars. I did it in my neck, in my legs. It's a good buzz, but anyway its too expensive. Crack was better, but I went down from 129 pounds to 100. I was so skinny. I'm 137 now. I smoke my pot, and that's it.

INTERVIEWER: What made you decide to stop crack?

JANET: It was when I went to jail. That's what happened.

INTERVIEWER: What did you go to jail for?

JANET: Assault causing bodily harm, I almost killed this girl. . . . I was on acid. I was 16. . . . Assault with bodily harm with a deadly weapon.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the only time ?

JANET: No, then I was in for stolen, stealing cars and everything else . . .

credit cards, and cash and stuff. . . . I was charged with so many different charges; twenty-two car thefts, and, ah, three armed robberies.

INTERVIEWER: What were they?

JANET: This, ah, 7-Eleven store, we went there with a knife and buddy had his gun and ran after us. . . . Then we had like, uh, it wasn't a real gun, it was like, uh, one of those starter pistols. . . . And this one woman, she thought it was real, so I just, pow up in the air. Stupid woman. . . . But I wouldn't do that again.

INTERVIEWER: What made you change?

JANET: I don't know. I guess talking to lots of people about it and then being in jail. No way I want more. I got beat up in there twice. . . . But then I beat up people, too. I beat up this one chick the first day I got in there.

Janet's extensive offending history is not unusual among the youth we interviewed, but it is not generalizable to all street youth either. Some street youth report no involvement in crime, and there is more to these young lives than crime.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, for Janet and many others, the street is a downward spiral of deviance, danger, and despair. The adversity of urban street life and the prevalence of crime among youth who spend their days and nights on the streets would seem to be an important focal point for crime research; yet contemporary criminologists continue to neglect the experiences of this group.

### **Criminologists of the Streets**

The early part of this century was characterized by a pervasive anxiety about the life of impoverished urban neighborhoods and the dangers they posed for young people. Responding to this concern, the first North American criminologists investigated the harsh class conditions of distressed low-income communities. Often collaborating with street workers and social agencies, these sociologists of the streets explored whether the rapidly building forces of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization were exposing the youth of growing cities to criminogenic conditions. The street seemed a natural place to study these youth, especially as they gathered on street corners and in gangs.

Initially, this work was more descriptively detailed than analytically rigorous, more socially engaged than scientifically grounded; but this gradually changed. Some of the best early work was represented in the Chicago school of sociological criminology. In 1923, Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* detailed the lives of homeless men and their criminal as well as noncriminal involvements.

In the same year, W. I. Thomas's *The Unadjusted Girl* described the experiences of young women who left home and often worked as prostitutes on the streets of Chicago. Continuing this tradition, Fredrick Thrasher (1927) made contacts with street groups and interviewed them about their membership and activities for his classic book *The Gang*. In *The Jack-Roller* (1930) and *Brothers in Crime* (1938), Clifford Shaw provided detailed ethnographies of life on the street and involvement in crime. Edwin Sutherland and Harvey Locke (1936) also produced a little known book in the Chicago tradition, titled *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*.

None of these studies are about street youth per se, but each is an effort to understand a life away from home that often involves young people who spend much of their time on the street actively involved in crime. This interest in urban street life extended well into the second half of the century, as reflected in the field research of William Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society* and Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967). It is also evident in James Short and Fred Strodbeck's (1965) use of street workers in their work, *Group Process and Gang Delinquency*, and in Gerald Suttles' (1968) participant observation study, *Social Order of the Slum*. This tradition continues today in ethnographies and participant observation studies that focus on criminal and gang activities in distressed American neighborhoods depicted, for example, in John Hagedorn's (1988) *People and Folks*, Mercer Sullivan's (1989) *Getting Paid*, Joan Moore's (1991) *Going Down to the Barrio*, Felix Padilla's (1992) *The Gang as an American Enterprise*, Philippe Bourgois' (1995) *In Search of Respect*, and Mark Fleisher's (1995) *Beggars and Thieves*. However, urban anthropologists, rather than criminologists, are mostly responsible for revitalizing the study of street crime in these impoverished communities, and mainstream criminology has paid little attention to these works.<sup>5</sup>

Criminologists' neglect of recent field studies is in part attributable to new urban ethnographers' tendency to study exclusively people who are involved in crimes or gangs, thereby limiting comparisons between offenders and nonoffenders. These small and highly selected samples do not lend themselves to methods of quantitative analysis, which have become a mainstay of the criminological research enterprise since the development of systematic social survey methods at midcentury.<sup>6</sup> From the 1950s onward, attention to sampling, measurement, and sophisticated multivariate analyses has increasingly dominated criminological research. As criminology has become more self-consciously scientific in its methods, its imperatives have changed: Criminologists have abandoned the streets, turning to self-report surveys and the study of school youth.

### School Criminologists

Armed with their new self-report methodology, criminologists moved into the schools of North America (and later other countries) to collect detailed information about family, education, community, and adolescent experiences. These self-report student surveys offered many advantages: They demonstrated that common forms of delinquency were measurable in anonymous studies of school populations; they allowed researchers to study large samples; they facilitated the systematic measurement of variables that could be tested for their role in the causation of delinquency; and they eventually provided a paradigm for classic contributions to theory testing in criminology (e.g., Hirschi, 1969; Matsueda, 1982).

This new methodology also raised questions about the relationships between class and delinquency and crime (e.g., Tittle, Villemez, and Smith, 1978; Weis, 1987; Jensen and Thompson, 1990). Self-report survey researchers questioned the taken-for-granted association between crime and poverty – a relationship evident in densely descriptive ethnographic studies, as well as in the measures of poverty and crime that sometimes tautologically and ecologically confounded areal studies of crime and delinquency. They rightly disentangled the concepts, insisting on independent measures of class and crime that provided building blocks for testing explanations based on class circumstances.

There is no doubt that the development of self-report methodology marked a major advance in modern criminology. The issue we take with this approach is not that self-report methodology is flawed but rather that its use is too often restricted to junior and senior high-school students. The neglect of other youth groups has transformed and, to some extent, misdirected the nature of criminological investigations. Three substitutions have characterized this transformation: (1) schools replaced the streets as sites for data collection; (2) parents' socioeconomic status superseded class backgrounds and more immediate class circumstances as presumed exogenous causes of delinquency; and (3) delinquency supplanted crime as the behavior to be explained.

In some ways, these changes enhanced the scientific standing of criminological research, but they also distanced self-report studies from the conditions and activities that stimulated attention to youth and crime in the first place. More accurate sampling frames can be established for schools than for the streets, but street youth are more likely than school youth to be involved in delinquency and crime. Student self-reports of

delinquency are less prone to some of the biases found in official record keeping, but the common indiscretions that students report are less likely to be the crimes that concern citizens. Also, although it is true that parental status can be indexed (with attractive measurement properties for persons regularly employed in conventional occupations) independently of the adolescent behaviors that researchers seek to explain, the status continua underlying these measures assume that parents have occupations to be measured. Moreover, these measures are not directly linked to the experiences of the youth whose behaviors are being explained (Greenberg, 1977).

Overall, these substitutions made self-report survey research more systematic, but they also produced several unintended results: less theoretically relevant characteristics (i.e., status versus class) are now used to explain less serious behaviors (i.e., common delinquency instead of crime) of less criminally involved persons (i.e., students rather than street youth). Although the analogy can be overstated, there is a parallel between studying crime among students and studying AIDS in this population. Even though serious crime and AIDS are relatively rare among school youth, minor forms of delinquency are common, and students are exposed to the risk of HIV infection. Useful research, therefore, can be done on minor delinquency and exposure to HIV infection among students. However, it is hard to imagine medical researchers neglecting the investigation of AIDS among higher-risk groups (e.g., intravenous drug users and sexually active youth) or arguing against investing research resources in these populations. Similarly, youth living on the streets of our cities have increased risks of involvement in several illegal activities and represent an important avenue for studying crime. Unfortunately, homeless youth remain an underutilized supplement to a school-based criminology.

### **Homelessness, Runaways, and Street Youth**

Social science interest in the homeless in North America diminished in the years following Edwin Sutherland and Harvey Locke's (1936) study, *Twenty Thousand Homeless Men*, and other classic contributions from the Chicago school (e.g., Anderson, 1923; Zorbaugh, 1929). In the 1980s, several influential scholars recognized this oversight and revived large-scale social surveys of the homeless (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Rossi, 1989; Wright, 1989). Shlay and Rossi (1992) identify at least sixty local and national primary data investigations undertaken since academics rediscovered this population; yet this resurgence rarely involves attention to youth. Instead, contemporary

knowledge of the lives of homeless youth is largely limited to photojournalism (e.g., Craig and Schwarz, 1984; Goldberg and Brookman, 1995), oral histories and case studies (e.g., Artenstein, 1990; Weber, 1991), and a handful of small surveys (Janus, McCormack, Burgess, and Hartman, 1987; Kufeldt and Nimmo, 1987; Whitbeck and Simons, 1990, 1993).

Social scientists' neglect of homeless youth may have resulted from tendencies to conceptualize narrowly such youth as runaways and to concentrate on the origins of leaving home rather than on the consequences of being on the street. North American researchers have typically presumed that, in most cases, prematurely leaving home was an adolescent behavior associated with a desire for independence from parental authority; these researchers have also implicitly assumed that most runaways would return home shortly following their departures (see Adams and Munro, 1979; Liebertoff, 1980). The remaining runaways – those who left home more than once or twice or who stayed away for lengthy periods – were treated as a distinct group of youth thought to suffer from more serious psychological problems ranging from simple depression and anxiety to severe maladjustment, mental instability, and pathological personalities. Particularly dominant in the 1940s, this approach remained influential through the 1970s (see Armstrong, 1932, 1937; Robins and O'Neal, 1959; Levanthal, 1963, 1964; Jenkins, 1969, 1971; Stierlin, 1973; Olson, Liebow, Mannino, and Shore, 1980; Edelbrock, 1980).

Toward the end of the 1970s, several writers (e.g., Walker, 1975; Wolk and Brandon, 1977; Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott, 1978) noted that research from the individual pathology perspective often ignored the stressful environments that frequently pushed youth from, or provoked youth to leave, their family homes. Building on a handful of studies that examined the psychological profiles of the parents of runaways (e.g., Foster, 1962; Robey, Rosenwald, Snell, and Lee, 1964; Rosenwald and Mayer, 1967), the structure of their families, and parent–child relationships (e.g., Hildebrand, 1963, 1968; D'Angelo, 1974; Shellow, Schamp, Liebow, and Unger, 1972; Wolk and Brandon, 1977), these writers offered integrated theories of why adolescents run away (Brennan et al., 1978; Nye, 1980). These theories emphasized the social context of leaving home, particularly the role of the family, school experiences, and relationships with peers.

More recent works have focused explicitly on family physical and sexual abuse as important determinants of leaving home (Farber, Kinast, McCoard, and Falkner, 1984; Garbarino, Wilson, and Garbarino, 1986; Janus et al., 1987; Kufeldt and Nimmo, 1987) and on differences between youth who have run from their families and those pushed or thrown out by

uninterested parents (Adams, Gullotta, and Clancy, 1985; Janus et al., 1987).

Notwithstanding these contributions, few studies have explored the experiences of youth after they arrive on the street. The available studies (Minehan, 1934; Howell, Emmons, and Frank, 1973; Brennan et al., 1978; Janus et al., 1987; Kufeldt and Nimmo, 1987; Whitbeck and Simons, 1990, 1993) reveal that youth who leave and stay away from home encounter many of the problems that are well-documented and extensively studied among homeless adults (Momeni, 1989; Rossi, 1989; Wright, 1989; Blau, 1992; Burt, 1992; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Jencks, 1994). Like their adult counterparts, homeless or street youth experience unemployment, poverty, hunger, lack of shelter, criminal victimization, sexual harassment, trouble with the police, and solicitation into crime (Kufeldt and Nimmo, 1987; Whitbeck and Simons, 1990, 1993).

### Street Youth and Crime

Recent figures indicate that approximately 100 million children and adolescents live on the streets of cities worldwide (UNICEF, 1989). Although conditions obviously vary, homeless youth are a growing presence and represent an important and sizable proportion of the adolescents living in high-risk settings of both developed (Wright, 1991) and developing nations of the world (National Research Council, 1993, p. 182; also see Aptekar, 1988; Wright, Wittig, and Kaminsky, 1993; Campos, Raffaelli, and Ude, 1994). An estimated two-fifths of the world's street youth live in Latin America (Barker and Knaul, 1991), with a majority of these youth living on the streets of Brazil (Campos et al., 1994). In the United States, recent figures suggest that the street youth population has reached one and a half million (Shane, 1989) and for much of the past decade in Toronto – one of the locations of our research – annual estimates of the number of street youth have ranged from 10,000 to 20,000 (Janus et al., 1987; Carey, 1990).

According to Campos et al. (1994), Brazilian street youth can be separated into two groups: those “on” and those “of” the street. Campos et al. (1994, p. 319) observe that youth “on” the street work at street-based jobs and return to their families at night or on weekends, whereas those “of” the street have fragmented family ties, sleep in street locations, and often engage in illegal survival strategies. Both kinds of youth are a prominent part of Latin American city life (Aptekar, 1988), whereas in developed countries, youth “of” the street cause more frequent concern. Our research concentrates on the latter, but it varies from much of the work in



this area by focusing on issues of survival on the street, including involvement in crime.

Although early investigations suggested that street youth were no more delinquent or criminal while on the street than were their homebound counterparts (see Shellow et al., 1972; Gold and Reimer, 1974), more recent studies concur with social workers' reports and media portrayals that indicate otherwise.<sup>7</sup> In a study using data on youth from Colorado and from a national sample of adolescents, Brennan et al. (1978) find that 33 percent of runaways admitted stealing after leaving home (15 percent indicated that they stole objects worth \$50 or more) and 20 percent reported selling drugs. Brennan et al. (1978) note that these activities were positively associated with the length of time spent away from home and the number of previous departures.

In a more recent investigation of 489 runaway youth in Edmonton (Canada), Kufeldt and Nimmo (1987) indicate that 71 percent of runaways reported being encouraged by others to participate in crime while on the street; moreover, 49 percent admitted involvement in unspecified illegal activities. Whitbeck and Simons (1990, 1993) report comparable findings in their study of 156 homeless adolescents and 319 adults in a midwestern U.S. city. They find that 43 percent of homeless youth shoplifted on the street, 33 percent sold drugs, 32 percent committed a break and enter, and 9 percent worked in prostitution. Whitbeck and Simons point out that for each type of crime, homeless youth report significantly greater involvement than their adult counterparts.

Several smaller and more qualitatively oriented studies also document the link between life on the street and involvement in crime (e.g., see Silbert and Pines, 1982; Palenski, 1984). For example, Palenski (1984) interviewed 36 New York City youth who left home and took to the streets. He notes that among these youth illegal behavior usually is not preferred but rather is adopted as a response to demands of being on the street:

What often occurs is that young people abandon the runaway preoccupation for any set of alternative acts that will bring money, security or approval for the moment. This marks the onset of illegal behavior in that drugs, sex and petty theft are not supports to the runaway episode but options in themselves. (p. 133)

We have found further evidence that criminal involvement is not simply more prevalent among street youth but also more frequent and serious. In the first of the two Toronto samples analyzed in this book, we find that 46

percent of the homeless respondents made drug sales, 49 percent stole goods valued up to \$50, and 27 percent broke into homes or businesses (McCarthy and Hagan, 1991). The respective percentages of 32, 13, and 13 reported in Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis's (1981) Seattle-based community study are substantially lower, despite the latter study's stratification to overrepresent adolescents with police contacts. Even lower proportions are reported in studies of the school samples that have become common in criminology (e.g., see Hirschi, 1969; Elliott and Ageton, 1980; Paternoster and Triplett, 1988).

Data on the frequency of offending are less commonly reported in the school literature, but the information available indicates that street youth are disproportionately repeat offenders. For example, in a study of over fifteen hundred eleventh-grade students, Paternoster and Triplett (1988) report that among offenders, the median frequency of petty theft is three, and for smoking marijuana, it is ten. In the first Toronto street youth sample (described in more detail later), the median frequency of *more serious theft* (over \$50) while on the street is eight, and for *selling hard drugs*, it is ten.

Criminologists increasingly recognize the importance of samples that include frequent and serious offenders (Piliavin, Thornton, Gartner, and Matsueda, 1986; Wolfgang, Thornberry, and Figlio, 1987; Sullivan, 1989; Matsueda, Gartner, Piliavin, and Polakowski, 1992; Inciardi, Horowitz, and Pottieger, 1993), and although street youth constitute a relatively small proportion of all adolescents, they are involved in a substantial and disproportionate amount of crime. Yet the youth in our samples range from those who are repeat, almost daily, offenders to those with little or no criminal involvement. The challenge of our work is to examine this variation to understand better the causal forces that lead many street youth to crime, as well as the direction that their involvement takes. First, however, it is important that we clarify our operational definitions of some key terms: youth, homelessness, and crime.

## Youth

There is little consensus about the period of life generally referred to as *youth*. Although the journal *Adolescence* is devoted to studying aspects of the "second decade of human life," it regularly publishes studies of young persons past the age of 20. Similarly, research on runaway and homeless youth considers individuals of various ages. For the most part, these definitions reflect the characteristics of the research setting. Studies that survey