

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Alice Goffman**, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780226136714 (cloth); ISBN: 9780226136851 (ebook)

Alice Goffman's portrayal of the daily life of a poor Black neighbourhood in Philadelphia shows us that decades of neglect, poverty, crime, violence, *and* the systematic intervention of the criminal justice system has resulted in the emergence of "fugitive communities". The sociologist's must-read ethnography, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, is a necessary addition to the now vast literature on the penal state, carceral and punitive geographies, and the geographies of neoliberalism. Goffman provides "an on-the-ground account of the US prison boom" in order to document how "the fear of capture and confinement has seeped into the basic activities of daily living", producing communities *on the run*—places where residents' daily life is structured by the continual avoidance of an imposing criminal justice system (p.xii).

*On the Run* focuses on the impacts of the criminal justice system on a neighbourhood where the majority of young men are "dirty", that is, individuals whose legal status is compromised because they are on parole or probation, or they have an outstanding bench warrant or pending court hearing. The book effectively illustrates how the extent and scope of policing in poor Black neighbourhoods is "transforming community life in ways that are deep and enduring, not only for the young men who are ... [its] targets but for their family members, partners, and neighbours" (p.5). Goffman, a White middle-class female, spent six years living among "dirty" and "clean"<sup>1</sup> people near "6<sup>th</sup> Street"—a fictitious name given to a real neighbourhood in Philadelphia's inner-city. She was a participant observer, consistently typing field notes and occasionally recording entire conversations. In the process, Goffman befriended young men in

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<sup>1</sup> By not having warrants or a criminal record, the lives of those who avoid the criminal justice system are said to be "clean".

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and out of jail, and the girlfriends, mothers, brothers and sisters directly or indirectly affected by the far reach of the criminal justice system. In short, by experiencing life on 6<sup>th</sup> Street Goffman was able to document the impacts of “the massive *expansion* of criminal justice intervention into the lives of poor Black families in the United States” (p.249, emphasis added).

The first chapter introduces the main characters of the story, members of the small street-based group “the 6<sup>th</sup> Street Boys”, and explores their “legal entanglements”. Mike, Chuck, and their friends are considered legally entangled because they’ve spent significant time in prison, on probation or parole, and/or in custody. All of them had a warrant out for their arrest at some point and they all had calendars filled with court dates. Since their daily lives are so intimately connected with the criminal justice system, these young men have learned the “art of running”, which is the subject of the second chapter. If a young man has a warrant, for instance, he avoids going to the hospital to seek medical help for fear his name, and warrant, might appear in the computer and he will be arrested on the spot (p.34). Similarly, those with a warrant avoid funerals, places of employment, and even visiting family members or friends in prison (p.35). Being in legal jeopardy means being on the run, being afraid of running *into* the police and getting arrested. Indeed, the police exploit this vulnerability and are constantly monitoring hospitals, funerals, and places of employment to arrest this ever-larger number of “fugitive” subjects. We learn in this chapter that the everyday life of the wanted man is filled with strategies “to avoid dangerous places, people, and interactions entirely” (p.52).

If a young man has a warrant for his arrest, the police can “knock your door in” to interrogate family members, girlfriends, wives, friends and neighbours. In the third chapter we are introduced to the world of “riders”, those who maintain a relationship with a wanted man and successfully aid him to escape and remain on the run. True riders are constantly pressured, and at times are the victims of threats and physical abuse, by the police to give the location of their boyfriends, husbands, brothers and sons, to cooperate with the authorities, and to snitch against

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their loved ones. Under these circumstances, Goffman reminds us, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain healthy relationships and create a sense of community, for a “culture of fear and suspicion” contributes to the destruction of “familial and romantic relationships” (p.90).

The threat of arrest disrupts the daily life of young men and their families, it destroys relationships and community life, and yet it also creates new opportunities and occasions. In chapters four through six Goffman documents the myriad personal, economic, and cultural resources people on 6<sup>th</sup> Street put to work in a community on the run. We learn how some residents use the bail office as a personal bank, how jail can become a safe haven for those who face death threats in the streets, and how an entire protection economy has developed to help those on the run. In these chapters we clearly see the effects the criminal justice system has on the everyday lives of residents in a “fugitive community”. Penal events, Goffman documents, have become significant social occasions that paradoxically bring a “fugitive community” closer. Neighbours and family members come together for “court sentences, bail hearings, and homecomings from a long sentence” (p.120). To a great extent, these occasions have replaced graduations and christenings, and have become important social events in “hyper-policed Black neighbourhoods” such as 6<sup>th</sup> Street (p.136).

Despite the apparent “immanent force” (Allen 2003) of the criminal justice system, many neighbours have managed to remain “clean”. The last substantial chapter of the book documents the lives of those who have successfully avoided the criminal justice system in “hyper-policed” neighbourhoods. “Clean” people have been able to draw clear boundaries between public and private spaces: for young men that want to “stay out of trouble” their social life is spent mostly “indoors” (p.167). “Clean” people tend to dissociate themselves from “dirty” people, and the most successful families have carved out “a life apart” (p.172). Negotiating the boundaries between the “clean” and “dirty” worlds, between public and private space, between street life and indoor life, can be a difficult task in neighbourhoods such as 6<sup>th</sup> Street, but it can prove to be

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the difference between life and death. According to one of the 6<sup>th</sup> Street Boys, “clean people attend more weddings than funerals” (p.186).

*On the Run* is a phenomenal book intended to illustrate the complex ways in which the criminal justice system penetrates, affects, and reconstitutes social and spatial relationships. Alice Goffman forcefully shows the ill-effects of a War on Drugs that has produced prisons, prisoners, and, we mustn't forget, “fugitive communities”. “The heavy police presence and the looming threat of incarceration”, concludes Goffman, “are spilling out past their targets and tearing at the fabric of everyday life” (p.197). The strength of the book resides in the detailed accounts which illustrate that a “new and more paranoid social fabric is emerging” (p.197). *On the Run*, moreover, is one of the best depictions of the effects of authoritative power. According to geographer John Allen, “the ability [of authority and domination] to reach into the scattered lives of others” can only take place through “mediated relations of power” (2003: 157-158). Goffman's book effectively demonstrates the complex geographies of power that enable the criminal justice system to reach out “to a dispersed population through a succession of relationships” (*ibid.*). It shows that judges, parole officers, hospitals, employers, family members, girlfriends and neighbours form part of the succession of relations, *and* sites, that collectively police and produce “fugitive communities”.

The chapter on methodology is buried in the Appendix. Although Goffman mentions enough about how she conducted her study at the beginning of the book for the reader to understand how she ended up at 6<sup>th</sup> Street, it would have been helpful to read the methodology chapter first. I was never able to fully relate to the characters of the book, and at times it was rather difficult to keep up with every character and their relationship with the ethnographer.

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Unlike Philippe Bourgois' (2003) *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*<sup>2</sup>, where at the end of the book one has developed a strong connection with the main characters of the story (and might end up empathising with and/or despising—even hating—them), one does not get that intimate connection in *On the Run*. I learned more about Mike, Chuck, and their friends and families by reading the Appendix at the end; thus I suggest reading the methodology chapter first. Likewise, it is only in the last chapter that we briefly learn about 6<sup>th</sup> Street and how it transformed economically, socially, and culturally over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to the present (p.173-176). As an urban geographer I was expecting to learn more about the processes that shaped 6<sup>th</sup> Street and how the criminal justice system contributed to the production of a segregated urban landscape.

Despite this omission, students and scholars of mass incarceration in the United States must read *On the Run*. Similarly, political, urban, legal, and cultural geographers should engage with Goffman's powerful ethnography as it provides a fresh and gripping depiction of the everyday life of residents in a poor Black neighbourhood in urban America—and the institutions structuring them. *On the Run* reminds us that the punitive and revanchist approach adopted over the past several decades to police the effects of “hypersegregation” in US cities has further criminalized the everyday lives of residents—whether “clean” or “dirty”—in poor neighbourhoods (see Massey and Denton 1993; Wacquant 2009; 2010). *On the Run*, in short, exposes the “latest chapter in a long history of Black exclusion and civic diminishment in the United States” (p.203). We geographers can further enrich the analysis of the impacts of the criminal justice

<sup>2</sup> In the weeks before the publication of *On the Run* I read *In Search of Respect* with my students. In their critical responses I encountered very passionate reactions to the characters of the book, and to its author. The main critique of Bourgois was that his gender enabled him to gain access to the world of crack. Goffman clearly breaks that mould and I thought it pedagogically interesting to discuss *In Search of Respect* followed by *On the Run* as it would surely generate fruitful conversations about gender, race, class, the War on Drugs, mass incarceration, and the future of inner-cities.

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system on poor neighbourhoods across the US by paying particular attention to the mobility/fixity of subjects across urban areas, the uneven distribution and application of state power, the legal geographies of “fugitive communities”, and the production of urban space through punitive institutions (see Beckett and Herbert 2011, for example, for a legal-geographical account of the production of fugitive subjects). *On the Run* will certainly help broaden our understanding of the wide-reaching power of the criminal justice system and its effects; you will not regret reading it.

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