ON THE RUN
Fugitive Life in an American City

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CONCLUSION

A Fugitive Community

In the last third of the twentieth century, the Civil Rights Movement helped forge a new Black middle class with considerable political and economic power. At the same time, the United States embarked on a new and highly punitive era in regard to poor communities of color—a profound change in how American society governs segregated urban areas and those living within them.

Around 6th Street, police helicopters circle overhead, police cameras monitor passersby, and police routinely stop, search, and arrest people in the streets. Many young men are going in and out of jail or attending court dates; many others are living under probation or parole supervision, under house arrest, or with open warrants out for their arrest. When these young men are home, they live as suspects and fugitives, afraid that any encounter with the authorities will send them back to jail or prison.

In the popular imagination, to be on the run is a condition reserved for those exceptional criminals who make the FBI’s Most Wanted lists. Fugitives are the stuff of action movies and legends. Yet today, the United States’ tough-on-crime policies have turned its poor and segregated Black neighborhoods into heavily policed places where many young men are using fake names, looking over their shoulder, and living with the genuine fear that those closest to them may bring them into the hands of the police.

Most of these men are out of work and spend some portion of their time trying and failing to secure the lowest-paying part-time jobs. Some are intermittently involved in the risky but ready drug trade, sell-
ing small and sometimes larger amounts of marijuana, crack, or pills hand to hand. Periodically they go hungry, and sleep in abandoned cars or their neighbors’ unfinished basements.

Around 6th Street, young men’s compromised legal status transforms the basic institutions of work, friendship, and family into a net of entrapment. Hospitals become dangerous places to visit, as do jobs. Their mother’s home becomes a last-known address: the first place the police will look. As the police track these men through their known addresses, bill payments, and cell phone activity and round them up at the hospital, at work, and at family gatherings, they learn to cultivate a lifestyle of secrecy and evasion, and to see those closest to them as potential informants. As long as a man is at risk of confinement, staying out of prison and routine participation in family, work, and friendships become contradictory goals—doing one reduces his chance of achieving the other.

To be on the run is a strange phrase for legally compromised people, because to be on the run is also to be at a standstill. Indeed, many on 6th Street use the terms caught up and on the run interchangeably. On the one hand, young men are quite literally running from the police, who chase them on foot or in cars, through houses, and over fences. They are also running from the information in the police database that designates them as arrestable on sight. At the same time, their legal entanglements leave them stuck or caught in place. The policing technology now in use to track people with legal entanglements means that leaving the city or the state will not enable them to escape their legal woes. Possessing few resources or skills they can take with them to succeed elsewhere, they remain in the neighborhood, dependent on the generosity of family and neighbors to hide them and help them survive.

These young men are also at a standstill in the sense that their warrants and court cases and probation and parole sentences loom over them as barriers to advancement. They sense that they cannot proceed with school or work until their legal issues are cleared up—until their warrant is lifted or their court cases end. While employers hesitate to hire a man on parole, they are perhaps even less inclined to take on a man with an arrest warrant or pending court cases, often advising him to come back after these are dealt with. The likelihood of a man
with pending legal entanglements being sent back to jail or prison also makes it difficult for partners and family members to build him into their future. Even if he doesn’t get sent back to jail, the number of meetings, court dates, and other appointments he must keep up with to continue in good standing with the legal system can feel like a full-time job, or at least a part-time job with unpredictable hours that undermine regular attendance at school or work. In this sense, living on the run is akin to treading water—continual motion without getting anywhere.

The authorities’ efforts to hunt, capture, try, and confine large numbers of young men in poor and segregated Black neighborhoods are not only changing the way these men see themselves and orient to the world around them. The heavy police presence and the looming threat of incarceration are spilling over past their targets and tearing at the fabric of everyday life, sowing fear and suspicion into the networks of family and friends that have long sustained poor Black communities. Under the threat of prison, a new and more paranoid social fabric is emerging—one built on the expectation that loved ones may become wanted by the police or may inform on one another to save their own skin. It is woven in subterfuge and trickery; in moves and counter-moves; in the paranoid practices of secrecy, elusion, misinformation, and unpredictability. If there is solidarity, it is an occasional solidarity against the police.

The pressure the police put on young men’s partners and relatives to provide information about their whereabouts places women under considerable duress. As officers raid women’s houses, threaten to arrest them or get them evicted, and take their children away, they must decide between their own safety and the freedom of the men they hold dear. Women’s pledges to protect the men in their lives dissolve under sustained police pressure, and some find they become the unwilling accomplices of the authorities. This descent from trusted partner to snitch or abandoner causes considerable personal anguish as well as public humiliation.

In ghettoized communities there has long been distrust between men and women, and also between people living respectfully and those living on the edge. The divide between members of respectable society and those oriented toward the fast life or criminal activity has long been noted. But generosity and trust, and bonds of family and friend-
ship, also have endured through great duress. Around 6th Street, intensive policing and the looming threat of prison are tearing at these bonds, shutting people up in their homes, sowing suspicion and distrust into friendship and family life. In this community, there is simply not enough safety from the authorities to go around. Staying out of jail may mean giving up a son or brother or right-hand man. A central tension in the relationships of men and women on 6th Street involves having to depend heavily on those whom they cannot trust, and wanting to be trusted by people they may put at risk or deceive.

The long-standing divide between the respectable and the shady members of the Black community has been at least partially supplanted by a new line between clean and dirty people: those able to make it safely through a police stop, and those likely to be seized. An underground market has emerged to supply those seeking protection from the authorities or a bit more freedom than their legal restrictions allow. The buyers and sellers of these protections and privileges forge new bonds together, though these transactional relationships also become complicated by the threat of discovery and arrest.

Men and women also turn the heavy presence of police, the courts, and the prisons to their advantage in ways the authorities never intended. For young men, jail sometimes serves as a safe haven when the streets get too dangerous. The bail office becomes a de facto bank, and warrants become a ready excuse for failure. In times of anger and desperation, women harness the threat of the police to control the men in their lives; during calmer months, they build meaningful routines around their son’s or partner’s bail payments, court dates, visiting hours, and parole meetings.

The threat of prison and the heavy presence of the police and the courts come to permeate the social fabric of the community in more subtle ways, shifting the currency of love and commitment and creating a new moral framework through which residents carve out their identities and relationships. People express their devotion by refusing to tell the police which way a friend went, or by offering a nephew wanted by the law a few nights’ safety on the couch. The events marking a man’s passage through the criminal justice system—his first jail visits, his bail posting, his sentencing—become de facto rites of passage and collective events: the weddings, graduations, and school dances of
the fugitive community. The threat of prison also creates opportunities for acts of bravery and loyalty: by protecting one another from arrest, people make claims for themselves as honorable and decent, and demonstrate the strength of their commitment to others.

And yet, it is important to remember that the world the criminal justice system creates—of stops and searches, of stints in jail, of warrants and court dates and parole meetings—is not total. While many young people spend their days running from the police, making court dates, and visiting their parole officers, some residents continue to go to school or work every day. Those with a close personal connection to someone on the run or sitting in jail can still build distance from this association, and carve out a life with little connection to the world of cops, court dates, and jail time. Still, these people often work very hard to avoid contact with the dirty world, and come to think of themselves in relation to those enmeshed in it.

THE PROBLEM WITH INTENSIVE POLICING IN POOR URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Crime and violence are undeniable problems in poor urban communities. Levels of homicide and gun-related violence in particular set poor minority communities apart, creating pressure for some kind of government action. Around 6th Street, the problems of drugs and violence are real ones, and the young men described here are intimately connected to them.

Some might say that in neighborhoods plagued by drugs and violence, the police have little choice but to arrest large numbers of young men and zealously run down outstanding warrants, particularly when those on the run may carry guns, become involved in serious violence, and/or deal drugs in the neighborhood. But around 6th Street the street trade in drugs, neighborhood rivalries, and their potential for violence are all deeply woven into community life. Under these conditions, the role of law enforcement changes from keeping communities safe from a few offenders to bringing an entire neighborhood under suspicion and surveillance.

In this context, the highly punitive approach to crime control winds up being counterproductive, creating entirely new domains of criminal-
ity. The level of social control that tough-on-crime policy envisions—particularly in a liberal state—is so extreme and difficult to implement that it has led to a flourishing black market to ease the pains of supervision. A new realm of criminal activity is produced as young people supply the goods and services that legally compromised people seek to evade the authorities or live with more freedom and comfort than their legal restrictions permit. This black market runs second to the fugitive status as a kind of corollary illegality. Moreover, mothers and girlfriends find themselves committing a seemingly endless series of crimes as they attempt to hide, protect, and provide for their legally entangled sons and partners. Thus, the great paradox of a highly punitive approach to crime control is that it winds up criminalizing so much of daily life as to foster widespread illegality as people work to circumvent it. Intensive policing and the crime it intends to control become mutually reinforcing. The extent to which crime elicits harsh policing, or policing itself contributes to a climate of violence and illegality, becomes impossible to sort out.

Another irony of tough-on-crime policies is that they are so disruptive to the bonds of family, friendship, and community that they have united drug dealers and working people around what all can agree is the unjust overreach of the police, the courts, and the prisons. This is not to say that law-abiding residents of the 6th Street neighborhood are untroubled by the violence and drug selling in which many young men in the neighborhood become engaged. They are troubled, and they wish these young men would either leave or change their ways. Some residents insist that their sons and nephews could get legitimate jobs if they simply tried hard enough to find them. But police officers’ public violence and efforts to pit neighbors and family members against one another have caused working residents to regard them as an additional problem, not a solution, and in this they find considerable common ground with dirty members of the community.

From the perspective of 6th Street residents, distrust and anger at the police are understandable. The police (along with courts, the jails, and the prisons) are not solving the significant problems of crime and violence but instead are piling on additional problems to the ones residents already face.

This justifiable anger does not mean that we should view the po-
lice as bad people, or their actions as driven by racist or otherwise malevolent motives. The police are in an impossible position: they are essentially the only governmental body charged with addressing the significant social problems of able-bodied young men in the jobless ghetto, and with only the powers of intimidation and arrest to do so. Many in law enforcement recognize that poverty, unemployment, and the drugs and violence that accompany them are social problems that cannot be solved by arresting people. But the police and the courts are not equipped with social solutions. They are equipped with handcuffs and jail time.

THE POLICE AND THE COMMUNITY

Here it might be worthwhile to comment on just how complex the relationship actually is between members of the 6th Street community and the criminal justice personnel who operate in that neighborhood (or remove people from it). On some level the police are seen as a white, anonymous occupying force that swoops into the area to round up whichever young men are unlucky enough to cross their path. Fear and hatred of the police are palpable, and it's not uncommon for people's anger and resentment to boil over during police stops. But many residents also count a few police officers as neighbors and relatives. These personal connections to the police force make it harder to see all officers as outside invaders, though some cops who live in the community are reviled just as much as the ones who do not, if not more so.

Another contradiction lies in the fact that young men getting chased by the police may at the same time be romantically involved with female members of the force. Women in the Black community are significantly better educated and better employed than their male counterparts, and a good share of them work in criminal justice. This means that a number of romantic partnerships cross the line between police and criminals. Such ties are only multiplied by the intimate association in which young men like Mike and Chuck so often find themselves with female halfway house operators, prison guards, and probation workers. Another surprising fact here is that young men sitting in jail or prison urge the women coming to visit them to apply for jobs in
law enforcement. Mike and Chuck and their friends understood better than most that criminal justice is one of the few robust branches of the economy, and a field in which those who do not have legal issues of their own would be smart to enter.

Similarly, the moral view of snitching is quite fluid. A generalized norm against informing certainly exists, but people call the police on one another every day. What is even more interesting is that many people who blatantly call police on others in the neighborhood are not judged for it; this action is expected of them, and understood as part of their character as upstanding, clean people.

THE FUGITIVE GHETTO IN HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

What sense might we make of the heavily policed community of 6th Street, and of the millions of Black young men going in and out of jails and prisons today? Sociologist Loïc Wacquant and Civil Rights advocate Michelle Alexander have drawn strong parallels between the current levels of targeted imprisonment and earlier systems of racial oppression such as slavery and Jim Crow, both of which denied Black people basic rights such as voting, running for office, and free movement.¹

Accompanying slavery and Jim Crow were policies that granted a fugitive status to large numbers of Black men and women—during slavery through the fugitive slave laws, and during the Jim Crow era through the vagrancy statutes that suppressed large numbers of Black people moving to the North during the first and second Great Migrations.² The vagrancy statutes held that men could be arrested for being unemployed and unhoused, as well as for drinking, loitering, disorderly conduct, or associating with known criminals.

Though vagrancy statutes had existed in the United States since the colonial era, widespread efforts to round up men on vagrancy charges occurred after the fugitive slave laws were struck down, as Black people migrated to Northern cities after emancipation. In turn, these statutes were stricken from the books in the 1960s and 1970s, just as the laws and practices of the tough-on-crime era began to take effect.³

From this history it would seem that large numbers of Black people in the United States have been assigned not only a diminished form
of citizenship but a fugitive status through slavery, sharecropping, the Northern migration, and now through the systems of policing and penal supervision accompanying the War on Crime. In this sense, what I have described here represents only the latest chapter in a long history of Black exclusion and civic diminishment in the United States.

Yet it would be incorrect to conclude that the history of US race relations has been one of unrelenting domination. Instead, there have been gains and reversals, and the quality of African American citizenship has expanded significantly in recent decades. An important difference between current levels of policing and imprisonment and earlier periods of racial oppression is that heavy policing and high levels of imprisonment are restricted largely to poor Black men and their communities, as well as to many poor white and Latino men. Educated Black men and their families are not enveloped in intensive penal supervision: they may on occasion be subject to public police harassment and mistreatment, but they are not spending their twenties sitting in jail, or living on parole or with warrants out for their arrest.

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If the current treatment of poor Black people in US cities bears at least some similarity to earlier periods of racial oppression in the United States, it might also remind readers of the experience of other groups whose ethnicity, religion, caste, or sexual orientation has in various moments placed them on the social and economic margins. Tools of state oppression may vary, but the experience of persecuted groups throughout history—from the Jews in Europe to undocumented immigrants in the United States to people anywhere living under a repressive, authoritarian, or totalitarian regime—shows astonishing threads of commonality across time and space.

At the level of lived experience, these cases all involve the denial of basic rights to large groups, and the risk of some extreme sanction—confine ment, expulsion, deportation, torture, or death—becoming a real possibility facing many people. The combination of restricted rights and threatened extreme sanction criminalizes everyday life as people work to circumvent their restrictions and avoid the authorities. We frequently see curfews as well as identity checks and searches being established, and the practices of evasion, hiding, and secrecy becoming
techniques for daily living. A black market in false documents and prohibited goods flourishes. We also see the pernicious issue of informants, both through the police's efforts to cultivate them and through people turning each other in for their own gain. The authorities not only cultivate professional informants but routinely pit close friends, neighbors, and family members against each other, asking people to choose between their own freedom and the security of those they hold dear. Residents experience frequent acts of state violence in the streets—people getting beaten, strangled, kicked, or even shot in public view, for example—and see that the authorities are fairly useless for protection or mediation, despite their omnipresence. Diminished rights and the looming threat of extreme sanction are felt at the level of the community's social fabric—for example, the taking on of legal risk is understood as a gesture of sacrifice and personal attachment—and legal restrictions and diminishments become key social distinctions, particularly the divides between those more or less safe from the authorities.

To be sure, these cases involve as many differences as similarities. In many instances, those seized by the authorities didn't circulate back into the general population; once they were gone, they didn't return. The fear of torture and death isn't the same as the fear of prison or deportation. But these cases share enough so that a deep knowledge of one may teach us something about the experience of people living in others. Certainly, the contemporary US ghetto can take its place among them.

Taken in these terms, we might understand the US ghetto as one of the last repressive regimes of the age: one that operates within our liberal democracy, yet unbeknownst to many living only a few blocks away. In a nation that has officially rid itself of a racial caste system, and has elected and reelected a Black president, we are simultaneously deploying a large number of criminal justice personnel at great taxpayer cost to visit an intensely punitive regime upon poor Black men and women living in our cities' segregated neighborhoods.