Elijah Anderson

The Social Ecology of Youth Violence

ABSTRACT

This essay, largely drawn from Elijah Anderson's forthcoming book, *Code of the Street*, offers an ethnographic representation of the workings of the code of the street in the context of the trying socioeconomic situation in which the inner-city black community finds itself, as jobs have become ever more scarce, public assistance has increasingly disappeared, and frustration has been building for many. The material presented here was gathered through many visits to various inner-city families and neighborhood settings, including carry-outs, laundromats, taverns, playgrounds, and street corners. In these settings, Anderson conducted in-depth interviews with adolescent boys and girls, young men (some incarcerated, some not), older men, teenage mothers, and grandmothers. The structure of the community, and that community's extreme poverty, which is in large part the result of structural economic change, will be seen to interact in a way that facilitates the involvement of so many maturing youths in the culture of the streets, in which violence and the way it is regulated are key elements.

A clarifying note on methodology is perhaps in order for those unfamiliar with the ethnographic method. Ethnography seeks to paint a conceptual picture of the setting under consideration, by observation and in-depth interviews. The researcher's goal is to illuminate the social and cultural dynamics that characterize the setting by answering such questions as "How do the people in the setting perceive their situation?" "What assumptions do they bring to their decision making?"

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"What behavior patterns result from their choices?" "What are the social consequences of those behaviors?" An important aspect of the ethnographer's work is that it be as objective as possible. This is not easy since it requires researchers to set aside their own values and assumptions as to what is and is not morally acceptable—in other words, to jettison the prism through which they typically view a given situation. By definition, one's own assumptions are so basic to one's perceptions that seeing their influence may be difficult. Ethnographic researchers, however, have been trained to look for and recognize underlying assumptions, their own and those of their subjects, and to try to override the former and uncover the latter. I have done my best to do so in the text that follows.

Adults who have grown up in inner-city neighborhoods understand the requirements of the code of the street and the necessity that their children understand them as well. The story of the inner-city black community, in Philadelphia as elsewhere, is at heart one of profound isolation—economic, physical, and social. In its simplest form the story is familiar—slavery, emancipation, migration to cities for opportunities in industrial and menial work. There they competed with European immigrants and faced significant racial discrimination. Segregation and ghettoization resulted and became institutionalized. The civil rights movements and the 1960s civil disorders followed, and, in response, the system opened up somewhat. Affirmative action resulted in a growing black middle class. A split developed between the working class and the middle class. Deindustrialization, the global economy, and other factors eliminate the manufacturing jobs that once provided working-class employment in the city. White people follow the jobs out of the city. Black people are prevented from moving because of housing discrimination and from commuting because of lack of public transit. As local neighborhoods become perceived as "black," the remaining white people leave, city services decline, and police and other institutions abdicate their responsibility to protect residents and property. The neighborhoods develop a "second-class" status. Eventually there is a concentration of poor blacks, as middle-class blacks join the white residents in fleeing the area. In addition, social welfare is being eliminated and many job-training programs have been terminated, further exacerbating so many of the conditions alluded to above. Then, in the absence of family-sustaining jobs and the lack of hope for the future in ghetto neighborhoods, the drug trade and the underground

economy move in and proliferate, providing opportunity where the wider economy provides none.

The historic social isolation of the black community in the United States contributes to the sense of alienation in these neighborhoods. The idea has circulated since the time of slavery that the wider system is against them, that the white authorities have a "plan" for the subjugation of black people, if not the annihilation of the black community. Today drugs, guns, and the persistent poverty of the inner city are seen by the most alienated residents of these economically compromised communities as part of a plan to destroy them.

Because of these factors, in the inner-city black community people have a strong sense that they are "on their own," that in matters of personal defense they must take primary responsibility. In this context the code of the street provides a set of prescriptions and proscriptions for behavior. It affects the exchange of goods and services and indicates a social status system. It provides a certain order in places where law has failed and, in that sense, might be called a "people's law." It is a cultural adaptation to a situation where other institutions and "codes" have failed. It involves give-and-take, reciprocity, and payback. To grow up in this inner-city community is to be affected by that culture.

Almost everyone in poor inner-city neighborhoods is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America, but there are degrees of alienation, captured by the labels "decent" and "street." Residents use these labels as judgments on themselves or others. People of both orientations often coexist in the same extended family. There is also a great deal of "code-switching": a person may exhibit both decent and street orientations, depending on the occasion. Decent people, especially young people, put a premium on the ability to code-switch. They share many of the "decent" middle-class values of the wider society, but know that the open display of such values carries little weight on the street: it does not provide the emblems that say "I can take care of myself." So they develop a repertoire of behaviors that provide that security. Those who are street, having had less exposure to the wider society, may have difficulty code-switching. They are strongly imbued with the code of the street and either do not know the rules for decent behavior or may see little value in displaying such knowledge.

At the extreme of the street group are those who can be called "hard-core street." People making up this class are often profound cas-

ualties of the social and economic system. Not only do they lack a decent education, they also lack an outlook that allows them to see far beyond their present circumstances in the most positive sense. Moreover, they tend to be alienated and angry.

Overall, members of this group are among the most desperate and alienated people of the city. For them, all people and situations are best thought of as "having a trick to them," and in most situations the effort is geared to not being "caught up in the trick bag." To them, it is important to see all persons and situations as part of life's obstacles; they are things to subdue, or to "get over." One gets over by developing an effective "game" or "game plan," setting oneself up in a position to prevail by outsmarting others. In line with this, one must always be wary of his counterparts, suspecting that they are involved with him only for what they can get out of the situation.

In this world, the competition is intense. It is a competition in which "winners" totally dominate "losers," and losing is a fate that is worse than death. So one must be on one's guard constantly. Other people are not to be trusted, partly because there is so much at stake but also because everyone else is understood to be so very needy.

Usually, these are the people who are identified as the "criminal element." They not only engage in criminal activity but teach their children to do so as well, at times starting with stealing and shoplifting. In some parts of the community there are whole families that have been in trouble with the law. Mom was a crack addict. Dad was a drug dealer who is now incarcerated. He taught brothers Joe and Tom how to steal cars. The whole family is living a checkered life. The moral code of the wider society has no authority for them, and of course they have no moral authority for that society. And when members of the wider society look at the ghetto, they tend to stereotype the community, unable or unwilling to see the differences, distinctions, and human complexities of the lives the residents are leading.

I. Down Germantown Avenue

Germantown Avenue is a major Philadelphia artery that goes back to colonial days. Eight and a half miles long, it links the northwest suburbs with the heart of inner-city Philadelphia. It traverses a varied social terrain as well. Germantown Avenue provides an excellent cross-section of the social ecology of a major American city. Along this artery live the well-to-do, the middle classes, the working poor, and the very poor. The story of Germantown Avenue with its wide social

and class variations can serve in many respects as a metaphor for the whole city. This essay about the "code of the street" begins with an introduction to the world of the streets, by way of a tour down Germantown Avenue.

One of the most salient features of urban life, in the minds of many people today, is the relative prevalence of violence. Our tour down Germantown Avenue will focus on the role of violence in the social organization of the communities through which the avenue passes, and on how violence is revealed in the interactions of people up and down the street. The avenue, we will see, is a natural continuum characterized by a code of civility at one end and a code of conduct regulated by the threat of violence—the code of the street—at the other.[1] But the people living along this continuum make their own claims on civility and the streets as well.

We begin at the top of the hill that gives Chestnut Hill its name. Chestnut Hill is the first neighborhood within the city of Philadelphia as you come into town from the northwest. Often called the "suburb in the city," it is a predominantly residential community of mostly white, affluent, educated people, which is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically mixed. The houses are mostly large single buildings, surrounded by lawns and trees. The business and shopping district along Germantown Avenue draws shoppers from all over the city. At the very top of the hill is a large Borders Bookstore. Across the street is the regional rail train station, with the local library in close proximity. Moving southeast down the avenue, you pass a variety of mostly small, upscale businesses: gourmet food shops, a camera shop, an optician's, a sporting goods store, a bank, jewelry stores, clothing boutiques. Many of the buildings are old or built to look old and are made of fieldstone with slanted slate roofs, giving the area a quaint appearance. You see many different kinds of people—old and young, black and white, affluent, middle- and working-class, women (some of them black) pushing babies who are white. Couples stroll hand in hand. Everyone is polite and seems relaxed. When people pass one another on the sidewalk, they may make eye contact. People stand about nonchalantly on the sidewalk, sometimes with their backs to the street. You

[1] This is to be distinguished from Wolfgang and Ferracuti's (1967) position, which identified and delineated more explicitly a "subculture of violence." Wolfgang and Ferracuti postulated norms that undergirded or even defined the culture of the entire community, whereas the code of the street applies predominantly to public behavior and is normative for only the most alienated and socially isolated segment of the community.

do not get the feeling that there is any hostility or that people are on guard against being compromised or insulted or robbed. There is a pleasant ambience—an air of civility.

One of the things you see at this end of Germantown Avenue is that relations in public appear racially integrated, perhaps self-consciously so. There are integrated play groups among small children on the playgrounds. At the bank, there is relaxed interaction between a black teller and a white client. There are biracial friendship groups. At the Boston Market restaurant blacks and whites sit and eat together or simply share the restaurant. A black man drives by in a Range Rover; two well-dressed black women pull up in a black Lexus. In their clothing and cars, the black middle class choose styles and colors that stand out and are noticed as expensive: they are quite expressive in laying claim to middle-class status.

In the upscale stores here, there is not usually a great concern for security. During the day the plate-glass windows have appealing displays; some shops even have unguarded merchandise out on the sidewalk.

Once in a while, however, a violent incident does occur. There was a holdup at the bank in the middle of the day not long ago, ending in a shoot-out on the sidewalk. The perpetrators were black. Such incidents give the residents here the overly simplistic yet persistent view that blacks commit crime and white people do not. That does not mean that the white people here think that the black people they ordinarily see on the streets are bound to rob them: many of these people are too sophisticated to believe that all blacks are inclined to criminality. But the fact that black people robbed the bank does give a peculiar edge to race relations, and the racial reality of street crime speaks to the relations between blacks and whites. Because everybody knows that the simplistic view does exist, even middle-class blacks, as well as whites, have to work against that stereotype. Both groups know that the reality is that crime is likely to be perpetrated by young black males. While both blacks and whites behave as though they deny it, this background knowledge threatens the civility of the neighborhood. The cleavages of wealth, and the fact that black people are generally disenfranchised and white people are not, operate in the back of the minds of people here.

One can see this as a black male walking into the stores, especially the jewelry store. The sales personnel pay particular attention to peo-

ple until they feel they have passed inspection, and black males almost always are given extra scrutiny. Most blacks in Chestnut Hill are middle-class or even wealthy, although some come into the neighborhood as day workers, and many are disturbed by the inability of some whites to make distinctions between middle- and lower-class blacks or between people who are out to commit crime and those who are not.

The knowledge that there are poor blacks further down the avenue also results in people "here" being on guard against people from "there." Security guards may follow young black males around stores, looking for the emblems and signs that they are from there and not from here. And at night the stores do have interior security devices, although they are outwardly decorative. These elements can, but most often do not, compromise civility between the races in Chestnut Hill; in fact, people generally "get along."

Down the hill, beyond the Boston Market, is Cresheim Valley Road, a neighborhood boundary. On the other side, we are in Mount Airy, a different social milieu. Here there are more black homeowners, interspersed among white ones, and there is more black street traffic on Germantown Avenue. Mount Airy is a much more integrated neighborhood than Chestnut Hill, and the black people who live here are mostly middle class. But Germantown Avenue in Mount Airy and the shops and stores along it are disproportionately used by blacks rather than whites and by poorer blacks rather than middle-class blacks. Whites and middle-class black adults tend to use the stores in Chestnut Hill, finding them more consistent with their tastes. As a result, the shops here are blacker, even though they may be middle-class.

A sign that we are in a different social milieu is that exterior bars begin to appear on the store windows and riot gates on the doors, at first on businesses such as the liquor store. Pizza parlors, karate shops, take-out stores that sell beer, and storefront organizations such as neighborhood health care centers appear—establishments that are not present in Chestnut Hill. There are discount stores of various sorts, black barbershops, and other businesses that cater to the black middle class but also to employed working-class and poorer blacks. Many of the black middle-class youths use the streets as a place to gather and talk with their friends, and they adopt the clothing styles of the poorer people further down the avenue. So people who are not familiar with social types sometimes cannot distinguish between who is middle class and who is not. This confusion appears to be a standing problem for

store owners and managers, and may lead to a sense of defensiveness among middle-class people who do not want to be violated or robbed. But it is a confusion that the youth tend not to mind.

Continuing down the avenue, we pass the Mount Airy playground with its basketball court, which is always buzzing. Evenings and weekends it is full of young black men playing pick-up games. There is a real social mix here, with kids from middle-class, working-class, and poor black families all coming together in this spot, creating a staging area. The urban uniform of sneakers and baggy jeans is much in evidence, which gives pause to other people, particularly whites (many of whom avoid the area). In many ways, however, the atmosphere is easy-going. The place is not crime-ridden or necessarily feared by most blacks, but there is a certain edge to it compared with similar but less racially complex settings further up the avenue. Here it is prudent to be wary—not everyone on the street here recognizes and respects the rule of law, that law that is encoded in the criminal statutes and enforced by the police.

Yet next to the playground is a branch of the Free Library, one of the best in the city, which caters mainly to literate people of Mount Airy, both black and white. Indeed, the social and racial mix of the community is sometimes more visible in the library than on the street itself.

There are many beautiful old buildings in Mount Airy. But the piano repair shops, sandwich stores, and plumbing-supply companies tend to have exterior bars and riot gates, which militates against the notion of civility as the dominant theme of the place. A competing notion crystallizes, and that is the prevalence of crime, the perpetrators of which are more often concerned not with legality but with feasibility. Ten years ago there were fewer bars on the windows and the buildings were better maintained. Today more relatively poor people are occupying the public space. There are still whites among the storekeepers and managers of various establishments, but whites have been displaced in the outdoor public spaces by poorer blacks. Moreover, the further down the avenue we go, the less well maintained the buildings are. Even when they are painted, for example, the painting tends to be done haphazardly, without great regard for architectural detail.

In this section, a billboard warns that those who commit insurance fraud go to jail. (No such signs appear in Chestnut Hill.) There is graffiti—or signs that it has recently been removed. More dilapidated buildings appear, looking as though they receive no maintenance. Yet

among them there are historic buildings, some of which are cared for for just that reason. One of them is the house where the Battle of Germantown was fought during the Revolutionary War. Another was a stop on the underground railroad.

As Mount Airy gives way to Germantown, check-cashing agencies and beeper stores appear, as well as more small take-out stores selling beer, cheese steaks, and other snack food. More of the windows are boarded up, and riot gates and exterior bars become the norm, evoking in the user of the street a certain wariness.

Germantown appears to be a more solidly black working-class neighborhood. Whites, including middle-class whites, do live here, but they either tend to avoid the business district or the stores simply do not attract them. On Germantown Avenue, discount stores of all sorts appear—supermarkets, furniture stores, and clothing stores. Of the people you pass, many more are part of the street element. Here people watch their backs, and more care is given to one's presentation of self. It is not that you are worried every moment that somebody might violate you, but people are more aware of others who are sharing the space with them, some of whom may be looking for an easy target to rob or just intimidate.

Germantown High School, once a model of racially integrated high-quality education, is now almost all black, a shadow of its former academic self. Resources have declined and many of the students are now impoverished and associated with the street element, and most of those who are not still have a need to show themselves as being capable of dealing with the street. In fact, the hallways of the school are in some ways an extension of the streets. Across the street from the high school is a store selling beer. Continuing down the avenue, we pass blocks of small businesses: taverns, Chinese take-out places, barbershops and hair salons, laundromats, storefront churches, pawnshops. Groups of young people loiter on street corners. We also begin to see boarded-up buildings, some of them obviously quite grand at one time, and empty lots. A charred McDonald's sign rises above a weed-covered lot. A police car is parked at the corner, its occupants keeping a watchful eye on the street activity. After a time, they begin to drive slowly down the street.

Just before Chelten Avenue, a major artery that intersects Germantown Avenue, is Vernon Park. The park has a caretaker who is trying to keep it maintained despite the carelessness and even vandalism of the people who like to gather there. A mural has been painted on the

side of an adjacent building. Flowers have been planted. On warm days, couples "making time" sit about on the benches, on the steps of statues, and on the hoods of cars parked along the park's edge. But even during the day you can see men drinking alcohol out of paper sacks, and at night the park is a dangerous place where drug dealing and other shadowy business is conducted. This is what I call a major "staging area," because the activity that occurs here sets the stage for other activity, which may either be played out on the spot, in front of an audience of people who have congregated here, or in less conspicuous locations. An altercation in Vernon Park may be settled with a fight, with or without gunplay, down a side street. People come here to see and be seen, to "profile" and "represent," presenting the image of themselves by which they would like to be known—who they are and how they stand in relation to whom. The streets are buzzing with activity, legal and illegal. In fact, a certain flagrant disregard for the law is visible. We see a teenage boy walk by with an open bottle of beer in his hand, taking a swig when he wants to.

A young man in his twenties crosses the street after taking care of some sort of business with another young man, gets into his brand-new black BMW Sidekick, and sidles up next to his girlfriend who has been waiting there for him. He is dressed in a crisp white T-shirt with Hilfiger emblazoned across the back, black satin shorts with bright red stripes on the sides, and expensive white sneakers. He makes a striking figure as he slides into his vehicle, and others take note. He moves with aplomb, well aware that he is where he wants to be and, for that moment at least, where some others want to be as well. His presentation of self announces that he can take care of himself should someone choose to tangle with him.

Here in Germantown, especially in some pockets, there is less respect for the code of civility, and that fact necessitates a whole way of moving, of acting, of getting up and down the streets, which suggests that violence is just below the surface. The people of Germantown are overwhelmingly decent and committed to civility, yet there is something about the avenue, especially at night, that attracts the street element. When that element is present in numbers, there is a sense that you are on your own, that what protects you from being violated is your own body, your own ability to behave the right way, to look as though you can handle yourself, and even to be able to defend yourself. While it is not always necessary to throw down the gauntlet, so to speak, and be ready to punch someone out, it is important, as people

here say, to "know what time it is." It is this form of regulation of social interaction in public that I call the "code of the street" in contrast to the "code of civility," based on trust and the rule of law, that strongly prevails up the avenue. You are not always tested, but you have to be ready for the test if you are. Mr. Don Moses, an old head of the black community, described the code this way: "Keep your eyes and ears open at all times. Walk two steps forward and look back. Watch your back. Prepare yourself verbally and physically. Even if you have a cane, carry something. The older people do carry something, guns in sheaths. They can't physically fight no more so they carry a gun." People here feel they must watch their backs, because everything happens here. And if the police are called, they may not arrive in time. People get killed here, they get stabbed, but they also relax and have a good time. In general, there is an edge to public life that you do not find in Chestnut Hill.

Chelten Avenue is lined with discount stores and fast-food restaurants. Yet just around the corner and two blocks down is a middle-class residential area. Most people here are black, but there are representatives of the wider society here, as well, including the police, the welfare office, the fast-food and clothing store chains. On Tuesday mornings, food-stamp lines snake around Greene Street at Chelten. There are also little people running small, sometimes fly-by-night businesses. Hustlers and small-time money men canvas the food stamp line with wads of cash—ready to buy discounted food stamps. It is this lack of resources that encourages a dog-eat-dog mentality that is concentrated at Chelten Avenue. Yet there is a great deal of other activity too. Especially during the summer, there is sometimes a carnival atmosphere. And the fact that the general area is diverse both racially and socially works to offset the feeling of social isolation that the poor black residents of Germantown have.

Occasionally, residents of Chestnut Hill drive this far down Germantown Avenue, and seeing what this neighborhood looks like has an impact on their consciousness. But they do not see below the surface. Mainly, they take in the noise and the seeming disorder, the poverty, and the incivility and when reading about urban violence they associate it with places like this, when in fact this neighborhood may not be as violent as they assume. To be sure, welfare mothers, prostitutes, and drug dealers are in evidence, but they coexist with—and are in fact outnumbered by—working people in legitimate jobs who are trying to avoid trouble.

As you move on past Chelten Avenue, you pass through quieter stretches colored by the residential nature of the surrounding streets, alternating with concentrated business strips. Many of the businesses are skin, hair, and nail salons. A common aspiration of the poorer girls in these neighborhoods is to go to beauty school and become cosmetologists.

We pass by the old town square of Germantown, which is surrounded by old, "historically certified" houses. Such houses appear sporadically for a long way down the avenue. Unfortunately, some are badly in need of maintenance. Just beyond the square is Germantown Friends School, a private school founded 150 years ago on what was then the outskirts of town but is now surrounded by the city.

Further down Germantown Avenue, thrift shops and discount stores predominate. Most are equipped with window bars and riot gates. Both the bars and the residents' understanding proclaim that this is a tough place. Some people can be counted on to behave according to the laws of force, not those of civility. Many people have to be forced to behave in a law-abiding way. The code has violence, or the possibility of violence, to back it up, and the bars on the windows signify the same thing—a lack of trust, a feeling that without the bars the establishment would be vulnerable. The code of the street has emerged.

The further we go down the avenue, the more boarded-up buildings there are, and more and more empty lots. In fact, certain areas give the impression of no-man's-lands, with empty overgrown or dirt lots, a few isolated buildings here and there, few cars on the street, and almost no people on the sidewalks. We pass billboards advertising "forties" (forty-ounce malt liquor) and other kinds of liquor. Churches are a prominent feature of the cityscape as a whole. Along this part of Germantown Avenue some of them are very large and well known, with a rich history, and are architecturally like those in Chestnut Hill and Mount Airy, but others are storefront churches that sometimes come and go with the founding pastor.

People move up and down the street. Even in the middle of the morning, groups of young men can be seen standing on corners, eyeing the street traffic. Yet the morning is the safest time of day. As evening approaches, the possibility of violence increases, and after nightfall the rule of the code of the street is being enforced all along the lower section of the avenue. Under that rule, the toughest, the biggest, the boldest prevail. We pass a school at recess. Kids are crowding into a makeshift store where someone is barbecuing hot dogs and ribs. Even

at play, they hone their physical skills, punching each other lightly but seriously, sizing each other up. This sort of play-fighting, playing within the code, is commonplace.

Continuing, we pass collision shops—former gas stations surrounded by many cars in various states of disrepair—music stores, and nightclubs. We arrive at Broad Street, Philadelphia's major north-south artery, where Germantown Avenue also intersects Erie Avenue, forming a large triangle that is one of the centers of the ghetto of North Philadelphia. It is a staging area that is racially diverse, drawing all kinds of people from adjacent areas that are extremely poor. In Germantown there are a fair number of working people. In North Philly there is extensive concentrated poverty. North Philly is in the depths of the inner city—the so-called hyperghetto—and people here are more isolated from others who are unlike themselves in terms of both class and race (Massey and Denton 1993).

Just beyond Broad Street is a business strip with the same sort of establishments we saw further up the avenue—clothing stores, sneaker stores, furniture stores, electronics stores. Many offer layaway plans. In addition, there are businesses that cater mostly to the criminal class, such as pawnshops and beeper stores. Pawnshops are in a sense banks for thieves; they are places where stolen goods can be traded for cash, few questions asked. Check-cashing exchanges, which continue to be a common sight, also ask few questions, but they charge exorbitant fees for cashing a check. As in Chestnut Hill, merchandise is displayed on the sidewalk, but here it is under the watchful eye of unsmiling security guards. The noise level here is also much louder. Cars drive by with their stereo systems blaring. A young man wearing headphones saunters down the street. On the adjacent streets, open-air drug deals occur, prostitutes ply their trade, and boys shoot craps, while small children play in trash-strewn abandoned lots. This is the face of persistent urban poverty.

This is another staging area. People profile and represent here, standing around, "looking things over," concerned with who is where, but also aware of others "checking them out." Here, phrases like "watch your back," or as friends reassure their friends, "I got your back," takes on meaning, for some people are looking for opportunities to violate others, or simply to get away with something. A man opens his car door despite approaching traffic, seeming to dare someone to hit him. Further down the block a woman simply stops her car in the middle of the street, waiting for her husband or boyfriend to emerge

from a barbershop. She waits for about ten minutes, holding up traffic. No one complains, no one honks his horn; they simply go around her, for they know that to complain is to risk an altercation, or at least heated words. They prefer not to incur this woman's wrath, which could escalate to warfare. In Chestnut Hill, where civility and "limited" warfare are generally the orders of the day, people might call others on such behavior, but here the general level of violence can keep irritation in check. In this way, the code of the street provides social organization and actually lessens the probability of random violence. When the woman's man arrives, he simply steps around to the passenger side and, without showing any concern for others, gets into the car. The pair drive off, apparently believing it to be their right to do what they just did.

At Tioga Street and Temple University Hospital, whose emergency room sees gunshot and stabbing victims just about every night, the code of the street is much in evidence. In the morning and early afternoon, the surrounding neighborhood is peaceful enough, but in the evening the danger level rises. Tensions spill over, drug deals go bad, fights materialize seemingly out of nowhere, and the emergency room becomes a hub of activity. Sometimes the victim bypasses the hospital: by the time he is found, there is no place to take him but the morgue. Nearby there is a liquor store and a place selling cold beer. People buy liquor there and drink it on the street, adding to the volatility of the street scene.

More and more gaps in the rows of houses appear, where buildings have burned down, been torn down, or simply collapsed. Others are shells, their windows and large parts of their walls gone, leaving beams exposed. Still others are boarded up, perhaps eventually to collapse, perhaps to be rebuilt. Indeed, there are signs of regeneration among those of destruction. Here and there a house is well-maintained, even freshly painted. Some of the exposed outer walls of standing structures have colorful, upbeat murals painted on them, often with religious themes. We pass a large building, a car repair shop, gaily decorated with graffiti art. Further down we pass a hotel that rents rooms by the hour.

There continue to be signs of the avenue's past life—large churches built by European immigrants at the turn of the century, an old cemetery, an occasional historic building. The many open areas—empty lots, little overgrown parks—underline the winding character of this

old highway as it cuts through the grid pattern of streets formally laid out well after this became an established thoroughfare.

We drive through another business district with the usual stores catering to the very poor. Two policemen pass by on foot patrol. This is another staging area. The concentration of people drawn by the businesses increases the chance of violence breaking out. A lot of people are out, not just women and children but a conspicuous number of young men as well, even though it is still morning. Practically all of them are black, with just an occasional Asian and even rarer white face among them.

We enter an area where there seem to be more empty lots and houses you can see right through than solidly standing buildings. Some of the lots are a heap of rubble. Others are overgrown with weeds or littered with abandoned cars. This is a spot where the idea of a war zone comes to mind. Indeed, gunshot marks are visible on some of the buildings. The black ghetto here gives way to the Hispanic ghetto. The faces are different but the behavior is similar. Yet in the midst of this desolation there is a newly built gated community in the Spanish style. Just beyond it, we reach Norris Street; at this intersection three of the four corners are large empty lots. But we also pass an open area that has been transformed into a community garden. Now, in late spring, vegetables in the early stages of growth are visible.

We are now just north of Philadelphia's center city area. This used to be a bustling commercial area, with factories producing everything from beer to lace and huge warehouses in which the goods were stored before being shipped out either by rail, traces of which are still visible, or through a nearby port on the Delaware River. Here and there some of these behemoths are still standing, although one by one they are falling victim to arson.

And so we reach the other end of Germantown Avenue, in the midst of a leveled area about a block from the river and overshadowed by the elevated interstate highway that now allows motorists to drive over North Philadelphia rather than through it, thereby ignoring its street life, its inhabitants, and its problems.

II. The Code of the Street

Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community, none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression. This phenomenon wreaks havoc daily on the lives of community

residents and increasingly spills over into downtown and residential middle-class areas. Muggings, burglaries, carjackings, and drug-related shootings, all of which may leave their victims or innocent bystanders dead, are now common enough to concern all urban and many suburban residents. The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future.

Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior. Although there are often forces in the community that can counteract the negative influences—by far the most powerful is a strong, loving, "decent" (as inner-city residents put it) family committed to middle-class values—the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of "the streets," whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society. These two orientations—decent and street—socially organize the community, and their coexistence has important consequences for residents, particularly for children growing up in the inner city. Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values—and most of the homes in the community do—must be able to handle themselves in a street-oriented environment.

The code of the street, evolved by the street culture, amounts to a set of rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence. The rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale that allows those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and are enforced mainly by those who are street, but on the streets the distinction between street and decent is often irrelevant; everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive, and it is literally necessary for operating in public. Therefore, though families with a decency orientation are usually opposed to the values of the code, they often reluctantly encourage their children to be familiar with it to enable them to negotiate the inner-city environment.

At the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated "right" or being granted one's "props" (or proper due)

or the deference one deserves. However, in the deprived and troublesome public environment of the inner city, as people increasingly feel buffeted by forces beyond their control, what one deserves in the way of respect becomes ever more problematic and uncertain. This situation in turn further opens the issue of respect to sometimes intense interpersonal negotiations, at times resulting in physical fights. In the street culture, especially among young people, respect is viewed as almost an external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost, and so must constantly be guarded. The rules of the code in fact provide a framework for negotiating respect. With the right amount, individuals can avoid being bothered in public. This security is important, for if they are bothered, not only may they be in physical danger, but they will have been disgraced or "dissed" (disrespected). Many of the forms dissing can take may seem petty to middle-class people (maintaining eye contact for too long, for example), but to those invested in the street code, these actions become serious indications of the other person's intentions. Consequently, such people become very sensitive to signals of advances or slights, which could well serve as a warning of imminent physical attack or confrontation.

The hard reality of the world of the streets can be traced to the profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city black people, particularly the young. The code of the street is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system, and in others who would champion one's personal security. The police, for instance, are most often viewed as representing the dominant white society and as not caring enough to protect inner-city residents. When called, they may not even respond, which is one reason many residents feel they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined toward aggression. Lack of police accountability has in fact been incorporated into the local status system: the person who is believed capable of "taking care of himself" is accorded a certain deference and regard, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control. The code of the street emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin. Exacerbated by the proliferation of drugs and easy access to guns, this volatile situation results in the ability of the street minority (or those who effectively "go for bad") to dominate their neighborhood's public spaces.

III. Campaigning for Respect

"Respect," as we have noted, is a key word in the code of the street. It is also a form of human capital, especially valuable when access to some of the forms of human capital of the wider community are not available. It is fought for, held, and challenged as much as "honor" was fought for, held, and challenged in the age of chivalry. Much of the code of the street has to do with achieving and holding respect. And children learn the rules early.

A. The Shuffling Process

Children from even the most decent homes must come to terms with the various and sundry influences of the streets, including that of their more street oriented peers. Indeed, as children grow up and their parents' control wanes, they go through a social shuffling process that can undermine, or at least test, much of the socialization they have received at home. In other words, the street serves as a mediating influence under which children may come to reconsider and rearrange their personal orientations. This is a time of status passage, when social identity can become very uncertain. It is a tricky time because a child can go either way—decent or street. For children from decent homes, the immediate and present reality of the street situation can overcome the compunctions against tough behavior that their parents taught them, so that the lessons of the home may be quickly put aside as children learn to deal with their social environment. The children are confronted with a local hierarchy based on toughness and the premium placed on being a good fighter. As a means of survival, one learns the importance of a reputation for being willing and able to fight, or even to go for bad. To build such a reputation is to gain respect among peers, and a physically talented child who starts down this track may find him- or herself increasingly committed to an orientation that can lead to trouble. Of course, a talented child from a decent or a street family may discover ways of gaining respect without unduly resorting to aggressive and violent responses—becoming a rapper or athlete, or, occasionally, a good student. The important point here is that the kind of home a child comes from is influential but not always determinative of the way he or she will ultimately turn out. The neighborhood and surrounding environmental influences—and how the child adapts to this environment—are key.

Typically, by the age of ten, children from both decent and street

families in inner-city poor neighborhoods are mingling on the neighborhood streets and figuring out their identities. Here they try out roles and scripts in a process that challenges their talents and prior socialization and may involve more than a little luck, good or bad. In this volatile environment, they learn to watch their backs and to anticipate and negotiate those situations that might lead to trouble with others. The outcome of these cumulative interactions on the streets ultimately determines every child's life chances.

Here lies the real meaning of so many fights and altercations, behind the ostensible, usually seemingly petty, precipitating causes, including the competitions over girlfriends and boyfriends and the "he say, she say" conflicts of personal attribution. Adolescents are insecure and are trying to establish their identities. Children from the middle and upper classes, however, usually have more ways to express themselves as worthwhile and so have more avenues to explore. The negotiations they engage in among themselves may also include aggression, but they tend to be more verbal in a way not available to those of more limited resources, such as showing off with things and connections. In poor inner-city neighborhoods, physicality is a fairly common way of asserting oneself. It is also unambiguous. If you punch someone out, if you succeed in keeping someone from walking down your block, "you did it." It is a fait accompli and the evidence that you prevailed is there for all to see.

During this campaign for respect, through these various conflicts, the connection between being respected and the need for being in physical control of at least a portion of the environment become internalized, and the germ of the code of the street emerges. As children mature, they obtain an increasingly more sophisticated understanding of the code, and it becomes part of their working conception of the world, so that, by the time they reach adulthood, it has come to define the social order. In time, the rules of physical engagement and their personal implications become crystallized. Children learn the conditions under which violence is appropriate, and they also learn how the code defines their relationship to their peers. They thus come to appreciate the give-and-take of life in public—the process of negotiation. From all this they gain, in the words of the street, valued "street knowledge." And, to a degree, they learn to resolve disputes mainly through physical contests that settle—at least for the time being—who is the toughest, and who will take what from whom in what circum-

stances. In effect, they learn the social order of their local peer groups, an order that is always open to change, which is one of the reasons the youths take such a strong interest in the fight.

The ethic of violence is in part a class phenomenon. Lower-class people seem more inclined to resort to physical fighting to settle arguments than middle- or upper-middle-class people. And members of the lower classes more often find themselves in disputes that lead to violence. Because they are more often alienated from the agents and agencies of social control, such as the police and the courts, they more easily resort to settling disputes on their own. And, as indicated above, the parents, in turn, tend to socialize their children into this reality.

This reality of inner-city life is largely absorbed on the streets. At an early age, often even before they start school and without much in the way of adult supervision, children from street families gravitate to the streets, where they must be ready to "hang," to socialize with peers. Children from these generally permissive homes have a great deal of latitude and are allowed to "rip and run" up and down the streets. They often come home from school, put their books down, and go right back out the door. On school nights many eight- and nine-year-olds remain out until nine or ten o'clock (teenagers may come in whenever they want to). On the streets, they play in groups that often become the source of their primary social bonds.

In the street, through their play, children pour their individual life experiences into a common knowledge-pool mix, negating, affirming, confirming, and elaborating on what they have observed in the home and matching their skills against those of others out in the street. And they learn to fight; in particular, they learn the social meaning of fighting. In these circumstances, even small children test one another, pushing and shoving others, and are ready to hit other children over circumstances not to their liking. In turn, they are readily hit by other children, and the child who is toughest prevails. Thus the violent resolution of disputes—the hitting and cursing—gains social reinforcement. The child in effect is more completely initiated into a world that provides a strong rationale for physically campaigning for self-respect.

In a critical sense, violent behavior is determined by situations, thus giving importance to the various ways individuals define and interpret such situations, which become so many public trials. The individual builds patterns as outcomes are repeated over time. Behaviors, violent or civil, that work for a young person and are reinforced by peers will

likely be repeated, particularly as the child begins to build a "name," or a reputation for toughness.

Moreover, younger children refine their understanding of the code by observing the disputes of older children, which are often resolved through cursing and abusive talk, and sometimes through outright aggression or violence. They are also alert and attentive witnesses to the verbal and physical fights of adults, after which they compare notes among themselves and share their own interpretations of the event. Almost always the victor is the person who physically won the altercation, and this person often enjoys the esteem and respect of onlookers. These experiences reinforce the lessons many children have learned at home: might makes right; toughness is a virtue, humility is not. The social meaning of fighting becomes clarified as they come to appreciate the real consequences of winning and losing. The child's understanding of the code becomes more refined but also an increasingly important part of his or her working conception of the world.

The street adults with whom children come in contact at home and on the street—including mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, boyfriends, girlfriends, cousins, neighbors, and friends—help shape and reinforce this understanding by verbalizing the messages they are getting through public experience: "Watch your back." "Protect yourself." "Don't punk out." "Respect yourself." "If someone disses you, you got to straighten them out." Many parents actually impose sanctions if a child is not sufficiently aggressive. For example, if a child loses a fight and comes home upset, the parent might respond, "Don't you come in here crying somebody beat you up; you better get back out there and whup his ass. If you don't whup his ass, I'll whup yo' ass when you come home." Thus, the child gains reinforcement for being tough and showing nerve.

While fighting, some children cry as though they are doing something they are ambivalent about. The fight may be against their wishes, yet they may feel constrained to fight or face the consequences—not just from peers but also from caretakers or parents, who may administer another beating if they back down. Appearing capable of taking care of oneself as a form of self-defense is a dominant theme among both street and decent adults, who worry about the safety of their children. But taking care of oneself does not have to involve physical fighting; at times, it can involve getting "out of stuff" by outwitting adversaries, a tactic often employed by decent inner-city parents. The

following incident related by Marge, a hard-working decent woman and the mother of Curtis, and three other children, is relevant:

> My son that's bad now—his name is Curtis. And he was going to Linden Junior High School, and he was in the eighth grade. And my son Terry was in the same grade. Terry's a year younger, but Curtis had gotten put back in the second grade. They had never had a fight.
>
> So he called me at work one day and told me that somebody was bothering him, and he was afraid. He was thirteen or fourteen at the time. He said he was also afraid to tell the teacher because if he told the teacher, they were gonna pick on him more. And he didn't have any men in his life at the time—my husband was not his father so that was another issue. So I said to him, "What are you gonna do? Are you gonna leave school?" He said he was afraid to leave school because if he left school, they would still pick on him. So I said to him, "Curtis, I'll tell you what you do. I'm gonna get off work early. What I want you to do, I want you to talk as bad as you can talk and don't act afraid. They don't know me. None of your friends in your classroom know me." I said, "I want you to come out and talk as bad as you can talk, but don't hit anybody. And then walk away." I said, "If a fight breaks out, then I'll come and break it up." And that's what he did and they left him alone. Isn't that something? See, he had to show nerve, it's very important for boys. It's easier for girls. The boys in the neighborhood—if you don't do some of the things they do, or even with the clothes, if you don't have nice things—at that time it was Jordache jeans and Sergio—if you don't have some of those things, people will pick on you and that type of thing.

Many decent parents encourage their children to stand up to those who might be aggressive toward them, but they also encourage their children to avoid the trouble of the streets. Given their superior resources and often their connections to the wider society, including schools, churches, and other institutions, the decent parents have the ability to see themselves beyond the immediate neighborhood; they tend to have more ways "to be somebody" than the typical street person. The difference in outlook has to do mainly with a difference in social class, particularly their sense of maintaining a class position while residing in the local inner-city environment. Hence, they tend

to be in a position to encourage their children to avoid conflict by talk or by turning and walking away, and they sometimes do. But, as indicated above, this is not always possible, and as a last resort such children are taught to stand their ground.

Thus there is at times a convergence in their child-rearing practices of those labeled decent and street, although the rationales behind them may differ. In the stereotypical street home, disorder is everywhere, mothers curse at their children, stepfathers and boyfriends come and go, perhaps physically abusing the child as they pass through. Through observing the behavior of street adults in these circumstances, even small children gain lessons about the street and survival in their world. The following field note graphically illustrates both the efficacy of these informal lessons and the early age at which they are learned.

Casey is four years old and attends a local nursery school. He lives with his mom and stepfather. Casey's family is considered in the neighborhood to be a street family. At home, his mother will curse at him and, at times, will beat him for misbehavior. At times, his stepfather will spank him as well. Casey has attracted the attention of the staff of the nursery school because of his behavior. When Casey wants something, he will curse and hit other children. He now has the reputation of "bad" around the center. He regularly refers to members of the staff as "bitches" and "motherfuckers." For instance, he will say to his teacher, "Cathy, you bitch" or "What that bitch want?" At times this seems funny coming from the mouth of a four-year-old, but it reflects on Casey's home situation. Around the center, he knows that such behavior is disapproved of because of the way the teachers and others react to it, though he may get reinforcement for it because of its humorous character. Once when his teacher upset him, Casey slapped her and called her a "bitch."

On hearing of this incident, the bus driver refused to take Casey home, or even let him on his bus. The next day, when Casey saw the bus driver again, he said, "Norman, you left me. Why'd you leave me? You a trip, man." Members of the staff fear that Casey has a bad influence on other children at the center, for he curses at them "like a sailor," though they "don't know what he's talking about." In these ways, Casey acts somewhat grown up, or "mannish," in the words of the bus driver, who sometimes glares at him, wanting to treat him as another man, since "he seems to act that way." Staff members at the center have found they can control Casey by threatening to report his

behavior to his stepfather, to which he replies, "Oh, please don't tell him. I'll be good. Please don't tell him." It seems that Casey fears this man and telling him might mean a beating.

Local decent blacks say Casey's home life is that of the typical street family, which is rife with cursing, yelling, and the physical abuse of children. Many of these parents do not want Casey to be playmate for their own children. They think he would be a bad influence, particularly encouraging them toward assuming a street identity. Children "like this one" worry them generally. They feel that certain neighborhoods breed such children, and that decent children are at some risk when placed in an environment with too many such kids.

In the minds of many decent parents, children from street families, because of their generalized ignorance and lack of opportunities, are considered at great risk of eventually getting into serious trouble.

B. Self-Image Based on "Juice"

By the time they are teenagers, most young people have internalized the code of the street, or at least learned to comport themselves in accordance with its rules. As indicated above, the code revolves around the presentation of self. Its basic requirement is the display of a certain predisposition to violence. A person's public bearing must send the unmistakable if sometimes subtle message that one is capable of violence and mayhem when the situation requires it, that one can take care of oneself. The nature of this communication can include both verbal and bodily expression—all geared mainly to deterring aggression. Physical appearance, including clothes, jewelry, and grooming, also plays an important part in how a person is viewed; respect requires the right look.

Even so, there are no guarantees against challenges, because there are always people around looking for a fight to increase their share of respect—or "juice," as it is sometimes called on the street. Moreover, if a person is assaulted, it is important in the eyes of his "running buddies" as well as his opponent for him to avenge himself. Otherwise he risks being "tried" (challenged) or "rolled on" (physically assaulted) by any number of others. Indeed, if he is not careful, he could lose the respect of his running buddies. This is an especially important consideration, for without running buddies or "homies," who can be depended on to "watch your back" in a "jam," the person is vulnerable to being rolled on by still others. Part of what protects a person in this environment is the number of people—and what their status is—who can be counted on to avenge his honor if he is "rolled on" in an "un-

fair" fight. Some of the most well-protected people in the environment are members not only of "tough" street corner groups, but also of families and extended families of cousins, uncles, fathers, and brothers who are known to be imbued with the code of the street. Their family members, especially when the family's reputation is secure, "can go anywhere, and won't nobody bother them. You just don't mess with the Hardys!" The Hardy family consists of six streetwise brothers, two of whom are in prison for murder, while the others are established hustlers in the community and two belong to a local gang. Generally, to maintain his honor the young man must show that he himself, as an individual, is not someone to be "messed with" or "dissed." To show this, he may "act crazy"—that is, have the reputation for "going for his piece [gun] quickly." But in general a person must "keep himself straight" by managing his position of respect among others, including his running buddies; fundamentally, this involves managing his self-image, which is shaped by what he thinks others are thinking of him in relation to his peers.

Objects play an important and complicated role in establishing self-image. Jackets, sneakers, gold jewelry, and even expensive firearms reflect not just taste, which tends to be tightly regulated among adolescents of all social classes, but also a willingness to possess things that may require defending. A boy wearing a fashionable, expensive jacket, for example, is vulnerable to attack by another who covets the jacket and either cannot afford to buy one or wants the added satisfaction of depriving someone else of his. However, if a boy forgoes the desirable jacket and wears one that is not hip, he runs the risk being teased or even assaulted as an unworthy person. A youth with a decency orientation describes the situation:

> Here go another thing. If you outside, right, and your mom's on welfare and she on crack, the persons you trying to be with dress [in] like purple sweatpants and white sneaks, but it's all decent, right, and you got on some bummy jeans and a pair of dull sneaks, they won't—some of the people out there selling drugs won't let you hang with them unless you dress like [in] purple sweatpants and decent sneaks everyday. . . .
>
> They tease 'em. First they'll tease 'em and then they'll try to say they stink, like they smell like pig or something like that, and then they'll be like, "Get out of here. Get out. We don't want you near us. You stink. You dirty." All that stuff. And I don't think that's

> right. If he's young, it ain't his fault or her fault that she dressin' like that. It's her mother and her dad's fault.

To be allowed to hang with certain prestigious crowds, a boy must wear a different set of expensive clothes every day. Not to do so might make him appear socially deficient. So he comes to covet such items—especially when he sees easy prey wearing them. The youth continues:

> You can even get hurt off your own clothes: like, say, I'm walkin' down the street and somebody try to take my hat from me and I won't let 'em take it and they got a gun. You can get killed over one little simple hat. Or if I got a gold ring and a gold necklace on and they see me one dark night on a dark street, and they stick me up and I won't let 'em, and they shoot me. I'm dead and they hid me. I'm dead and won't nobody ever know [who did it].

In acquiring valued things, therefore, a person shores up his or her identity—but since it is an identity based on having something, it is highly precarious. This very precariousness gives a heightened sense of urgency to staying even with peers, with whom the person is actually competing. Young men and women who are able to command respect through their presentation of self—by allowing their possessions and body language to speak for them—may not have to campaign for regard but may, rather, gain it by the force of their manner. Those who are unable to command respect in this way must actively campaign for it.

One way of campaigning for status is by taking the possessions of others. Seemingly ordinary objects can become trophies with symbolic value far beyond their monetary worth. Possessing the trophy can symbolize the ability to violate somebody—to "get in his face," to dis him—and thus to enhance one's own worth by stealing someone else's. The trophy does not have to be something material. It can be another person's sense of honor, snatched away with a derogatory remark. It can be the outcome of a fight. It can be meeting a certain standard, such as a girl's getting herself recognized as the most beautiful. Material things, however, fit easily into the pattern: sneakers, a pistol, somebody else's girlfriend, all can become a trophy. A person who can take something from another and then flaunt it gains regard by being the owner, or the controller, of that thing. But this display of ownership

can then provoke a challenge from other people. On inner-city streets this game of who controls what is constantly being played, and the trophy—extrinsic or intrinsic, tangible or intangible—identifies the current winner.

In this often violent give-and-take, raising oneself up largely depends on putting someone else down. There is a general sense in the deprived inner-city ghetto community that very little respect is to be had, so everyone competes for what is available, and there is also much jealousy and envy. The resulting craving for respect makes some people "touchy" giving them thin skins and short fuses. Shows of deference by others are soothing and contribute to a sense of security, comfort, self-confidence, and self-respect. Unanswered transgressions diminish these feelings and are believed to encourage further transgressions. So constant vigilance is required against even appearing as if transgressions will be tolerated. Among young people, whose sense of self-esteem is particularly vulnerable, there is special concern with being disrespected. Many inner-city young men in particular crave respect to such a degree that they will risk their lives to attain and maintain it.

As indicated above, the issue of respect is thus closely tied to whether a person has an inclination to be violent, even as a victim. In the wider society, people, or local people with a decent orientation, may not feel required to retaliate physically after an attack, though they are aware that they have been degraded or taken advantage of. They may feel a great need to defend themselves during an attack, or to behave in a way that deters aggression, but they are much more likely than street people to feel that they can walk away from a possible altercation with their self-esteem intact. Some people may even have the strength of character to flee without thinking that their self-respect will be diminished.

In impoverished inner-city black communities, however, particularly among young males and perhaps increasingly among young females, such flight would be extremely difficult. To run away would likely leave one's self-esteem in tatters. Therefore people often feel constrained not only to stand up and at least attempt to resist during an assault but also to "pay back"—to seek revenge—after a successful assault on their person. Revenge may include going to get a weapon or even getting relatives and friends involved. Their very identity, their self-respect and honor are often intricately tied up with the way they perform on the streets during and after such encounters.

IV. Adapting to the Code

Every young person in deprived inner-city black neighborhoods must learn to live with the code of the street. The street kids must prove their manhood and achieve their identity under the intricate rules of the code. The decent kids must learn to coexist with it.

A. Manhood and Nerve

On the neighborhood streets, many of the concerns about identity have come to be expressed in the concept of "manhood." Manhood in the inner city means taking the prerogatives of men with respect to strangers, other men, and women. It implies physicality and a certain ruthlessness. Regard and respect are associated with this concept: if others have little regard for a person's manhood, his very life and those of his loved ones could be in jeopardy. There is an existential link between manhood and self-esteem, so that it has become hard to say which is primary. For many inner-city youths, manhood and respect are two sides of the same coin; physical and psychological well-being are inseparable, and both require a sense of control, of being in charge.

The operating assumption is that a man, especially a real man, knows what other men know—the code of the street. The code is seen as having a certain justice, since it is considered that everyone has the opportunity to know it and can be held responsible for being familiar with it. If the victim of a mugging, for example, does not know the code and so responds "wrong," the perpetrator may feel justified in killing him and may feel and show no remorse. He may think, "Too bad, but it's his fault. He should have known better."

A person venturing outside must adopt the code to prevent others from messing with him, and it is easy for people to think they are being tried or tested by others even when this is not the case. For something extremely valuable is at stake in every interaction, and people are encouraged to rise to the occasion, particularly with strangers. For people who are unfamiliar with the code—generally people who live outside the inner city—this concern with respect in the most ordinary interactions can be frightening and incomprehensible. But for those who are invested in the code, the clear object of their demeanor is to discourage strangers from even thinking about testing their manhood. The sense of power that attends the ability to deter others can be alluring even to those who know the code without being heavily invested in it—the decent inner-city youths. Thus a boy who has been leading a basically

decent life can, in trying circumstances, suddenly resort to deadly force.

Central to the issue of manhood is the widespread belief that one of the most effective ways of gaining respect is to manifest nerve. Nerve is shown by taking another person's possessions, messing with someone's woman, throwing the first punch, or pulling a trigger. Its proper display helps check others who would violate one's person and helps build a reputation that works to prevent future challenges. But since such a show of nerve is a forceful expression of disrespect toward the person on the receiving end, the victim may be greatly offended and seek to retaliate with equal or greater force. The knowledge that a display of nerve can easily provoke a life-threatening response is part of the concept.

True nerve expresses a lack of fear of dying. Many feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over issues of respect. In fact, among the hard-core street, the clear risk of violent death may be preferable to being dissed. Conveying the attitude of being able to take somebody else's life if the situation demands it gives one a real sense of power on the streets. Many youths, both decent and street, try to achieve this appearance for both its practical defense value and the positive way it makes them feel about themselves. The difference between them is that the decent youth can code-switch: in other settings—with teachers, say, or at his part-time job—he can be polite and deferential. The seriously street-oriented youth has made the concept of manhood part of his very identity and has difficulty manipulating it.

B. Black Adolescent Identity in the Inner City

The reader may again ask what the source of the power of the code is. Why does it dominate the inner-city community? Why is it so central to young people's lives? Part of the answer lies in how these adolescents are trying to shape identities for themselves, and the roles of the elements that might be expected to influence this process.

Any discussion of black adolescent identity must consider the wide variations among black youths and the diversity in the youth culture. Differences of religion, class backgrounds, and orientations operate in the same school, church, mosque, or neighborhood. The picture is further complicated by the social isolation of the black community as a whole, reducing young people's ability to identify with the mainstream or their hope to become part of the wider society.

Note that social isolation can and does exist even for people who

appear to be close to the wider society and culture. Isolation must be seen to some degree as a state of mind, the feeling that there is something profoundly alien about the wider society that discourages identification with it. People so isolated can begin thinking of themselves as an "own" and develop orientations toward the mainstream that reflect their distance and alienation; they may develop a counter-ideology that holds that society in contempt. In the inner-city community today, this is exactly what has happened in certain settings.

Moreover, the young people have been given powerful messages that it is actually wrong to harbor hope of identification, to "think white." They use things and issues associated with the wider society, but make them their own by using them in their own ways and so neutralizing the white negatives associated with them. Many such young people, as this essay shows, have come to pride themselves on knowing and being able to enact the code of the street, even though in settings of civility they may code-switch to more civil behavior.

Part of the code of the street is to dress and act as a member of the oppositional culture that has developed in this way. Young people gain points for being mean or successfully going for bad, especially in public places like streets, school hallways, or multiplex movie theaters. People adorn themselves, displaying what they have, or "what's to them." The jewelry and the name-brand sneakers and clothing attest to the wearers' social worth, and those who do not wear the right things may be viciously excluded and ostracized.

In school and in the neighborhood, adolescents are very much concerned with developing a sense of who they are, what they are, and what they will be. They try on many different personas, roles, and scripts. Some work, others do not. How do the roles of decent and street play in their identity considerations, and what parts do others play? What stages do these young people go through? What is the career of their identity as it takes shape in these circumstances?

Observing relations in the school and talking with adolescents reveals that school authority is often an extremely important issue for young people, but very often the authority figures are viewed as alien and unreceptive. The teachers and administrators are concerned that their own authority be taken seriously, and claims to authority are always up for grabs, if not subject to out-and-out challenge.

A black authority figure, particularly a black male, enjoys a certain prestige. He tends to be taken more seriously and given the benefit of the doubt for having experienced what the young people have experi-

enced. On the surface, at least, he is more easily seen as "one of us." Such a person may be on probation with the students, but the period of testing may be seen as his to lose, since the students tend to be favorably disposed toward him.

Typically, such figures are quite exacting with the students. They tend to be strict and rule oriented, understanding that it is better to be seen that way at first and then possibly loosen up later. In the students' parlance, they are considered "mean." They may not be well-liked, but they do tend to be respected among the students.

White authority figures tend to be on constant probation. The students are very much concerned to test whether they are racist; the verdict is usually that they are. Some teachers who know what they are up to have a ready campaign to win the trust and approval of their charges. But it is often a very tough fight, and sometimes complete trust never comes. This is frustrating to many teachers and often leads to premature burnout.

Young people of course do not go about developing their identities solely from privileges and rewards by teachers. But some of this surely goes on. More often than not, students find the institution and its staff utterly unreceptive, but there are situations in which the school and its staff are truly nurturing and supportive.

The decent children especially put stock in the ability to code-switch, adopting one set of behaviors when inside the building and another when outside on the streets. But at times the two roles become confused and propriety for both settings is seen as the same. When this confusion goes unchecked, it can make discipline in the school elusive, for the children who seem to get away with it encourage others to follow their lead, especially if to behave decently can be seen as acting white. There is great incentive for young people to buy into the oppositional culture even in school, because to do so means they can "be something" in a world that is controlled by themselves.

Teachers as agents of the wider system really have to bend over backward to make a place for these students, saying "I'm here for you," to an extent that may compromise their own hard-won authority or respect. But if the students feel that the teachers as part of the wider system are dissing them, they turn to the oppositional culture to shape their identities in a way that seems positive to them.

Black students "do it" (take on the oppositional role) so effectively that they are models for other disaffected students. They are the authentic alienated people. They do it because they are profoundly at

odds with the white culture and can see themselves visibly as different. But white students mimic them because they are such good models.

C. The Dilemma of the Decent Kid

At a certain critical point in development, say ages five through eight, the child of a decent inner-city family ventures into the street, away from home, out of the view and immediate control of his family. Here children begin to develop an identity beyond the family, one that is helped along by the way they go about meeting the exigencies of the streets. They find their level, get cool with others, adjust to the situation as they swim about the environment "looking for themselves" and trying to "be real."

They often experience a certain tension between what they learn at home and what they find in the streets. The family often becomes mildly concerned about the kinds of children their child is playing with. At this stage the child's peer group becomes extremely important. Often the child must go with what groups are available. A child from a decent home can easily be sucked up by the streets. The child may learn to code-switch, presenting himself one way at home and another with peers.

Many children are left on their own for long periods of time. Others in the neighborhood may be encouraged to look out for them, including "big brothers," "cousins," and neighborhood friends of the family. But at the same time the children are out to try new things, to find themselves, and to grow into independence. The child encounters the street in the form of peers, cousins, and older children, and begins to absorb the experience.

To many residents, the negative aspects of the street are exemplified by groups of young men who physically defend their neighborhoods by molesting interlopers. These young men often come from homes ravaged by unemployment and family disorganization. On the streets they develop contacts and "family" ties with other youths like themselves. The groups they form are extremely attractive to other youths and not simply to those whose lives have been seriously compromised by poverty. They dominate the public spaces and any young person must deal with them. Even the decent young people must make their peace with them.

It must be understood that these decent young people's connection with the street is not simply a matter of coercion. Often they have strong aspirations for feelings of self-worth, and to achieve it they must

do more than make peace with the street group, they must actually come to terms with the street. On the streets, they must get cool with the youth who dominate the public spaces. They must let others know how tough they are, how hard they are to roll on, how much mess they will take. The others want to know what will make such a person's jaws tight, what will get him mad. To find out they will challenge the person to fight or test his limits with insults to his family. Some of the most decent youths reach their limits rather quickly, thus allowing others to "see what's to him," or what he's made of. Often a fight ensues: as the young men say, "it's showtime."

So the streets, or at least the public spaces, are extremely important for young people, because these are places where they are involved in the process of forging their own local identities—identities that carry over into other critical areas of their lives, including school, church, employment, and future family life. This is an issue for all the children in the environment, both decent and street. Even if the child is one of the most decent persons in the neighborhood, at some point there comes a time when he must display his degree of commitment to the street.

Life under the code might be considered a kind of game played by rules that are partly specified but partly emergent. The young person is encouraged to be familiar with the rules of the game and even use them as a metaphor for life, or else feel left out, marginalized, and ultimately be rolled on. So the young person is inclined to enact his own particular role, to show his familiarity with the game, and more specifically his street knowledge, to gain points with others.

It is extremely important that the child learn to play well. This ability is strongly related to who his mentors and "homies" are and how much interest and support they show for the child. How "good" he is to some important degree corresponds to how "bad" his neighborhood is viewed to be. The tougher the neighborhood, the more prestige he has in the minds of others he encounters. This prestige often provides a challenge to interlopers.

Young people who display decency are generally not given much respect in public. Decency or a "nice" attitude is taken as a sign of weakness, inviting others to roll on or try the person. To be nice is to risk being taken as a sissy, as someone who cannot fight, as a weakling, as someone to be rolled on. And to roll on someone once is not enough; it is often done again and again to establish the pattern of dominance in the groups. Young people who are out to make a name for them-

selves are actively looking for chumps to roll on. A name once achieved must be sustained, and its owner must live up to his reputation or be challenged. Decent kids serve as so much cannon fodder for such individuals. A name is like a fire: it needs fuel to exist. The decent kids serve as fuel, to be rolled on in order to maintain a name that, when established, wards off danger from others.

With some number of campaigns to his credit, a person may feel self-confident enough to try someone who has already established himself. Defeating such a person may be the ultimate trophy for someone on a campaign for respect. But he is likely to try the decent youths first. Knowing this encourages decent youths to mimic those who are more committed to the streets. Showing this street side of themselves blurs the lines separating one from the other, particularly for outsiders like prospective employers, teachers, and police, and sometimes for the young people themselves.

Respect is sometimes especially necessary for decent kids, and they may be quite impressed by the exploits and actions of their "sho' nuff" street peers. Often such a child is respect-needy, since decent values and behavior are not generally held in high esteem. A member of the street group might bring such a person around to his group. For the decent acquaintance there is the added attraction of the possibility of social acceptance, of getting cool with people on this side of the playground or classroom. The connection is at best tenuous and there are many sanctions against getting with the street crowd, but he is attracted just the same.

Occasionally, the decent kid will taste the ways of the street group, and they will "get good" to him. The feelings of deference, the suggestions of real respect and friendship are often too attractive to let pass. There is often a serious promise of such a turn of events. The decent group gradually loses its hold on the kid, or at least for the moment appears to. With this taste of the new way fresh on his mind, he feels able to resolve problems of self-esteem by joining up.

For a fifteen-year-old boy, there is also the issue of becoming a man. He is encouraged to try out his new-found size and strength to see what they will gain him in the game of social esteem.

A youngster who is able to gain some support for his new way of relating to others in the group of tough guys may be inclined to test out his new strength on others. With the help of his acquaintances, he is able to see himself in a different light, not to mention that other people are now seeing him in a different light, too. He is inclined to

try out his new ways not just on other street kids, but on decent kids he knows well. And closely noting the social reaction to his new, if provisional identity, he may be inspired and motivated to continue. In these circumstances, he may gain points for going for bad as he tries out and forges this new identity through bullying other decent kids.

Here he models himself after what he has observed among the street kids, notes how he puts fear in the hearts of decent kids, and may well be encouraged to continue. An old head who has closely watched the youngster over the years may intervene, but this is less likely to happen today than in years past, mainly because of the spreading economic and social distress of so many such communities. Allowed to continue, he refines his skills, gaining a taste of respect, and comes to crave more: it gets good to him. Slowly he develops a different attitude about himself. He changes from a person who code-switched to go for bad to one who increasingly does not seem to have to put up a front to assume a street posture in defense of himself and of what belongs to him.

This "coming of age" process has implications for relations with parents, teachers, coaches, and other meaningful adults in the child's life. If he used to do his homework, now he may be less attentive to it. He may have a problem obeying teachers. His grades begin to suffer. When his mom asks him to go to the store or to run some other errand, he has a word of resistance. He develops difficulty in doing what he's told. He increasingly gives authority figures back talk. Arguments erupt more easily. Slowly his stance changes from cooperative child to adversary.

The changes are clear to those looking on, people who once depended on the image they had of him as a nice and decent youngster. But those closest to him, particularly mothers, aunts, uncles, and adult neighbors who remember him growing up, may resist any other definition of the person they know and love, a young man who to them is the same person. They are often incredulous when they hear of something terrible the boy is accused of doing.

Once such a street-oriented person has established himself, or has made a name, there is some disincentive for code-switching, for he has much to lose by letting the wrong people see him do it. He is not inclined to "sell-out" to appease "white people or striving blacks." On the streets he has respect precisely because he has opposed that wider society, and to switch back is to undermine his name or reputation. Here the alienation so many young people feel has taken on a life of its own and become institutionalized. Those deeply involved in the

code of the street sometimes find themselves proselytizing others to join them. (We seldom hear of decent kids saying to street kids, "Hey, why don't you come join us?!") A common entreaty is "Hey! When you gon' get legal?" (meaning when are you going to come and sell drugs with us).

I might add that for the serious street element there is no need for a put-on; rather, the street is in the person, consuming his being, so much so that the person has a limited behavioral repertoire. The decent kid who has come through this socialization process often has a wider array of styles from which to choose how to act, and certainly with which to gauge and understand the conduct of others. And with such street knowledge the young person may avoid being taken advantage of on the streets (not a small accomplishment). To be more appealing to those of the street, however, he must present himself in contradistinction with adult authority, and to some degree make his peace with the oppositional culture. This behavior is reinforced by the street group.

It is important to appreciate here that the code of the street and the street knowledge it implies are very important for survival on the inner-city streets. If the code did not exist, there would be even more disorganization in the community than there is, and violence and crime would likely be more frequent. The code is a kind of policing mechanism, encouraging people to treat others with a certain respect or face the consequences.

By a certain age a young person becomes proficient on the streets and accumulates a certain amount of capital. This kind and form of capital is not always useful or valued in the wider society, but it is capital nonetheless. It is recognized and valued on the streets, and to lack it is to be vulnerable.

The issue here, that of social belonging, raises other issues and questions. Would the decent kid resolve his dilemma differently if there were more decent kids present? If there were a critical mass of decent kids, could he get by with his decency—in deed as well as behavior—intact? But the decent kids do not form a critical mass. There may be overwhelming numbers of youths who in some settings—home, work, church, in the presence of significant adults about whose opinions they care—display a commitment to decency, but they cannot do so here. They are encouraged by the dominant youths here to switch codes and play by the rules of the street, or face sanctions at the hands of peers about whose opinions they also care.

And, as has been indicated, there is a practical reason for such a tack. To avoid being bothered, both decent and street youth must say through behavior, words, and gestures, "If you mess with me there will be a severe penalty—coming from me. And I'm man enough to make you pay." This message must be given loudly and clearly if the youth is to be left alone, and simply exhibiting a decent orientation often does not do so forcefully enough.

V. Conclusion

This essay has explored the conditions of life in the impoverished inner-city community, and the code of the street that has developed in response to those conditions. This essay includes a summary of the elements—economic, racial, and social—that have led to those conditions.

America's urban centers have experienced profound structural economic changes, as deindustrialization—the movement from manufacturing to service and "high tech"—and the growth of the global economy have created new economic conditions. Job opportunities increasingly go abroad to Singapore, Taiwan, India, and Mexico, and to nonmetropolitan America, to satellite cities like King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Over the last fifteen years, for example, Philadelphia has lost 102,500 jobs, and manufacturing employment has declined by 53 percent. Large numbers of inner-city people, in particular, are not adjusting effectively to the new economic reality. Where previously low-wage jobs—especially unskilled and low-skill factory jobs—existed simultaneously with poverty and there was hope for the future, now jobs simply do not exist. These dislocations have made many inner-city people unable to earn a decent living.

It often appears to outsiders that the ghetto consists of poor black people who engage in morally reprehensible behavior. The condition of these communities, however, was produced not by moral turpitude but by economic forces that have undermined black, urban, working-class life. Although it is true that such behavior as persistent welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, drug dealing, violence, and crime reinforces economic marginality, much of that behavior originated in frustration and the inability to adjust to economic dislocation. In other words, the social ills that the companies moving out of these neighborhoods today use to justify their exodus are the same ones that their corporate predecessors, by leaving, helped to create.

To place the blame solely on individuals in urban ghettos is seriously

misguided. The focus of the problem should be on the socioeconomic structure, because it was structural change that caused the number of jobs to decline and joblessness to increase in so many of these communities. Moreover, the people there lack good education. They lack both job training and good job networks, connections with people who could help them get jobs. They need sympathetic people, such as potential employers, who are able to understand their predicament and are willing to give them a chance. Government, which should be assisting people to adjust to the changed economy, is instead cutting what little help it does provide. At the same time, white and even black middle-class people are moving away from these inner-city areas, thereby both exacerbating bad conditions and removing role models for those left behind. This in turn leads to a weakening of social and family structure so that children are increasingly not being socialized into mainstream values and behavior.

Segregation and racism play important parts as well. After the abolition of slavery, segregation was introduced through both formal and informal means to keep blacks apart and ineligible for the rights, obligations, and duties of full citizenship. The creation of a black underclass living in jobless ghettos—to use sociologist William Julius Wilson's phrase—can thus be traced to the interaction of segregation and the effects of the global economy.

The attitudes of the wider society are deeply implicated in the code of the street. Most people in inner-city communities are not totally invested in the code, but the significant minority of hard-core street youths who have to maintain the code in order to establish their reputations because they have—or feel they have—few other ways to assert themselves. For these young people the standards of the street code are the only game in town. The extent to which some children—particularly those who through their upbringing have become most alienated, and those lacking in strong and conventional social support—experience, feel, and internalize racist rejection and contempt from mainstream society may strongly encourage them to express contempt for the more conventional society in turn. In dealing with this contempt and rejection, some youngsters will consciously invest themselves and their considerable mental resources in what amounts to an oppositional culture to preserve themselves and their self-respect. Once they do, any respect they might be able to garner in the wider system pales in comparison with the respect available in the local sys-

tem; thus they often lose interest in even attempting to negotiate the mainstream system.

At the same time, many less alienated young blacks have assumed a street demeanor as a way of expressing their blackness while in reality embracing a much more moderate way of life; they, too, want a nonviolent setting in which to live and raise a family. These decent people are trying hard to be part of the mainstream culture, but the racism, real and perceived, that they encounter helps to legitimate the oppositional culture. And so on occasion they adopt street behavior. In fact, depending on the demands of the situation, many people in the community slip back and forth between decent and street behavior.

A vicious cycle has been formed. The hopelessness and alienation many young inner-city black men and women feel, largely a result of endemic joblessness and persistent racism, fuels the violence they engage in. This violence serves to confirm the negative feelings many whites and some middle-class blacks harbor toward the ghetto poor, further legitimating the oppositional culture and the code of the street in the eyes of many poor blacks. Unless this cycle is broken, attitudes on both sides will become increasingly entrenched, and the violence, which claims victims black and white, poor and affluent, will only escalate.

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