HUMAN TARGETS
Schools, Police, and the Criminalization of Latino Youth

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Foreword by James Diego Vigil

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This book defies the insider-outsider, subjective-objective, native-going native, qualitative-quantitative contrasts and debates and pushes us to learn about the consequences of the punitive treatment, such as harsh school discipline or police harassment and brutality, that we impose on marginalized children. In the end, we are left understanding that in order to develop solutions for the complex problems that marginalized youths face, we must develop nuanced studies that help to illuminate the fully complex lives that young people live, the multifarious cultures they utilize, and the ways in which society has come to govern them by belligerently regulating their behaviors, frames, and worldviews.

James Diego Vigil

INTRODUCTION

Crossing Institutional Settings

The foul-tasting latex flavor of the blueberry-sized, heroin-filled balloons tucked inside my bottom lip forced me to compulsively spit, leaving a trail of saliva splotches on the sidewalk to evaporate in the hot California sun. After my homeboy and business partner, Conejo, and I shared a forty-ounce bottle of Olde English malt liquor, I had saved the bottle to fill with water from any functioning outdoor faucet I could find in this precarious corner of East Oakland—Twenty-Seventh Avenue and Foothill Boulevard. Sometimes, I added a packet of bright-red, cherry Kool-Aid to give the water some flavor.

Fifteen years old and desperate for money in 1993, I teamed up with Conejo to find a new venture. Conejo was in his early twenties and had sold heroin here in the past. Feeling left out of the education process, I had dropped out of school. We each invested twenty-five dollars to purchase a caramel-chew-sized chunk of heroin, which we broke into ten smaller pieces to sell for ten dollars each. We sealed each piece in small water balloons to hide inside our mouths; if the police stopped and frisked us, we could swallow the balloons. Later, we figured, we could dig through our excrement and recover the goods. This was risky business, and we knew it: Two of our homies had been hospitalized from ingesting heroine that had leaked into their intestines after they had swallowed their balloons. But for Conejo and me, selling heroin was both a desperate way to earn some money and bold proof of our manhood on the streets—we were self-sufficient and could handle danger. Through our industrious entre-
Grinding heroin for two fourteen-hour days on street corners waiting for clients yielded a profit of fifty dollars. I had doubled my initial investment, but the glamour of drug-selling quickly turned into a scary reality. I couldn't shake the fear of getting caught, becoming addicted, or ending up in prison. The possibility of being victimized and perpetually stuck making low wages loomed large. I knew a handful of guys who made hundreds of dollars a day selling drugs, but the majority of us hit a “tar ceiling” at street-level dealing, with very little money trickling down our way. Fear of the short-term consequences—violence or arrest—was enough, and I was blind to the long-term impact of crime, consequences serious enough to impede my success in adulthood.

After three days of street peddling heroin, a twenty-something-year-old veteran drug dealer approached me as I leaned against a wall on the back side of the liquor store where Conejo, a half-dozen other guys, and I usually posted, waiting for customers. I was sipping from my bottle of Kool-Aid when he addressed me point-blank, “Why you perpetrating, mothafucka?” Before I could ask him what he was talking about, he smacked the bottle out of my hand, glass shattering against the wall, staining the dingy, khaki-colored paint red. “Get the fuck out of here! If I see you around here again, I’m gonna scrape your ass, mothafucka!”

“Man, fuck you! You know who I’m with?” I snarled.

He reached into his pants at his waistline and pulled out a gun, waving it around. “I don’t give a fuck who you wit’! If I see you around here again, you gonna get shot.”

I walked away, looking for Conejo. This guy was cleaning up the area, Conejo cautioned, creating his own drug monopoly. “We could bring the homies and take the territory back... is it worth it to you? We making enough money to take the risk? To take this fool out?”

Ignoring Conejo’s advice, I started a fight a few days later with the older drug dealer’s nephew, a kid my age, to retaliate against his uncle’s threats. I was walking with two of my friends when I told them, “Hold on!” and I started running toward the kid. I caught him off guard, from behind, in front of another liquor store a few blocks
away and began punching and kicking him. As he ran inside the store for refuge, I walked away, proud of my attack.

About thirty minutes later, I was celebrating, laughing and recounting the sequence of events, when a 1980s Honda Civic slowed down as it approached us on busy Foothill Boulevard. I turned to see the driver, a chubby-faced, goateed man about forty, look straight at us from behind dark sunglasses. Right below him, I spied the dark-steel and light-wood trim of a shotgun. Instinctively, I fell backward, flat on my ass. A loud shot rang out, followed by a splatter noise as the shotgun shell pelted the wooden steps with dozens of pellet-sized pockmarks less than a foot above my head.

Collapsed on the ground, but uninjured, I sat there alone, my heart pounding. My friends were gone: They had noticed the driver a few seconds ahead of me and managed to jump a nearby fence before the gunshot.

The close call shook me to the core.

At fifteen and no stranger to violence, I had dabbled in marijuana and heroin sales and had stolen bicycles or cars to sell parts for ready cash. None of these activities had produced consistent, lucrative money, and all were fraught with dangers and huge risks. I even had landed in juvenile hall, for felony offenses, and was on strict probationary terms. Mess up again, and I would face some serious time.

But what other choice did I have? I wondered, except to continue to take those risks and face those dangers. What about my dispute with the older drug dealer? Would I step up my game and stake a claim for that street corner? Would I do whatever was necessary to compete with rivals for the territorial rights to sell drugs? And what would happen if I went down that path?

By chance around this time, I found a small flier in my pants pocket that a teacher had given me three weeks ago, the last time I had set foot in school. “Need a Job? Talk to Ms. Miller in Room D211. Fridays at Lunch,” the flyer read.

Desperate for cash, I returned to school to pay a visit to Ms. Miller and another teacher, Ms. Russ, who had mentored me in the past and had asked Ms. Miller to look out for me. Ms. Miller, who appeared
to like me, made dozens of phone calls to local businesses inquiring about jobs. Finally, German Auto Salvage, an auto repair shop, said they needed someone to clean up the shop four hours a day. It was this or a violent fight for the street corner. So, a few days later, I had a steady job cleaning up a repair shop, dismantling wrecked autos, and helping with oil changes and basic mechanic work. The six-dollar-an-hour wage was more consistent than the money I could earn through the illicit economy, and, even more important, German Auto Salvage taught me about professionalism, auto mechanics, and maintaining a steady job. I stayed at German Auto for over a year until I found a better paying job as an expeditor, later a busboy, and then a waiter at a local steak house called Charlie Brown’s. These strong connections with mentors and the solid work opportunities they helped me obtain offered me a viable choice, and I never returned to the streets to steal or to sell drugs. In fact, for the next decade, I worked at least twenty hours a week, while continuing my education.

Despite drifting in and out of street life and hanging out with my homeboys for a few more years, I found I was able to exist in two worlds: fixing people’s cars or serving food with courtesy and professionalism, on one hand, and engaging in turf disputes and putting myself at risk of arrest and victimization, on the other. By age seventeen, I had returned to school with a serious outlook and was shifting seamlessly between these various settings—school, probation, the street gang, the workplace—adopting a different persona for each. At school, I was the street kid turned legit; with my probation officer, I was the reformed criminal; on the street, I was that homie who had put in work, but now was less willing to break the law because of the greater risk of going to prison; at work, I was the fast-learning, hard-working kid eager for promotions who dreamed of going to college.

But without opportunities as a fifteen-year-old youth, flat on my ass amid a hail of shotgun fire, desperate for money and a place on the street, I could have easily remained like many of my peers—a human target. To be a human target is to be victimized and considered an enemy by others; it is to be viewed as a threat by law en-
forcement and schools and to be treated with stigma, disrepute, and punishment. Elsewhere, I have written that mass incarceration and punitive social control have constructed the treatment of a generation of marginalized youths as perennial criminals in need of control and containment, before they even commit their first offense; they encounter what I have termed “the youth control complex” (Rios 2011). Not all marginalized young people are as fortunate. In my professional career, as I have worked with young people who were labeled as deviant or criminal, I have found the dominant approach to reform these youngsters is to crack down on them, punish them until they follow directions, or harass and brutalize them to teach them a lesson. What allowed me to eventually turn conventional and escape being a perpetual target was not just an ability to code switch among my environments—something many urban youths learn on the streets—but also encountering tangible resources that caring adults facilitated for me: connections to meaningful educational, social, and labor market opportunities; the knowledge to recognize opportunity and take advantage of it; and the support to fortify my education-oriented aspirations, expectations, and day-to-day behaviors (see Vigil 1988).

In Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys (2011), I wrote about how some young people in the inner city grow up policed and punitively controlled by schools, parents, law enforcement, and others. I demonstrated how punishment operates as a social fabric of everyday life for marginalized young men. These young people experienced a kind of social death; they were outcasts before they even committed their first offense. This kind of targeting creates a system that metes out brutal symbolic and physical force on young people. In essence, young people become targets for police, schools, and other systems of social control to aim punitive resources and treatment at. This study lays out the interactional dynamics that take place within these punitive contexts, within a culture obsessed with control.

In this book, I offer an analysis of the quality of interactions between authority figures and youths and of how these interactions impact the ways these youths engage with institutional actors; of how they view themselves, their social contexts, their futures; and of how they behave. I analyze how culture plays a key role in determining the well-being of young people that navigate punitive institutional settings. I show how, in attempting to support or reform youths placed at risk, schools and police develop practices that contradict good intentions. These actions support a specific kind of cultural framing in young people that often leads them to further criminalization. In the end, I argue that institutional process and power overdetermine young people's ability to adopt and refine specific cultural practices and actions that impact their well-being. I also include recommendations for program and policy solutions to the misunderstanding, misjudging, and mistreatment leveled on these youths that perpetuate their social misery.

Although the problem of hypercriminalization, targeting, and negative framing of marginalized youths of color is a massive issue, solutions are not impossible. For instance, when I demonstrated an interest in returning to school and finding a job, my teacher, probation officer, and potential employer responded with empathy and compassion. They provided resources, opportunities, and second chances that created a trajectory of social mobility for me. But few of the young people I shadowed encountered these kinds of empathy or resources. The many youths I have followed who did not graduate from high school or achieve social mobility encountered a lack of opportunities and resources to develop the skills, not just to survive, but to thrive.

A “surviving” frame is one that allows young people to utilize the street-life skills that they have learned to persist in a world with few social and material resources. A “thriving” frame is one that influences young people to seek out the skills to accomplish conventional goals, like acquiring a job, doing well in school, and desisting from health-compromising behaviors. As I developed a “thriving” frame for becoming an adult, mentors taught me to recognize and utilize these opportunities. Finally, the opportunities that I was given were culturally relevant, resonated with my tastes, desires, and aspira-
taneously be one or more of the following: young adults, athletes, obnoxious drunks, travelers, cheaters, daughters, boyfriends, drug users, deviants, assholes, and social justice champions.

Some of the street-life-oriented young people I have studied do present aggressive tendencies, at times. However, more common are young people who shift their practices, actions, and attitudes across short time spans (e.g., a few hours) and spaces (e.g., between school and the street). They may be persistently vulnerable, but they are hardly static in the ways in which they navigate their worlds. I have discovered that youths can consistently adopt different personae, and institutions play an integral role in the types of performances these youths enact and the sorts of cultural frames they engage (see Vigil 1988; Harding 2010; Conchas and Vigil 2012). Instead of thinking of people as fixed types, we should view them as actors dynamically responding on a stage with constantly shifting backdrop and scenery, their performances influenced by different settings and different actors they encounter. This process is difficult to analyze because in the real time in vivo world, the individuals we study continually and consistently shape-shift. Since we are trying to capture patterns and replicable understandings, we tend to write about people in one-dimensional, practicable ways. Researchers in many ways are like still photography cameras. We collect a plethora of images that represent the real world but these images can only portray specific, frozen in time moments. We should strive to be more like video cameras in that we represent the multiple dimensions that we encounter in the real world. Following young people across institutional settings allows us to see these multidimensions and the many impediments and supports various institutions provide.

In order to understand how this process of shifting personae operates among marginalized young people, I decided to shadow those considered a high threat in the community they lived in—gang members. Most books about gangs focus on the life stories, group processes, perspectives, structural impediments, criminal behaviors, life outcomes, or resistance strategies of gang members (see, e.g., Vigil 2002). Although such interrogations provide valuable
insights, this book takes a different tack to focus on the outcomes of interactions between gang-associated youths and the institutional actors they encounter. I utilize the phrase “gang-associated” to describe individuals who have been labeled or self-describe as gang members (typically, the former is more common). “Associated” helps to remind us that many gang members are actually gang members because they have been labeled as such. A “gang” is just that, a label. When we forget this caveat, we perpetuate ideas of inner-city youths as violent criminals—an identity often connected to gang member in conventional discourse. To understand the multiple dimensions of these young people that are typically seen as one-dimensional gangsters, I shadow them from multiple angles.

Let’s imagine that a helmet camera has been attached to the youths you will meet in this book, and what you see are snippets of youths’ experiences as they navigate multiple settings. This narrative view emerges from interviews, focus groups, and observations. In addition, let’s imagine the camera capturing these youths’ lives has a zoom-out lens so you can see the youths themselves, the institutional actors they encounter, and the settings they navigate. Let’s also imagine that another camera is recording from across the room or across the street, providing a vantage point from which I can make observations about the youths and their interactions with institutional actors. In this way, I have applied a triangulated method in which interviews, observations, and focus groups yield insights from various viewpoints in the field. Readers who wish to learn more about this triangulated method and my “shadowing” approach may read the methodological appendix.

I am not interested in creating yet another sensationalistic or celebratory book about “ghetto denizens” or “gangbangers,” but rather in providing a deeper understanding of the processes by which authority figures fail to support young people and to recognize their multiple dimensions and multiple selves and how young people fail to demonstrate to the system their readiness to change. I show that as police and educators—often with good intention—try to reform or support young people, they create human targets: youths pro-
duced and portrayed as risks and criminal threats. As a result, they deliver punitive treatment at these youth, expecting a positive response. Instead of reforming, young people recognize this systematic targeting and look for ways to get the bull’s-eye off their backs or to fight back. This targeting leads young people to drift between conventional and self-compromising identities, while authority figures also vacillate between restorative and punitive social control in dealing with these disreputable individuals.

**Pernicious Fire**

Criminologist David Garland has argued that the United States has developed a culture of control. This culture of control is characterized by a deep-seated fear of crime; marginalized, primarily poor, populations rendered as criminal threats; the expansion of punitive legal sanctions; the obsessive focus on victims; and the manipulation of crime issues for political gain. Culture becomes a powerful, lone-standing vessel that helps to produce social marginalization through punitive mechanisms (Garland 2001b). But what does this culture of control look like in real time? How does it come to affect the lives of those individuals that become its targets? The aim of this book is to provide an ethnographic archaeology of the processes that this culture of control imposes on marginalized youths, and the cultural formations that circumscribe these young people’s lives as they engage with punitive structures.

As human targets, young people inevitably encounter pernicious fire—the meting out on individuals any number of detrimental outcomes, such as institutional stigmatization, school suspensions or expulsions, police harassment and humiliation, or disproportionate arrest and incarceration. Pernicious fire can evoke a life of social misery—like when an individual is pushed out of school or granted a criminal record and is unable to find viable employment. The more that authority figures misunderstand and mistreat marginalized populations, the more likely they are to resort to pernicious fire. This notion of pernicious fire is both a metaphor for the continuum of
punitive treatment across institutional settings and an observation of the trajectory of social action that leads to lethal outcomes, like police killings of unarmed males of color.

In recent years in the United States, a spree of police shootings of unarmed young men of color has made national news. In 2016, Alton Sterling, a black male in Louisiana, and Pedro Villanueva, a Latino male in California, were both shot and killed by police. Both of them were unarmed. While Sterling’s case made national headlines, Villanueva’s killing did not receive much national media attention. It appears that when Latinos are killed by police, the national media does not pay as much attention to the issue, diminishing the story of the punitive and violent policing of Latinos in the United States. But, as I demonstrate in this book, poor Latino youths encounter punitive and violent police treatment that is also worthy of national attention.

Police killings of unarmed men of color have also spurred some of the most vibrant, massive, controversial, and prolific social movements among marginalized classes in recent history. Two more of many cases were the killings of Michael Brown and Andy Lopez. Michael Brown, an unarmed, black eighteen-year-old, was fatally shot by a white police officer on August 9, 2014, in the Saint Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. Brown’s murder sparked near immediate protests in Ferguson as well as national media attention as residents called for an end to the pattern of police assaults on members of the black majority in a city with predominately white government officials (Bouie 2014; Schuman 2014). Andy Lopez, a thirteen-year-old Latino resident of Santa Rosa, California, was shot and killed by a white sheriff’s deputy when the officer mistook Lopez’s airsoft gun—a nonlethal replica of an AK-47—for an actual firearm. Similar to the Brown incident, protests were organized in Santa Rosa and throughout California to draw attention to an epidemic of police brutality (Alexander 2013). These young men represent just two examples in the national crisis of police misreading, misunderstanding, misjudging, and dehumanizing young males of color.

When police officers don’t understand and fear the bodies, cul-
ture, and actions of young black and Latino men—when they misrecognize and misframe them—they can make reckless decisions that invite unjust treatment, violence, and even death. Police operate in a larger cultural context in which they are socialized and taught to fear males of color. From a very young age, some youths are constructed as human targets by this culture of control, and when they encounter police mistreatment and violence, many in society may have come to believe these young people deserve such targeting and even eradication, leading to a culture of impunity within law enforcement departments across the nation. When police are trained by their departments to shoot when they feel that their life is in jeopardy, these fears, combined with the a system of impunity that does not hold officers accountable for unjustified killings, can play a major role in the split-second decision to shoot and kill a black or Latino male. Within this culture of control, officers are implicitly taught and allowed to operate under the assumption that blacks and Latinos are a threat and that their lives don’t matter. While most police stops do not end in a killing, many police stops do result in negative interactions. It is these micro-punitive processes that build up over time, leading to negative community-police relations, resentments toward police, and racist policing.

Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate in this book how our punitive attempts to help, regulate, and control disreputable youths can end up creating a larger crisis of control and can lead to school failure and police violence. The unfortunate outcomes are entire communities that are hyperpoliced and hyperincarcerated (see Rios 2011; Fader 2013; Goffman 2014), tens of thousands of dollars spent to imprison even one person each year (California spends $46,421 in tax dollars per prisoner annually), and the perpetuation and accentuation of the social misery that poverty already brings to these young people. This crisis of control plays out through culture: day-to-day practices, negative interactions, and contested symbols that come to frame young people’s understanding of their social world.

If we want heroin-selling, gangbangin, car-theieving, juvenile delinquents to reform and work toward developing productive lives,
then institutions, especially schools and law enforcement, must find ways to improve the quality of their interactions with these youths, provide them with meaningful resources to thrive on, and celebrate and promote their innate ability to shift between a myriad of identities and personas. We must develop programs and policies that account for the multiple scenes and backdrops that these youths regularly encounter as they seamlessly shift with fluidity through various daily settings. The culture of control must be replaced with a culture of care; we must stop setting young people up as targets and instead treat them as seeds to be nurtured.

Study Participants and Setting

I observed the institutional and personal stories of gang-associated young people in a Southern California community I have renamed "Riverland." In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants in this study, I have created pseudonyms for them, their community, and the city they are from. While descriptions and news reports might expose the location and identity of some of the participants in this study, I have done my best to report findings that minimize vulnerability that this study might place them in.

Many youths that I initially encountered had multiple stories of racism, humiliation, and punishment meted out by schools and police; I wanted to explore firsthand what they experienced as human targets. I sought to collect information from multiple angles to unearth the logic and practice of this targeting process, of this culture of control. I conducted five years of observations, from 2007 to 2012, and interviews on street corners and in parks, a community center, courtrooms, a probation school, and a conventional high school. The study began at Punta Vista, a school for youths on probation, where I eventually conducted two years of observations. At that school, I developed relationships with some youths from the south side, who facilitated my encounters with other out-of-school, gang-associated youths.

Throughout the study, I observed and interviewed fifty-seven Latino gang-associated males between fifteen and twenty-one years old in various settings; interviewed and observed eighteen gang-associated females, primarily at Punta Vista School; and supervised fourteen focus groups with females and forty-two with males. In this particular community, gang-associated females had a less visible presence, and as a male researcher, I felt a limited ability to gain trust and shadow the young women I encountered. Latina women experience a very unique trajectory from that of Latino men in the criminal justice system (see Diaz-Coto 2006). In addition, my research objective was to try to understand a group that is disproportionately represented as human targets, bearing the brunt of harsh school discipline, arrest, and incarceration—young males of color. Therefore, I chose to focus primarily on male gang-associated youths, while drawing insights from the young women whom I managed to interview and informally observe.²

Over the years, a team of eight graduate students and fourteen undergraduate students helped me to conduct focus groups and interviews for this study. Their research was primarily conducted at the local community center where we met with gang-associated youths as a team once a week on Friday evenings over the course of four years and where I could supervise them as they helped to collect interview and focus group data. Although I organized a research team to help with this project, I alone collected the systematic observational data outside of the community center in order to maintain consistency and to avoid exposing students to risk. While some of my students went on to conduct observations for their own independent research projects, the fieldwork observations that I report on in this book are my own, unless otherwise reported with "we" instead of "I." Chapter 3 was coauthored with Patrick Lopez-Aguado, chapter 4 was coauthored with Rachel Sarabia, and chapter 5 was coauthored with Samuel Gregory Prieto—all graduate students under my supervision at the time. They helped to collect and analyze data and to provide me with insight on my coding, theoretical memos, and preliminary conclusions, in order to ensure that at least one other person was seeing the patterns I uncovered in the field.
Setting and Study

Riverland is a Southern California city known as an idyllic beachside community. Its beautiful coastal geography inflates real estate values, attracting development of hidden mansions along hillsides that offer scenic ocean views, as well as upscale boutiques along Beach Street, the main corridor for the downtown commercial district. Home to numerous theaters, museums, and vacation homes, the city sells itself as having the culture and sophistication of California’s larger elite cities without the big-city problems of crime or poverty. Through the prioritizing and policing of public space, Riverland works hard to maintain the popular perception that it is exclusively wealthy and white.

But despite its tranquil image, Riverland is not immune from race and class conflicts. A few blocks from Beach Street, Chavez Avenue cuts through South Riverland as a kind of second main street, one that caters to the city’s overlooked Latino population. Largely hidden from Riverland’s projected image and rarely acknowledged in positive reporting by local media, Latinos comprise approximately 30 percent of the city’s population, and most of these residents work in the low-wage service sector. South Riverland houses many residents of color, positioned as a servant class to the larger population, who struggle to survive in face of the extravagant cost of living, one of the nation’s highest. Some of them live in dire conditions and express a desire for better living conditions. Thirty-one-year-old Cristina, mother of Rosy, a fourteen-year-old gang-associated girl, explained:

I would like them to have the basic resources they need. How do I help them, if I don’t have the money? . . . Rosy doesn’t get a good lunch. She comes home hungry, and I don’t have much. I want to be able to provide them with the basics: shoes, food. I want to be able to feed my kids, to clothe them. I think that has a lot to do with how she acts. She gets frustrated with our situation. Frustrated over not having anything and living the life we live. I think this lifestyle is what drives her to hang out with her friends in the street; drives her to stay on the streets with her sister rather than come home. They have food. She is probably tired of Top Ramen or Cup-o-Noodles, or canned vegetables or peas, but that is what I can afford and sometimes they are free from the church. We don’t even have money for laundry detergent. We have been wearing dirty clothes for the last few days. We haven’t washed in three weeks.

The youths in this community commonly find themselves publicly racially profiled as criminal others. The local division of labor that designates Latinos as low-end service workers who cater to wealthy residents and tourists reinforces racial tensions. These status differences, which are most visible at school and in encounters with whites, remind youths of color that they are considered “dangerous, fearsome” people, a designation that is ironically both stigmatizing and empowering. The youths’ responses are varied, but some turn to gang culture and life, like Rosy. Youths who adopt gang-associated attire find they have the power to cause a reaction—usually a negative one, within a context in which they are feared. Johny, a sixteen-year-old gang-involved Latino, explained:

If you go with your homies, they stare at you. Baggy clothes make you look suspicious . . . around here if you’re walking in a little group. People are all scared of you. . . . If gueros [whites] are coming toward you, they’ll get off the sidewalk so you can pass by. They’re scared as fuck!

Latino youths report other encounters with white residents that serve to reinforce the local economic hierarchies. Johny continued:

I used to work at the farmers’ market with my father, and there was white people that would give you attitude about the color skin that you are. ’Cause I’m working behind this table selling these things to you don’t mean you have to be rude to me, ’cause you don’t have to buy them from me and feel like I need you.
Race and class become inextricably tangled as young Latinos are expected to represent a working class that serves the wealthier white locals. But rather than submit to class oppression and become “good workers” while being robbed of opportunities to obtain viable occupations, these youths become defiant against the exploitive status thrust upon them. Within a culture of control, these young people have come to be feared and constructed as criminal threats rather than ducile, exploitable, “well-behaved” workers.

In Riverland, race and class marginalization also occurs in schools. Sixteen-year-old Mary, a student who was expelled for fighting and sent to the probation school, Punta Vista, shared her perspective:

I think they feel that like white kids are like better . . . like Mexican kids are, I guess, like gang-related and I think they think they’re like bad influences, and they think we’re like not smart. They think that like white kids are . . . smart, and they’re like good kids, they’re like good influences . . . You could tell how the teachers are like how they look at you before you even start dressing different. 

This criminal labeling becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for many youths of color. Another gang-associated male, sixteen-year-old Tito, experienced similar treatment and pinpointed an incident that strongly influenced his decision to adopt a “gang” style and drop out of school: “The teacher chose . . . me, and the white guy [a fellow student],” he said, “Oh, he won’t know the answer. He’s Mexican.” The teacher didn’t say anything.”

When I asked him how he felt about this, he said,

I felt like shit, so I just skip school. Go to a friend’s house, help my parents with work, do drugs, fucking just go look for fights, go to Beach Street. Just anything rather than school. I hate school.

For many of these youths, school becomes a place where they feel disrespected and reprimanded rather than educated, and as a result, they develop an oppositional stance toward educational institutions and seek alternative spaces for acceptance and affirmation (Dance 2002). One such surrogate is the street and gang life. Once associated with this world, young people find it more difficult to succeed in school and the labor market, and they get caught up in the criminal justice system. Institutional labels and the way in which institutions treat these gang-associated youths play a role in young people’s well-being.

What’s in a Label?

After gathering data in the field for a year, I developed a conceptual and theoretical framework in order to understand the processes by which labeling shaped the kinds of cultural and material resources, and by default life outcomes, that marginalized Latino youths encountered. This section describes the conceptual and theoretical framework I utilize and develop. Readers who wish to immediately learn more about the youths in this study, their contexts, and their stories may skip to chapter 1.

To be “from the south side” carried multiple meanings in Riverland. One could have grown up there, resided in a south side neighborhood, or be formally labeled as a member of the south side gang by schools or law enforcement. This ambiguous labeling created immense problems for law enforcement, schools, and the media as they sought to determine who was a gang member and who was not. Often, these parties—along with social scientists—have been content with a loose definition of a gang member that could be applied to youths who wear symbols, enact mannerisms, hang out in specific areas, and represent specific racialized populations. Entire books on “gangs” have been written by social scientists without clearly defining how they determined gang membership. Decker and Van Winkle’s Life in the Gang (1996) is one example. In describing gang activity and behavior, these authors make it appear as if all the youths in the community they studied were gang members. The uncritical assumption that these and other “gang experts” make is
that living in poverty, being of color, and having a tight-knit group of friends renders one a gang member and, therefore, an ideal research subject. Gang researchers must reflect on the process by which they determine gang membership, and find strategies for determining if their definitions hold any value in the real world, prior to conducting their studies. Otherwise, they risk misrepresenting the lives of marginalized youths and influencing practice and policy based on fallacy.

For this research, I sought to bypass simplistic, racist labels devoid of empirical evidence that are frequently applied to urban youths of color. Instead, I refer to the boys in this study as “gang-associated.” To be gang-associated is to be perceived as, self-reported as, or informally or formally labeled (typically by law enforcement or schools) as an actual gang member. The reason I utilize this label is to address the ambiguity that exists in the study of gangs. “Associated” here refers to those cognitive, institutional, or interactional processes by which individuals are connected to the gang life. This line of reasoning helps us acknowledge that the research and writing we conduct is also embedded within a larger culture of control that influences the intersubjective construction of reality that our work produces. In other words, researchers can be just as complicit in constructing marginalized populations as criminal threats in need of regulation and control.

How do we know who is a gang member? Sometimes, when young people self-report, they have their own arbitrary definitions of what a gang is. Some believe a crew of three friends with a moniker for their group is a gang; others believe that you are not a gang member until you have been officially initiated by a street gang under the jurisdiction of a recognized prison gang, such as the Mexican Máfia or Nuestra Familia. In one instance, police formally entered a fourteen-year-old in a statewide gang database—CalGang, hosted and supported by the California Department of Justice—simply because he wore a hat bearing his childhood nickname, Flaco (Skinny), on the bottom flap. Was he a gang member? Other times, without any justification other than their biased judgment or a few disciplinary incidents, or the youth’s tough demeanor, school officials have been convinced that a kid is a gang member. The youth is labeled and treated accordingly: zero-tolerance dress codes, assignment to special programs, and interactions based on disdain, pity, or fear.

The gang label is a powerful one that generates specific resources, actions, and interactions within the various institutions these young people must navigate. For example, during my time in the field, researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara, had helped to create a “risk assessment” instrument for the county probation department to survey probation youths about their attitudes toward violence and crime. The youths were also asked whether their relatives where gang involved or in jail or prison. The intent was to collect data on the resources that these young people needed to facilitate their reform. During four court observations, I witnessed prosecutors using these instruments to make a case against some of the boys. The logic: If the young man reported that his older brother was in jail and in a gang, then he was at risk of committing a crime as well and, therefore, should be given a harsher sentence to prevent that crime from occurring.

According to criminologist and former gang member Robert Durán (2013), gang membership is socially constructed, and “there is nothing [finite] that establishes when people join or leave.” Therefore, it is difficult to determine who is a gang member and when the person joins or leaves the gang. Research has shown that “most people fade away from the gang scene” (Durán 2013, 24) as they mature. But despite the fact that most gang members have been found to disengage from gang activity within two to three years from initiation, the effects of the gang label last much longer. When law enforcement or schools label a young person as a gang member, that youth is likely to face grave consequences independent of any possible criminal activity he may engage in, past, present, or future. These consequences might include indefinite registry in the gang databases, automatic gang enhancements if convicted of a future crime, stigma and negative treatment from authority figures, and injunctions prohibiting being physically present in certain loca-
tions, including educational facilities such as high schools and community colleges. In this study, I found that gang labeling resulted in stigma, exclusion, and subsequent arrests, even years after the youngsters had left the street life.18

Based on the findings in this study and insight from Brotherton and Barrios’s (2004) gang definition, I developed a working definition for the gang: a group process that occurs as marginalized young people attempt to provide each other, within a collective context, a dignified identity, “an opportunity to feel individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to, challenge,” and engage the dominant culture and institutions of social control, “a refuge from the stresses and strains of poverty,” and a protective factor—a surrogate—that functionally and perceivably replaces the role that institutions of socialization and support (schools, the family, the welfare system) have failed to provide. In essence, a gang, and a gang member, are not a what but a how (Vigil 2002). They are not things or people; they are processes. In the United States, the gang label is heavily racialized. In the media and with law enforcement, a group of Latino or black youths committing a crime is likely to be labeled as a gang. This is not the case with groups of white youths who commit similar crime (Covington 2010).

Because a gang is socially constructed, its definition must be fluid enough to allow for local context, nuanced group processes, and the autonomous power of labeling. By extension, if an institution defines a group of disreputable youths as a gang, then regardless of any specific characteristics or function, that group is, in effect, a gang. Institutional power defines who is a gang member and what constitutes a gang threat. Once defined, we must account for the racialized response to this perceived gang threat, the quality of interactions between the gang and authority figures, the group and cultural processes that ensue from this label, and the reactions provoked. To understand young people who have been labeled as gang members, we must observe them in various facets of their lives, at different times and space points, and across different settings. We must also understand their multiple selves. A cultural framing perspective helps in this endeavor.

Cultural Framing

Cultural framing offers an analytical tool for understanding the role that institutions play in influencing young peoples’ worldviews and actions. A cultural frame is a system of meaning-making, identity formation, and presentation of self based on material and symbolic resources that influence peoples’ perceptions of the world and of their choice of actions and behaviors. Sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) describes this system as a cultural “toolkit” that individuals use to develop “strategies of action” (273).19 Cultural frames influence how individuals think about their social and personal mobility and “how they choose to act” (Young 2004, 11). All populations in society draw upon a variety of cultural models, often coexisting simultaneously, to inform their actions. An array of cultural frames comprises an individual’s understanding of the world and this “system of meaning” serves as the basis for future behavior (Geertz 1973). Likewise, individuals living in poverty are not bound by a fixed value system, but are surrounded by multiple cultural frames—what David Harding (2010) refers to as “cultural heterogeneity”—that offer various models for shaping perceptions, worldviews, and actions.20 Social psychology research offers a similar conception—shape shifting—the intricate process of identity change (see Burke and Stets 2009; Alvermann et. al. 2006).

Culture provides resources from which individuals can draw to shape the outcomes of their actions, and structural opportunities determine which resources individuals will utilize in the various contexts they navigate. So when a young person has a negative interaction with an authority figure who represents a specific institution, the frames that inform the young person’s actions are limited to a minimal selection of responses, often either to resist or reject the system, to develop what sociologist L. Janelle Dance calls
A healthy selection of responses might include asking for a meeting to address the issue, writing a letter to the school district, or having parents or lawyers intervene (assuming that these actions will be taken seriously by the system). However, these responses are limited by class or by the school's unwillingness to allow for these kinds of kids to respond in these kinds of ways. In this way, institutions play a key role in the process by which individuals encounter and utilize cultural frames. Schools and law enforcement can either help young people resonate with productive frames or hinder their connection with these frames.

Cultural frames structure how we interpret events and how we react to them, though the relationship between culture and behavior is not "cause-and-effect," but rather "a relationship that highlights constraint-and-possibility" (Small 2004). Although the youths in this study were influenced by cultural frames in near proximity—for example, gangsterism, defiance, and criminality—these frames did not cause their actions, but only made certain kinds of behavior more recognizable, accessible, and likely.

A cultural frames approach offers a more nuanced way to view young people's behaviors and reactions than the "typologies" model—the angry kid, the gang member, the decent type, the dirty people, the clean people—which assigns labels to individuals based on recurring observed attributes or based on labels imposed by others in the community. This approach renders individuals incapable of acting any other way. With a cultural frames approach, we allow ourselves the capability to observe individuals change their dispositions and behaviors based on their encounters with power (in this case institutions) and as they cross institutional settings. David Harding (2010) provides a compelling theoretical model for understanding inner-city youths through a cultural framing perspective. This model has the potential to move urban ethnography, criminology, and other research on poor populations beyond typologizing approaches that caricature and at times even pathologize the populations we study.21

Harding argues that young people living in poverty have access to conventional cultural models, such as acquiring a college educa-

tion or becoming responsible parents, and, indeed, aspire to achieve these goals; however, with limited resources to reach their aspirations, they inevitably follow other stronger models that resonate the most with their lived experience. Thus, cultural heterogeneity takes a different form in low-income settings based on the neighborhood context. Take, for example, the youngster in a poor neighborhood who aspires to go to college. His single mother may constantly push him to achieve his goal, but his peers on the streets and older siblings may support an alternative, survival-based frame: make some money to make ends meet. From their viewpoint, the strongest indicator of success may mean evading arrest or living another day without being victimized. Although an educational credential may be a highly valued aspiration, the immediate neighborhood context makes it a far-fetched idea and a less valuable indicator of success for these young people. As sixteen-year-old Mario phrased it, "A piece of paper [high school diploma] ain't gonna work as a bulletproof vest or stop the puerco [pigs] from violating me [arrest for violating terms of probation]."

Cultural heterogeneity exists in all social environments among all social groups; however, poor neighborhoods lack resources to support certain specific cultural frames. Therefore, the more positive aspiration (going to college) can be diluted and less influential, while the negative, more immediate goal (surviving violence, staying out of trouble) can be amplified. This process, which Harding calls "model shifting," occurs when young people adopt the salient frames for their neighborhood context.

Harding's study focused on the influence of neighborhoods and peers, but did not analyze the role authority figures and institutional powers play in shaping the cultural models that influence young people's understandings and actions. In this study of Riverland youths, I examine how young people's model shifting unfolds across institutional settings—the probation school, the streets, the community center, the conventional high school, and the legal system—and the role that institutional actors play in how young people interpret and utilize cultural frames. In other words, institutional
processes have a profound influence on the cultural models available to youths and the cultural models that young people choose to engage with. For example, Mark, a fifteen-year-old gang-associated student, wanted to go to college, and he even demonstrated that he knew the steps needed to obtain a four-year college degree, as in this conversation with me:

V.R.: Do you know the steps needed to get to college, to get a degree?
MARK: Get some, like two years of CC [community college] classes and get good grades. Then I apply to transfer to get a business degree.
V.R.: What prevents you from taking these steps, what obstacles do you face?
MARK: A bunch of lame-ass shit. Like my record and my grades and my attitude and these dumb-ass probation officers and teachers that don't get me. . . . Every day, I guess, it's like I just have to avoid getting caught up, staying legit.
V.R.: You sound like you know what it takes to stay legit. Why do you think you still get caught up even though you know how to avoid it?
MARK: You can leave the streets, but the streets aren't gonna leave you. At the end of the day that's all you got. Your homies there waiting, backing you up, needing a favor . . . but the school side what does it have to offer you?

To Mark, planning for college represented a relevant, albeit muted, system of ideas and practices that signaled his desire to extend his education and someday become a professional. Another positive frame was “staying legit,” which meant avoiding academic failure, victimization, incarceration, and acquiring resources through legitimate economic and financial means. Youths like Mark could be drawn to these positive frames, but authority figures' either subtle or overt countermessages may result in them turning back to the street—a landscape with a stronghold on the boys' decision making.

Indeed, as I examined the quality of interactions between youths and authority figures, I uncovered how cultural heterogeneity functions across institutional settings and how it's impacted by institutional power. To deal with youths' disreputable behaviors, police and school officials attempted to incorporate young people's alternative "street" frames into the informal rules and interactions they propagated. As a result, good or neutral intentions often constructed negative outcomes.

Negative interactions can determine worldviews and outcomes for marginalized young people. Authority figure–youth interactions were dominated by misrecognition: the process by which an individual fails in understanding the meaning and intentions attached to the cultural framing that the other is engaged in. When students' actions were misinterpreted, they responded with resistance.22 Resistance became cognition: Young people became aware of the crisis of control and institutional failure to regulate their behavior and, in turn, consciously attempted to persist and generate alternative protective factors. A failure of control at school and other institutions produced collective identities, frames of resistance, and protective mechanisms among these marginalized youths. This, in turn, fueled the culture of control, resulting in harsher interactions and punishments. The quality of interactions between youths and authorities had a tremendous impact on youths' attitudes and decisions, which, in turn, profoundly affected their lives as they neared adulthood. Schools and police, like the streets, limited the cultural models young people could realistically pursue, and those limitations shaped how they engaged with authority figures. I first observed these processes of cultural (mis)framing at the local probation school, Punta Vista, where my study began.

Punta Vista served as a revealing opening site for this research because the various forces I sought to study seemed to converge there: the culture of control, cultural heterogeneity, gang-associated youths, delinquent youths, high school dropouts (more sensible label: pushouts), probation officials, police, educators, and community and social services.
CHAPTER ONE

The Probation School

Punta Vista School opened its doors in the early 1990s in Riverland, California, as an alternative institution for educating students who were failing school or in trouble with the law. Juveniles on probation and students expelled from local high schools—usually for gang-related truancy, defiance, fights, and drug use—were mandated to attend Punta Vista School. Its mission was to educate those youths released from incarceration or those truants who had missed too many days at the conventional school to be allowed to return.

Jorge and Mark were two of the first youths I met at Punta Vista. Over time, I shadowed and interviewed them to learn about the institutional forces that converged to impact them. Punta Vista School and the surrounding streets of South Riverland formed the main nexus where youths like Jorge and Mark interacted with authority figures. Eventually, I hung out on the streets of the south side and in other relevant places—the conventional high school, the community center, and the courtroom—to follow up with Jorge, Mark, and other gang-associated youths.

For two months, I observed classes at Punta Vista before I approached Mark and Jorge, gang-associated youths who had reported being previously arrested and listed in law enforcement’s gang database. They were also described by school officials as gang members. Over the years, the boys shifted between labeling themselves as gang members or alleged gang members, depending on their attitudes and circumstances. The boys agreed to allow me to interview and observe them. In addition, Jorge and Mark connected me with other gang-associated young men in the neighborhood. With this snowball method, I gained access to members of a male street gang that law enforcement had linked with the Mexican Mafia, a notorious prison gang that was otherwise suspicious of outsiders.

Despite these introductions and connections, gaining the trust of some of these young men was not easy. In fact, some stated that they did not trust me even after four years in the field. Their main concern was that one day I would turn data I collected over to law enforcement. Therefore, for the youths’ safety and my own protection, over time I acquired a certificate of confidentiality from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which allows the researcher to refuse to disclose identifiable research information in response to legal demands. Part of the certificate mandates that “persons so authorized to protect the privacy of such individuals may not be compelled in any Federal, State, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings to identify such individuals.” Eventually, some of the boys trusted me enough to allow me to shadow them at the park, the street, the community center, their schools, and at Golden State Liquors store.

When I first met Jorge, a short, scrawny fifteen-year-old Latino, he had a shaved head and preferred to dress in extra-baggy polyester work pants or shorts—Dickies or Ben Davis—and extra-large white T-shirts or blue-checkered dress shirts. He was in fourth grade when he and his older brother arrived undocumented to the United States from Mexico, and he still spoke with a heavy accent, struggling to find words in English as quickly as he wanted to say them. He often switched back and forth between English and Spanish: “Ay ese cabron is talking shit about me; si no se calla le voy a dar en la madre” [Ay, that asshole is talking shit about me; if he doesn’t shut up I am going to kick his ass]. Jorge’s response to his environment and the stress inflicted on him was to make jokes and witty comments. From his seat at the front of the class, he cracked jokes, chatted with classmates, blurted out random noises, and constantly frustrated the teacher with back talk.

Mark was a Californio (Mexican and indigenous origin) whose
family roots could be traced back to California native peoples and the Spanish who arrived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before the United States seized California from Mexico. Mark was proud of his family’s heritage (“My great grandma was Chumash [Native American], and all my family has been here way before the guerros [white people] came”), but he also used his deep roots with the land as a point of resistance to the Anglo culture’s dominance, disrespect for indigenous and other cultures, and expectations of assimilation and submission to a given role in society.

Mark’s experience illustrates Riverland’s deeply problematic racialized culture in which Latinos are portrayed, described, and visible as either members of a servant class or a criminal class (see chapter 3). The servant class typically includes adult immigrants who work in the tourist and restaurant industries, while the criminal class comprises younger individuals, often second generation and beyond, who are constantly stopped and frisked by police in public and appear almost nightly on the evening news as criminal suspects or perpetrators. Mark, like many of the boys in this study, troubled with the community’s treatment of his people, wanted to do something about the problem, but did not know how.

With his hair buzz-cut so short that his pale scalp was visible, Mark sat quietly at the back of the classroom, consistently appearing disgruntled. The administration and faculty had a list of character types, folk categories, used to label students for the sake of everyone’s safety and to maintain order: the addict, the emotionally disturbed, the promiscuous cholita (gangster girl), the angry cholo, the wannabe (aspiring gangster), and the class clown. The principal selected “the angry type” to describe Mark. He did appear to internalize his frustrations, and eventually he would reach a breaking point and lash out. One day, for example, Mark overheard a male classmate tell a female student, “I think you like Mark; I think you want him to ask you out?”

Mark’s light complexion turned slightly red as he clinched his fists together and his face and the back of his head convulsed in anger. He stood up from his desk to confront the other boy: “What you say about me? Don’t be putting my name in your stupid fucking words. . . . I’m gonna kick your ass after school!”

The classroom security guard, a typical fixture in a school for students considered at risk, swiftly grabbed Mark by the shoulder and marched him outside. Mark did not return for the remainder of class. Later, I noticed him sitting in the principal’s office. “We have to give him lots of time to cool down,” the security guard said.

Being removed from class was hardly new to Mark, whose disruptive behavior invited institutional reprimand from an early age. White boys displaying similar behavior in an affluent suburban school might be labeled ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), but, for Mark, the ritual was to be singled out and positioned as “gang” member. Mark told me:

Since like third grade I would like disrupt the class, according to them [teachers], I would always be disruptive. They would wait for me to say one little thing just to get me out of class . . . they wouldn’t give me a chance . . . like then in high school my fuckin’ English teacher, that fool, used to have my referrals already written for me—a big stack—he would wait just for me to say something and he’ll be like all right go outside walk to the office . . . and I knew because they would always say the same, like no matter what I did, it would say “disruptive in class.”

According to Mark, his disruptiveness led him to become labeled a gang member:

I know like they don’t want you there [at school], like gangsters like people that they think you know are gangsters. These motherfuckers, they’re not doing, they’re not gonna do any good to our school. Fuck that. Kick ’em out, you know try to find reasons to get ’em out. Like, oh yeah, this fool got suspended like three times, he’s a gang member . . . that’s what happened with me. Just for getting in trouble in class, they were scared and labeled me a fuckin’ gangster and kicked me out.
During my observations, I found Mark had a tendency to respond to conflict through facial expressions and language that staff considered angry and threatening to others. Many times, I witnessed Mark become uncontrollably upset over an apparently trivial issue. On one occasion, in front of the Golden State Liquors store, the preferred hangout spot for the south side boys, Mark loaned his brother, Justin, a pair of Locs sunglasses. Advertised as "the most popular hardcore shades in the world" and worn by famous rap artists like Ice Cube and the late Eazy-E, Locs sold for under twenty dollars and were coveted among the neighborhood boys.

(Justin, also one of the South Riverland gang-associated boys had been arrested for running away from a police officer who caught him breaking the 10 p.m. city curfew. The curfew bans youths under sixteen from being out without an adult chaperone at night, and violators are ticketed and ordered to appear in court to face financial penalties and possible probation. Justin attempted to flee before the ticket and the fine; instead, he was arrested and charged with violating the terms of his probation.

That day in front of the liquor store, Justin accidently chipped Mark's Locs, which infuriated and enraged his brother. Mark started pacing and cursing, and then kicked the liquor store wall. Standing about three feet away from me, he slammed the sunglasses on the ground with all his might, shattering them into hundreds of tiny fragments. The loud noise followed by plastic shrapnel bouncing off my arms sent chills running through my body. The other boys looked shocked, and Mark walked away as if trying to stop himself from physically attacking his brother.

On the streets, such aggressive displays were prominent and threats or violent acts could unfold at any given moment. However, the Punta Vista School's authoritarian control kept such aggression to a minimum during the day and on site, saved for a later time and a different space. The school's primary role seemed to be to contain violent behavior in order to maintain a reputation of control. But what happened outside of school was out of its purview.

Despite his principal's description and my own initial observation of an ill-tempered Mark, he was more complicated than the "angry type" label suggested. I could have settled for studying Mark's dominant "angry" persona. Over the years, he demonstrated many episodes of rage and anger. However, I also realized that Mark had other ways of being, other identities, that the school had not recognized but that over time and across space, I could uncover.

Observing young people across settings and for long periods of time allows us to uncover their multiple dimensions. It is our obligation as researchers to complicate our descriptions of these individuals so that our writing portrays a more true-to-life version of the individuals we encounter in the field. A more reflexive approach that understands research participants as heterogeneous in their worldviews and behaviors allows us to grant individuals the human dignity they deserve and to approach a more nuanced understanding of the social facts we examine.

Mark could have been understood in this project as simply an angry type, taking his frustration out on his peers and the system. However, Mark also portrayed other dominant characteristics that require further examination. For example, a few hours after the glasses incident, I observed Mark in front of his friend Michael's apartment talking to Michael's mother. He noticed that the front of her apartment smelled of urine and was filled with cigarette butts and trash. He said, "Spenca señora [excuse me, ma'am], I can clean some of this stuff if you want. All I need is a bucket of water and a broom and a trash bag." Mark's relationship with this adult—an authority figure he respected and listened to—seemed to position him as a helper. In this different social context, Mark presented himself as kind and empathetic.

Among many youths in this study, I found a similar ability to switch personae and corresponding mannerisms from one social context to another. Labeled one way by authorities in a certain context, these same youths could present themselves as quite the opposite elsewhere. Some authority figures and some spatial and social
contexts seemed to bring out the best in young people while others brought out the worst, and, more than distinct personalities, these interactional and spatial contexts mattered.

The Controlled Environment of Punta Vista

The interactional and spatial context of Punta Vista seemed to bring out the worst dimension in students. The school resembled an industrial building, about three thousand square feet and freshly painted institutional gray. The main door, painted green, seemed better suited to a residential house, hardly like a gateway through which dozens of high school students would walk each day. Three insignificant windows facing west brought minimal natural light into the school. Plumbing pipes, electrical wires, and utility meters covered about a fourth of the front facade. The parking lot had room for three cars, and a metal, barbed-wire fence, about eight-feet tall, divided the school from the adjacent sidewalk. A minuscule sign, two-inches wide by five-inches long, read “Punta Vista School.” Local residents appeared clueless about this unattractive, seemingly vacant building.

Aside from the building’s dreary appearance, the school site had been mired in controversy when toxic chemicals had seeped from abandoned, dilapidated underground oil and toxic waste storage tanks left behind from a diesel truck repair shop that once had been located on the adjacent property. In addition, the Department of Toxic Substances Control detected tetrachloroethylene in the school, a chemical known to pose health risks for humans. During my observations, the county conducted an environmental study that determined that the tetrachloroethylene present in the school was not strong enough to harm students, but could potentially pose a risk to teachers who had worked there for an extensive period of time.8

On my visit to Punta Vista School, I found the front door locked. I pushed a small black doorbell, and I was buzzed in a few seconds later. Cameras in the front lobby recorded my entry. The tall, husky, shaven-headed white security guard subtly lifted his head and wrinkled his face, as if to say, “What’s up?” I returned his speechless gesture with a minimal response; tilting my head slightly to the side and lifting my chin, I said, “How’s it going?”

As I arrived at the front office, the receptionist, a short, stocky middle-aged Latina with curly hair, was on the phone. She paused her conversation to ask, “How can I help you?” I explained I was there to see the principal, Ms. Mason, with whom I arranged my visit and classroom observations a few weeks prior. Ms. Mason was a thin, dark-complexioned, middle-aged Latina who appeared to care for the students, but also demonstrated a “no nonsense” approach to dealing with discipline. During our first interaction in her office, she revealed, “Security. It’s my favorite sport.” Over time, I realized that her leadership approach was more concerned with preventing violence and crime at the school than educating students. The school structure and culture reflected this approach.

As I waited to see Ms. Mason, I observed the student check-in process. At the beginning of each school day, students lined up and presented all of their personal belongings to the front office staff: wallets, loose cash and change, cell phones, even their school supplies. Removing their shoes to ensure no weapons were hidden inside, the students were inspected with a handheld metal detector. The receptionist provided them a reference number—14, 15, 16, and so on—which they used after school to retrieve their belongings. Mark described his experience with the check-in process:

This school’s more controlled, we have no freedom. . . . It’s like you come in and you checking in to prison but the teachers can’t really control us. They just tell us what not to do. . . . They’re so mad that they can’t tell us what to do that they all they can do is tell us what not to do.

If a male student wore an extra-baggy shirt or a T-shirt with images considered inappropriate, security guards would give him
a plain, bright-orange shirt to wear instead. One out of every five students ended up in this situation. I later learned that this bright-orange shirt also was used to punish students who defied school personnel, even if they were dressed appropriately. Clothing had become a contested symbol that authority figures used to control students’ behavior and that students used to challenge the authoritarian order.

Mark saw the school’s imposition of such strict control on students as a sort of unspoken compromise. Students would obey the disciplinary rules in exchange for lower academic expectations and requirements. This was a common theme in my observations of interactions between authority figures at Punta Vista. In its desperation to control unruly youths, the school exempted itself from serving its primary function—to educate—and instead defaulted to its secondary function—to keep these youngsters from breaking the law. In its practice and day-to-day interactions, the school operated as a quasi-criminal justice institution. Students understood this institution as a punitive one, and, as such, they informally agreed to follow its crime control rules and regulations, as long as they were not also required to fulfill its academic expectations. One might imagine the confusion and strain having to follow two sets of conflicting rules could have on young people—one from a criminal justice logic and one from an educational context. In the end, they negotiated with the institution to follow one set, while resisting the other. This might explain why so many of the students failed to return to the conventional high school or to make academic progress at the school. In our society, obsessed with a culture of control, obedience, law abidance, and regimentation become measures of success, good citizenship, and legality. I waited nervously to meet the principal, swiftly shaking my leg as I felt chills tingle down my spine. Even for me, the overbearing presence of control imbued me with shame and foreboding. The feeling was eerily familiar, although the schools I attended never had this kind of intrusive check-in process. Later, reviewing my field notes for the day, I realized why I was so disturbed by the observation:

The staff at the school seems to look at the students with fear or disdain. The air feels thick with tension between staff and student. The staff’s eyes appear to dilate when they stare down the students, as if appearing to possess X-ray vision, giving the impression that they know every detail of a student’s possessions and even knowing what a student is thinking. As one of the students, a short, chubby, square-headed, light-skinned boy by the name of Jaime walks in wearing a baggy black T-shirt, shaved head, and baggy dark-blue work jeans, and headphones, Mr. Juarez, a security guard, tells him, “I know you’re in a bad mood today. Don’t try to start anything or I will have to call your P.O. [probation officer].” Jaime has yet to mention a word. To me, he appears groggy from having just woken up. His eyes are droopy with a slight grin or his face as if saying, “I wish I was in bed right now” . . . he walks with a heavy slouch, hump on upper back showing, and a somber look. Watching students pass through this rigid, meat-packing-house-like, processing routine gives me the feeling of déjà vu—the school’s check-in process is almost exactly the same as when I got booked into juvi.

I was fifteen when I was incarcerated for the first time. Terrified, I experienced a check-in process much like the one at Punta Vista: My belongings were placed in a large plastic bag, and I was told to remove my clothes so my body could be inspected for illegal substances and contraband. I was then told to take a shower with a fluorescent-blue shampoo and body soap to “disinfect” myself and was given inmate garb to wear. The experience was humiliating, and I recognized that Punta Vista students went through a similar ritual—minus the shower—every time they walked through the door. Jorge found the process emasculating:

I hate getting searched ’cause you have to get searched when you go inside . . . they tell you that you are their little bitch. They search you and I hate that. I don’t like getting touched by another guy.
Eventually, Ms. Mason greeted me and escorted me to a classroom through hallways painted white with no decor, nothing at all to break up the stark institutional landscape. All classroom doors were closed, creating a claustrophobic feeling, as if the walls were caving in. Toward the very end of the hallway, a few wall posters advertised milk for healthy, lean, and muscular teenage bodies. On one of the posters, “model mom” Heidi Klum sat on a tall stool wearing a shiny evening dress that showed a large portion of her left leg. Her top lip was covered with a white “milk moustache.”

I joined Mr. Jordan’s class and found a seat in the back of the room. A video was playing, and students—sixteen Latino boys, five Latina girls, and one white boy—stared at the TV screen. Mr. Jordan, a stocky, middle-aged white teacher, was using the Olympics to illustrate his biology lesson. He had chosen the diving competition to explain concepts like rotation, revolution, and, in the case of two divers, the idea of synchronization. He also talked about how the Olympic judges scored the athletes. When the clip was over, Mr. Jordan turned off the television and asked what replication meant, specifically replication of DNA. A young man wearing an extra-baggy, blue-checkered dress shirt and sitting by himself in the very front responded, “It’s like bootleg [pirated] videos.” Mr. Jordan replied, “Yeah, but it doesn’t have to be bad or illegal. Replication is a copy, a copy of anything.”

In addition to the teacher, two security guards were in the room—Mr. Juarez and Mr. Thomas—one for every eleven students. They walked around the room to regulate behavior and ensure compliance. Mr. Juarez noticed two students resting their heads on their desks, so he walked up in front of them and tapped each on the shoulder—all while Mr. Jordan was trying to connect with the class about basic biological concepts. “Pay attention,” the guard demanded in a stern, low, dragged-out voice with obvious frustration.

A video camera mounted high in a corner of the windowless room pointed toward the students, and below the camera a sign read, “Get glad, not mad.” A blue Skechers shoebox had been converted into a “cuss box” and sat in front of the teacher’s desk. “If you cuss, you pay ten cents, or stay in class ten minutes after school,” Mr. Jordan whispered when he noticed me observing the box. This juxtaposition of creative attempts to socialize teenagers to behave themselves with that of rigid rules aimed at shutting down disruptive behavior and gang violence was a recurring theme at the school and in other settings in this study. Most authority figures attempted to create solutions for the issues that young people faced and the disreputable behavior they demonstrated. At the same time, when those attempts failed, they defaulted to a more punitive system of control that often directed the youths toward deeper, more formal sanctions. For example, Tito described a more antagonistic relationship with the teacher:

Mr. Jordan tells you all right, if you don’t want to learn that’s fine with me, I don’t give a fuck. I will still get paid the same. If you don’t want to learn, that’s your shit. You guys aren’t going to amount to nothing. They [Mr. Jordan and other teachers] will tell you straight up: “If you guys don’t want to do anything, just don’t. . . . We don’t care.”

As Mr. Jordan lectured about DNA and how cells produced new copies of themselves, only three or four students were actively engaged. The others rested their heads on their desks—despite the constant policing against it—talked among themselves, or doodled on paper. Most students filled in the answers to their worksheets only after the teacher wrote them on the board, showing passive commitment to the classroom structures and an informal give-and-take in which they pretended to complete assignments as long as the teacher afforded them the answers.

Low morale abounded amid this vague semblance of teaching and learning. It was as if the youths were saying, “They pretend to teach me; I pretend to learn.” This mutual affirmation of incompetence produced an environment in which students did the minimal amount of work to get by, and the adults focused on preventing vio-
ience and crime—nothing more. If the goal of schools like Punta Vista are to regulate behavior and reform students, they fail miserably because they have very little clue as to how cultural frames impact young people’s actions and as to how punitive control often generates further resistance from young people, leading to unwanted, unruly behaviors.

Except for rare moments of frustration, Mr. Jordan appeared to want to help the students learn the rules that would help them get through school and, perhaps, survive in the real world that he defined according to the dictates of mainstream respectable behavior. His rules were flexible enough to accommodate those who did not know how to follow them, and he attempted to connect with his students at their level, although, ironically, some of these attempts simply served to shut down the students all the more.

Circulating around the classroom, Mr. Jordan stopped next to Matthew, a student sitting in front of me, and asked how his meeting with school district officials had gone. Matthew responded, “I am going back to the high school.” Mr. Jordan replied, “So you earned the right to go back?” and then announced to the rest of the class,

Matthew has earned his right to go back to the high school! That is what you all should be aiming for. You don’t want to be stuck in this toxic pit for too long.

Many students were desperate to return to the conventional high school because they realized that being a student at Punta Vista degraded their image and cast them as social pariahs. Jorge described his attempts to return to the conventional school:

Then I talked to the principal and she’s like, “Well, yeah, you probably won’t be able to go back. It’s rare that a kid is able to go back after this and that... after being disrespectful to me and the teachers...” I remember one time I got suspended from this school, I don’t remember why, but it was some *pendejada* [bullshit]. That stupid *pen-

*deja* [idiot] told my dad, “I don’t know why you bring your son; he should be in jail—life, for the rest of his life...” They never really teach: they always putting us down.

Continuing his stroll up and down the aisles, Mr. Jordan approached the back corner of the room where Mark was seated backward in his chair, punching the seat. Mr. Jordan asked,

What did the chair do to you? Did it pinch you in the keister? Please don’t do that. Please turn back in your seat.

“Keister,” meaning buttocks or “butt cheeks,” had a double meaning, Mr. Jordan explained to me after class. According to Mr. Jordan, “keister” described the act of placing drugs or other contraband in one’s anal cavity while in prison to hide them from authorities. Mr. Jordan had alluded to this process in class before, describing how some of his former students had ended up in prison and had to hide stuff in their “behinds.” Mr. Jordan seemed to brag that he would know such things, as if being in the know might earn him street credibility with the students in class. In his attempts to connect with gang-associated boys at their level, Mr. Jordan used concepts he believed would be intimately familiar to them, such as keister. But Mark just looked perplexed. Later, when I asked Mark to explain the definition of keister, he said, “Butt? Shit, I don’t know.”

Authority figures commonly believed that they could gain an upper hand in regulating young people’s behavior if they adopted a “play-it-cool” strategy to show they had some knowledge of street culture gained through contacts with older youths. “If I get to know who they are and how they talk,” explained Mr. Jordan on one of my visits, “I find better ways at connecting with them.” However, this perspective fails to consider the repercussions and ultimately misses the mark for establishing meaningful relationships with youths. I discovered that sometimes these well-intentioned teachers and police officers were actually teaching or affirming negative
frames and practices. At times, adults transmitted concepts that the boys were not yet familiar with, sparking their curiosity to explore things that they had no idea their older peers were engaged in. In this case, Mark was unfamiliar with "keister," the word or the act, but he developed a curiosity and a sense of embarrassment from not knowing an idea that was supposedly a part of street and prison culture.

In their attempts to reach young people, sometimes educators inadvertently socialize their students to accept the very disreputable behavior they seek to eradicate. This occurs because of the assumptions that educators make about these young people: that in order to reach them one has to approach them through street or criminal culture. The irony is that when young people respond with what is perceived to be street or criminal culture, authority figures react through stigma and harsh discipline.

As I observed at Punta Vista School, when authority figures dealt with disreputable youths, they applied the knowledge they learned from educational institutions and workplaces, social work, or criminal justice and began with positive interactions or attempts at positive interactions; yet, many times a punitive result ensued. Institutions produce interactions, policies, and programs aimed at connecting with youths to guide them, but ironically, these attempts to connect often result in processes that are not in the youths' best interests or well-being. As a result, these interactions represent negative institutional socialization, a process of inculcating counterproductive ideas, cultural practices, and behaviors that lead individuals to be rendered incompetent by institutions. Although with the positive intention of channeling normative behavior, and compliance, authority figures’ language and actions end up causing students to disengage or misinterpret institutional expectations.

This incongruous outcome may have to do with the contradictory nature of formal and informal rules in schools. Formal rules maintain high expectations and rigid behavioral conduct, while informal rules allow for negotiation through which youths can act up as long as they don’t trigger a sporadic, spontaneous negative reaction from a frustrated teacher, security guard, or administrator. I call this process as an expectational contradiction between adults and youths: The gang-associated youths are provided clear, rigid rules and expectations by teachers and administrators, and yet all parties engage in a more informal, flexible system of interaction, and adults and youth alike behave differently from how they may act outside of the confines of the institution. In this manner, both parties break the formal rules designed to educate or reform the youths and, thus, propagate the very behaviors and attitudes intended to be reformed. The culture of control seems to have as its main goal to regulate and control unruly behavior. The paradox here is that as control becomes a culture, it becomes inefficient at preventing or intervening in crime and instead produces resistance and magnifies transgressions, leading to a perceived sense of lawlessness.

At Punta Vista and across the landscape of similar institutional systems, expectational contradictions result in confusion, negative interactions, and high levels of uncertainty for marginalized young people. Youths at Punta Vista School did not know when they might be warmly welcomed, frigidly disrespected, or openly mocked for failing to navigate this ambiguous maze of rules and expectations. Therefore, when greeted in a positive manner, they responded with suspicion: "What are you trying to set me up to do now?" In this sense, the interactions between adults and youths fall flat. As authority figures default to negative interactions and punitive treatment to deal with youths' disrespectful behaviors, they reaffirm these young people's suspicions and mistrust of the institution and promote a self-fulfilling prophecy: Disreputable kids are defiant and need harsh punishment to learn their lesson. In turn, the school socializes young people through negative interaction that often results in additional negative repercussions in their future trajectories.

In his well-intentioned attempt to help students get by, Mr. Jordan, as an institutional representative, nudged young people like Mark to seek acceptance, dignity, and better interactions from another powerful institution, the gang. This negative institutional socialization encourages younger boys—the next generation—to
seek out older boys on the street from whom they can learn about ideas and practices they first encounter through interactions with teachers and police officers. Harding (2010) called this phenomenon “cross-cohort socialization,” younger boys in poor communities who seek older boys for teaching, guidance, and protection (see also Vigil 1988, 2002). Tito explained the role relationships with older boys had for him:

I got into all this bullshit [getting in trouble with the law] 'cause I mean they [older boys] show love and shit... they showed me love. I seen them more like family you know? Like older brothers and shit.

These older boys are powerful in the lives of younger boys and socialize them in both positive and negative ways. Because the older boys are often involved in crime and unhealthy behavior, the younger boys can suffer negative consequences from these friendships, but, paradoxically, the older boys also can relay positive messages about life and education to their younger peers. For example, Justin explained his relationship with an older friend who was in jail but had been a strong role model:

He’s like twenty-three [years old]. He’s looking at some crazy charges. He tells me to go to school and learn something. He tells me us Mexicans, like how we need more people educated and doing something and fighting for a cause that’s right. Being oppressed and... people thinking we’ll never amount to nothing. What he wanted to see was somebody to prove the system wrong... so in that sense he wanted me to go to school, if not for myself, then for that reason—to represent the hood in a positive way.

Mark also talked about learning to be an adult from older homies:

I basically raised myself to be a man. And the way I could be a man, I learned from the homies and shit. Got to be down, got to be down for your shit, you know?

Although older boys could represent negative role models, I also found through several years of observation in Riverland that boys also encountered many opportunities for negative socialization in the institutions they navigated. As they developed from teenagers into adults, they absorbed countless messages from authority figures, messages that these young people interpreted as simply unpredictable and inconsistent. This confusing milieu led some to seek the stable predictability of a gang with its well-defined rules, structure, and functionality.

Although gang affiliation can bring negative social and health outcomes for young people, a gang as an institution sets clear formal and informal rules and predictable rules of engagement that require less emotional energy compared with socially sanctioned institutional structures. The gang also provides young people with their own brand of authority—senior gang members, sometimes only two to three years older—which resonates with their expectations for role modeling and counters their experiences of exclusion and stigmatization. Gang authority figures mean what they say in their interactions with the boys. In the gang, you either “put in work” or you don’t; you snitch or you don’t; you are loyal or you are not. Each of these binaries carries specific consequences: rewards for following the rules and punishments for not “being down.” This transparency may be another central reason for the rock-solid social bonds among gang-associated boys. Unlike the institution of the school, the institution of the gang accepts and embraces the multiple frames that young people embody. The gang, in many ways, has a more realistic, complex understanding of its members.

As the place that the community considered the “dumping ground” for “gang kids,” Punta Vista was a laboratory in which to explore how the legal and education systems engaged, treated, socialized, and managed these youths. The case of Punta Vista is a prime example of how institutions charged with disseminating and monitoring behavior of reform and compliance, ironically, can end up perpetuating criminality. Young people were inadvertently socialized to seek out or learn about street culture in two ways: In response
to negative treatment from school authorities, youths were inclined to view street culture as a means of defiance or a way to reject the system, or youths interpreted adults’ attempts to connect with them through a false sense of street cultural practices as disparaging them. In their attempt to comply, some students followed along, embracing these authority-imposed meanings and practices. This, in turn, affirmed their teachers’ distorted understandings of them, constructing a reality dominated by institutional definitions of risk, reform, and control.

Some of the harshest punishments resulted from processes that appeared to be rooted in good intentions and creative, reform-based practices aimed at connecting with the boys. Adults would begin with a positive gesture with good intent, but as the interactions persisted, the continuum frequently would shift negative and both parties would end up attacking the other. For instance, during one of my observations, an English teacher initiated an interaction with a boy named Mike, asking simply, “How are you today?” Mike, a sixteen-year-old black and Latino youth with the build of a college football player, ignored her.

The teacher responded: “OK. You are choosing to ignore me. I hope you don’t do the same with your in-class assignment.” Annoyed, Mike replied, “I don’t care about no assignment.” The teacher retorted, “I will not take your attitude today.” “Fuck, you are always lame. I didn’t do shit,” protested Mike.

At that point, the teacher crossed her arms, nodded her head toward the door, and without saying a word conveyed the message, “Leave my classroom.” Mike stood up, grabbed his Texas Rangers baseball cap, and headed to the principal’s office. How could such a seemingly innocuous and positive beginning deteriorate so quickly into a negative interaction? The teacher seemed to be making a positive attempt to reach out to Mike, and we could interpret this scenario as Mike’s deliberate choice to ruin the moment and get into trouble.

However, on closer examination, the teacher’s initial gesture—

“How are you today?”—set this positive-to-negative continuum in motion. The teacher mixed her greeting with body language that appeared cold. Her arms were crossed, and she looked at Mike with her mouth clenched and tension in her face that accentuated the crow’s-feet above her cheekbones. Mike read the greeting as insincere, a mere formality in a process in which he was being set up to expel himself from the classroom. In a follow-up interview, he explained, “That white teacher is fucking scared of me. She always pretends to be cool, but her lame ass is setting me up.”

Resistance to the culture of control had become part of Mike’s cognitive process. He had developed a keen sense for reading physical and verbal cues exercised by authority figures and deciphering their intentions. As an observer, I could not know the teachers’ intentions, but I did find a distinct difference between those teachers that Mike abhorred and those he liked. The teachers with whom Mike conflicted appeared diffident, tense, upset, or unsupportive in their body language or tone of voice when they attempted to reach out to him. In contrast, in classrooms where Mike presented himself as an attentive or compliant student, the teachers appeared relaxed, smiled often, and seemed happy to see their students, including Mike. Like many other youths I observed at Punta Vista and Riverland High School, Mike seemed to thrive with such adults. Positive verbal messaging alone is not enough. Students like Mike need authority figures to reflect on the informal messaging they engage in, including their body language.

From this English teacher’s perspective, she was trying her best to connect with this young man, and she may have been unaware of the dissonant message her body language created. As far as she was concerned, she was trying to make Mike feel welcome in her class, despite their history of negative interactions. That was the best she could do. From Mike’s perspective, he could read both words and body language, and he found a mismatch. Reading between the lines, Mike believed he could predict the teacher’s next move: chastise him or send him out. In the end, even a positive gesture can
conjure a cyclical set of actions and reactions: a negative response from youths, which produces justification for punitive treatment, followed by the stigma of criminality and gangs attached to youths. This process of rendering young people as human targets prevails in schools and among police, especially if they have been labeled as criminals and gang members.

Cultural Frames across Settings

Punta Vista was a space where young people with similar social and emotional needs were concentrated with little room for self-expression or positive development and where they were systematically stripped of their dignity on a daily basis. Besides not being conducive to learning, Punta Vista supported behaviors that compromised students' well-being and freedom through negative socialization, as youths based their respect for each other on their willingness to reject institutional practices.

With the best of intentions, Punta Vista School staff mimicked the students' cultural practices in an attempt to engage them. When this mimicking failed, authority figures defaulted to mocking youths' language and style—using slang words out of context, making fun of hairstyles and clothing, and pretending to act like students in order to exemplify how ridiculous their posturing looked to teachers. When cultural mimicking and mocking failed, school authorities relied on law-enforcement practices and resources to control the youths. But even the intervention of being removed from school could become a status symbol that demonstrated a youth's rejection of the institutional practices considered miserable, demeaning, and undignified.

An example of cultural mimicking was the practice of adults' appropriating the youths' vernacular when speaking to students, often with poor results. For instance, when adults used the word "lame," students often reacted with shrugged shoulders and dirty looks. Youths used the word "lame" to describe someone or something they didn't like or disapproved of: "That fool is a lame" or "This shit is lame." But in an encounter with some male students, Mr. Jordan used the word out of context and seemed to mock the boys when he said: "You are being lame—get back in the classroom."

Two boys looked at him and nodded, and one murmured under his breath, "Ese pendejo [that idiot] is the real lame."

Mr. Jordan's mistake was to neglect to add the article "a" before the word "lame," a distinction that indicated he did not really understand the students' world. In addition, he dragged out the pronunciation of lame, which seemed to mock some of the boys' speaking style; for instance, he interpreted traditional Southern California cholo (gangster) speak as "Hey homie, don't be a laasame."

Interactions like these in which school authorities or police officers attempt to forge relationships, provide life lessons, or discipline youngsters are marred when adults' language and behaviors seem to reject, mock, mimic, replicate, or mirror youth culture. Indeed, these authority figures participate in the re/production of street culture and identity among disreputable young people, and worse, they seem to lack any self-awareness about the implications of their actions.

For example, Mr. Jordan would ask students, "What's going on out there? You got any new word to teach me?" On one level, he seemed to want to display genuine interest in the students' lives; however, once he interpreted and retransmitted words like "keister" or "lame," his interactions seemed at best awkward, irrelevant, or even offensive to students, and at worst sparked curiosity in the minds of younger students and normalized street behaviors. When I asked Mark about Mr. Jordan's use of slang, he said, "Mr. Jordan can say some nutty shit some times. But I sometimes think about, let me figure out, what he is saying just so I know."

On one of my observations at Punta Vista School, Mr. Jordan confronted Mark for ignoring him, and despite the teacher's attempt to act cool, Mark seemed unfazed by Mr. Jordan's request to turn around in his seat. At that point, Mr. Jordan pulled a candy from his
pocket and handed it to Mark, who finally turned around and faced the front of the class for a few seconds. He then proceeded to scribble on his worksheet. A few minutes later, I glanced over to see what he drew: “thug life” in bubble letters with a shotgun hovering over it. Later that day, Mr. Jordan told me in passing, “If you want these kids to respect you, I recommend bringing some candy and giving them a piece when they start getting crazy.”

As class came to an end, Juanita, a fifteen-year-old female student, excitedly slapped her palm on her desk as Mr. Jordan congratulated her for figuring out the answer to a question on the worksheet. She exclaimed, “I’m a star! I am going to college!”

Mr. Jordan’s reply—“First, you need to go to ‘normal’ school,” and “This is a school for backward individuals who have to earn back their rights”—served to reinforce negative messaging and to drive students away from the very goals that school claimed to support. The negativity and criminalization youth experienced from authority figures in one setting, such as school, translated to their being suspicious in other contexts. For instance, Jorge looked back in my direction and announced to another male student seated nearby, “Hey, they’re watching you. They are taking notes on you dog.” Another student said, “Really?” and turned to me, “Are you probation?” But my smile and the shake of my head did not assuage his doubts: “You look straight up like probation, homie!”

As a bespectacled, early thirties college professor in loose (not baggy) jeans and polo shirts, I was consistently suspected of being a probation officer or an undercover police officer during my time in the field. But over six to nine months, these questions began to fade away. I doubt all of the boys ever trusted me completely, but at least they no longer questioned whether I was a law-enforcement officer or informant.

At the end of class, Mr. Jordan congratulated the group for participating, but focused his attention on the female students sitting at the front of the room. Mr. Juarez went around the room collecting pencils because students were not allowed to walk around school with them. The principal told me the reason for the rule was to avoid stabbings, “like in prison.”

I asked, “How many times have students stabbed each other with pencils here?”

“None,” she replied. “We’re trying to keep it that way.”

“How many times have students been stabbed with knives or other objects at the school?”

Again she said, “None, but we are trying to prevent it.”

That exchange brought to mind the work of sociologist Robert Garot (2010), who argued that such preemptive harsh sanctions imposed by school officials on gang-associated students reinforce “tough identities.” When schools center on managing and controlling students, the youth disengage from learning, which facilitates their adoption of a tough role, a process Garot labels the contradiction of control.

From Mr. Jordan’s classroom, students transitioned to physical education, which consisted of walking around the school perimeter and the local neighborhood. When they returned to the school building, the students were subjected to another round of scrutiny and processing. Jorge was stopped by Mr. Juarez, who, referring to the loaner T-shirt meant to replace gang attire, told him, “Go grab a shirt.” Jorge objected to wearing the shirt, and, after a three-minute debate, Ms. Mason, the principal, intervened, saying, “If you don’t wear it, I will have to call your probation officer.”

The principal regularly threatened students with calling their probation officers. For those not on probation, she threatened to call her brother, who was a sheriff’s deputy in town. On two occasions, I witnessed police officers show up at the school after the principal called them regarding student misconduct. On any given day during the afternoon, for physical education hour, a group of about forty high school students could be seen walking around the neighborhood escorted by seven adults with radios, one holding a video camera. More than half of these students would be wearing baggy, bright-orange T-shirts, drawing perplexed stares from neighbor-
hood residents, local business employees, and passersby. One day, I overheard a white woman sitting in a car remark, “Look at those poor kids in those god-awful prison outfits.”

In his now classic work, sociologist Erving Goffman (1990) discussed different forms of stigma, some more visibly obvious than others. Those hapless enough to bear a stigma immediately apparent to others—what Goffman called a “stigma symbol”—garner troubling reactions from other members of society. Clearly, the bright-orange shirts were such a stigma symbol. Goffman noted that the public reacts with emotions ranging from terror to hatred to those who wear a stigma symbol. People may feel pity for the stigmatized, resort to abusive commentary, or organize to quarantine the stigmatized individuals away from society as if they festered with contagion.

At the end of each school day, Punta Vista students lined up to retrieve their personal belongings: cell phones, pencils, pens, folders, hats, cash, and keys. About five security guards were on duty in front of the school at dismissal—two at the right corner of the building, and three at the left. Mr. Juarez videotaped students as they left, “so that if they get into a fight, we catch it on tape,” he explained.

Punta Vista School students and staff commonly referred to their environment as a jail or prison, and I discovered that this label was not simply a metaphor. The policies and restrictions of law enforcement and incarceration had penetrated this building very much like the tetrachloroethene found in the ground underneath the school.

Two months after my first observation, Jorge was arrested at Punta Vista for threatening a teacher. He recounted what happened in a follow-up interview. I later confirmed his recollection with Mr. Juarez. One day, the teacher asked students to tell her their career choices. Jokingly, Jorge said, “I want to be a hit man when I grow up.” Then he looked at her and said, “… and I want to start with you.”

The teacher grabbed her cell phone, texted someone, and within twenty minutes, a police officer arrived to escort Jorge out of class for threatening the teacher and for violating probation. Jorge was released the following day, but was not allowed to return to school, nor was he given instructions as to where to report. With nowhere to go, for weeks he spent his entire day in front of one of his favorite hangouts, a neighborhood liquor store.

On the street, Jorge’s day was now organized around avoiding arrest; police constantly impacted his daily routine in and out of school. In addition, he believed that he was targeted because of his race:

> It could be a guero [white person] riding the bike on the sidewalk and I could be riding it as well, but they’ll stop me and let that fool slide. They’ve done it in my face before. . . . It’s like the pinche white kids get away with murder. They’ll [the white kids] even admit it to you. *Te dicen que si ay racismo* [they tell you that there is racism]. They try to lock us up for anything.16

Criminologist Robert Durán (2013) argues that to understand the criminalization of Latino youths residing in the U.S. Southwest, we must understand the history of racialization and colonization. The boys in this study lived in a context in which their parents worked in precarious jobs tied to serving the elite class of Riverland. They labored in restaurants and in the construction industry, and as gardeners, babysitters, janitors, and housekeepers. The boys aspired to have jobs—even working-class positions—but were burdened with a criminal gangster stigma that diminished their ability to gain employment like their parents.15 Within a generation, these Latinos had moved from being constructed as docile, cheap labor to a lazy criminal class needing punishment and confinement.

The youth I interviewed described the effects of this human targeting. When I asked Johny how he ended up at Punta Vista School, he told me,

> I wasn’t always bad. . . . When I got to junior high, there [was] honors and all this crap, and I was in those classes, too, and there were
all these white kids and shit. I didn’t really fit in, you know. It didn’t really catch my attention as much, you know, like most classes and shit. So you know, I guess it was like just like, from right there, I was like, “fuck school.”

I asked why he didn’t fit in. “My teachers,” he replied. “My teachers never gave a shit for me. They knew I didn’t belong there ‘cause of what I look like” (referring to his race and style).

Johnny’s aspirations were to join the military, but his dreams of joining the military were tainted by this experience: “Like I do want to go [to the Marines], but then I don’t, because I’m a fight for a country that discriminates us and like thinks we are like shit.”

Seventeen-year-old William had left school for similar reasons:

One time, I was in sixth grade, and I got in a fight with some white kid. I was the only one who got suspended, and that guy, they didn’t even suspend him at all. I mean, he was right there fucking biting my leg and everything. Like seriously, that guy fucking dropped on the floor and started biting the shit out of my leg. I don’t know what the hell, but that kid didn’t get suspended at all, and I did. After that I said, “Fuck school.”

Even as Punta Vista School staff members sought to change these gang-associated youths’ behavior and set them on a more positive path, the youths could not escape being racialized human targets. Ironically, authority figures created the very conditions in which young people embraced negative frames, resisted control, and were emboldened to seek street life, by (mis)appropriation of their language or style, mocking the youths and their culture, and resorting to a system of confusing informal rules and punitive responses. Instead of promoting positive cultural frames—going to college, staying legit, forming healthy relationships—the informal interactions at the school all too often reinforced street-life frames that led youngsters deeper into trouble. Surprisingly, authority figures seemed to lack any self-awareness about how their actions, behav-
to future higher status and respect, in contrast to the legal system’s probation that often sticks for years at a time and perpetuates a spiral of criminality. The more that the system pushes one out, the more likely that one will experience social outcasting by relevant others.

Labels like “at-risk,” “gang member,” “illegal,” “truant,” and “criminal” provide the symbolic resources for other institutions, including the gang, to create hierarchies, and, in turn, determine which youths are relegated to committing the hardest crimes or receiving the worst victimization. Although neighborhoods play a key role in the trajectories of inner-city youths, institutional context also matters. The quality of the interactions youths have with institutional authorities and the labels they are given mediate the frames these youths adopt. In turn, frames influence the behavioral outcomes young people perceive for themselves. Institutions that provide unambiguous rules, a chance to prove worthiness, and accomplishable goals are the institutions that win the hearts of the masses. In Riverland, the gang was the most maneuverable institution that these youths encountered.

Adolescent development is affected by the labels and treatment imposed by various institutions. The quality of interactions between youths and institutional authority figures impact a young person’s well-being, future aspirations, perceptions, and attitudes. Interactions and labels can determine whether youngsters end up attached or detached from school, family, and law enforcement. Negative labels such as “illegal,” “at-risk,” “dropout,” and “gangbanger” accompanied by negative treatment—a process I refer to as layers of illegality—have the power to diminish young people’s motivation and self-efficacy and cause them to drift into various deviant frames available to them, including a gang identity where they find a sense of belonging and worthiness. Institutions play a powerful role in delegitimizing, and in determining the kinds of cultural frames available to, and adopted by, targeted populations.

**CONCLUSION**

From Culture of Control to Culture of Care: Policy and Program Implications

Two years into my study, Jorge, one of the most delinquent, drug using, defiant boys in the sample, decided he wanted to leave the gang life behind. One day, out of the blue, he decided to confront his homies about his decision to leave the gang. He waited for a Friday evening when a large number were gathered. He told me the story, a few days after this event. “I just got tired of it, Rios. Ésos bueyes ni me acen el paro [those fools don’t even back me up]. Then one day I thought, man, I could get deported. This shit is nutty. . . . I just went up to them the other day y les dije [and I told them], ‘gangs are for immature people.’” Jorge explained that his homies, a large group of over twenty, acted perplexed and shrugged their shoulders but no one confronted him. “They just told me, you gotta do what you gotta do homie!” He left thinking that things were all good, that his friends would respect his decision. Many of them did. But some were upset about his way of going about leaving the gang. Jorge believed that his notoriety and reputation of being one of the toughest guys in the neighborhood and the first one to attack rival gang members would shield him from repercussions. However, a few weeks after dropping out, one of his homeboys who was driving an automobile
spotted Jorge while he rode his bicycle. He tried to run him over. Jorge jumped off; the car trampled his bicycle.

Jorge experienced many attacks over the course of a few weeks. Around this time, I would pick him up and take him to lunch or on drives around town to check in with him and make sure he was OK. During a car ride with him, Jorge recounted to me a major life decision he had recently made. One day, the guys came to his house and threw rocks on his window. They broke the kitchen window where his mother was standing. Jorge was infuriated. He contacted one of his childhood friends, a white kid from a middle-class family. Jorge’s friend, Miles, had access to a collection of guns owned by his father. Jorge asked Miles if he could borrow the “AK,” an assault rifle. Miles agreed. Jorge told me, a few days after this event, that Miles had given him the rifle. Jorge wanted to use it to teach the guys a lesson. He would wait until they gathered at the park and shoot them up.

As Jorge waited for the right time to confront his old homies, he got a call from his mentor, Jacob, an ex-professional hockey player that had retired in an affluent part of Riverland. Jorge met him through the local community center, which tried to match local professionals with at-promise youths (here I am referring to young people labeled “at-risk”; “at-promise” is a more appropriate term). The mentoring relationship was very informal. They had lunch once a month or so, whenever Jorge felt like responding to Jacob. Jorge explained to me that he decided to go to lunch with Jacob this time because he was stressed about possibly shooting his old friends. He asked Jacob to give him advice on his situation, without telling him he had possession of a gun. Jacob told him that he had made an important life choice and that he was a step closer to becoming a man of honor. Someone that could stand alone, that did not need a gang to back him up. He told him to hang in there and that he believed in his ability to transform even further. Jorge was touched by the conversation, by Jacob’s ability to connect with him, to see his potential. “Le llame al pinche guero y le di su pinche cuerno [I called the damn white guy (Miles) and gave him his damn AK].” Jacob’s conversation had somehow inspired Jorge to do the right thing. Jacob served the role of delivering a positive interaction to Jorge and affirming his multiple selves in a critical juncture in his life. While Jacob did not have a clue that Jorge was ready to shoot up the neighborhood, he was committed to being consistent with Jorge and showing him that he believed in him, that he represented an adult that cared for his well-being. Imagine how many shootings could be prevented if more young people had a mentoring lifeline like Jacob. Unfortunately, there are very few programs in poor communities aimed at providing quality mentoring for gang-associated youths. Even in Jorge’s case, his mentor was a self-driven volunteer who took the initiative to approach the community center for mentoring opportunities. The program was very informal. What if more young people like Jorge encountered more formal mentoring programs, employment opportunity programs, and other social and educational programs?

Jorge is now a floor manager at a fancy restaurant in the heart of Riverland. He makes a decent salary there and has avoided the deeper pitfalls of the street life. He wears a crisp white shirt, a black tie, fitted dress slacks, and long hair parted and combed to the side, with a shine to it.

Interactions matter. The quality of interactions between the youths in this study and authority figures played a major role in their chances of overcoming adversity and proving negative labels wrong. Young people who encountered or perceived they had encountered more negative interactions with authority figures ended up experiencing higher incarceration and dropout rates. Those who encountered positive interactions after having experienced negative ones were able to find more hope for attaining an education and employment and for desistance from crime.

Resources also matter. Interactions are one kind of resource. How authority figures label and engage with young people often determines the kind of emotional energy created for their decision-making and thought processes. Negative interactions become negative resources because they often influence the punitive treatment
process. Positive interactions can provide a better outlook for young people and an authority figure's openness to grant access to material resources, like a job or an educational credential.

So what can we do as policy makers, educators, police officers, or practitioners to capture that sense of hope and possibility for these youths and redirect our efforts to guide their development and life trajectories toward more positive outcomes? How can we recognize the process of creating human targets and cultural misframing in the various institutions that impact the well-being of young people? And see these as factors that derail youths' genuine attempts to desist from crime and excel in school or at work? In the same vein, how can we acknowledge authority figures' gestures to relate to youths when so many of these interactions are fraught with contradictions and hidden biases? How do adults get it so wrong in their interactions with youth—and how can we get it right?

It seems almost cliché to say that adults misunderstand teenagers since adolescence is considered a natural time of rebellion. But the practice of targeting and meting out of detrimental punishment on poor urban children of color counters the quintessential idea in youth development that in order to grow up to be productive, healthy adults, young people have to be allowed to make mistakes and then be given the opportunity to learn from their transgressions. To learn from one's mistakes requires the resources to do so, and, unfortunately, some young people are not allowed to demonstrate that they are capable of making amends because a vast array of authorities use their transgressions to mark them, minimizing resources for redemption and positive development.

Interactions with authority figures often determine the distribution of resources, as these persons are gatekeepers doling out rewards and punishments. Positive resources may include informal mentoring, choosing not to arrest or incarcerate, referral to youth development, employment training, choosing not to suspend or expel from school, implementing a restorative justice program, affirming young people's desires and ability to utilize positive cultural frames, or creating academic mentoring programs. Negative re-

sources include arrest, humiliation, expulsion from school, stigma, cultural misframing, or placement in a gang database.

Based on these findings, I propose policy and program recommendations. As a researcher, I want to go beyond describing and analyzing the problem to developing possible solutions. While these policy and program recommendations might not change structural conditions and are yet to be tested or perfected, they are insights gathered from years in the field. What practical, day-to-day strategies worked? And can we imagine these strategies being systematically implemented, say, law-enforcement and educational institutions? Surely, police and schools want to gain insight into how to improve their engagement with marginalized populations and prevent setting up more young people as human targets. Therefore, I offer the following policy and programmatic recommendations.

**Cultural Recognition Training**

One major policy implication emerging from this study is the need to train school personnel, police and probation officers, and youth workers on how to recognize, interpret, and translate a diverse array of cultural frames. How can authority figures recognize and harness disreputable youths' genuine attempts to be successful within socially acceptable channels? How can these adults' behaviors and attitudes toward youth reinforce these youths' efforts and generate a significant positive impact on their lives?

Young people navigate multiple frames, they have an incredible ability to model shift, and authority figures need to know how to reinforce those frames that are productive and correct those that are misdirected. But adults must be able to understand multiple frames, to read adolescence, and to have enough self-awareness to recognize the implicit and explicit biases that direct typical responses and reactions to specific frames. It is not enough for cultural training to include an understanding of "black culture" or "Latino culture"—as if such universal cultures existed—but, rather, training must include the richness of local community and youth cultures and the
particular frames young people encounter as they navigate these multiple, diverse contexts and develop multiple identities accordingly. Cultural understanding at the local community level might include knowing how young people from a specific neighborhood learn to solve their day-to-day adversities. Schools and law enforcement could then incorporate these survival strategies into the messages they deliver to young people and suggest how youths could utilize these unique skills in a conventional setting like a classroom or workplace.

For example, Los Angeles police officer Deon Joseph has been walking the streets of Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles for seventeen years. With experience, he has been able to get to know the people who live in Skid Row, to understand their problems, and to see through what other officers describe as hostility and aggression. He employs community policing to help and to be an agent for change. Offering practical help for desperate people, he believes arrest should always be the last resort. In an interview on National Public Radio, Joseph said, “I’m not stupid or naïve, but I also know if I keep pushing, if they keep looking at me and saying, ‘That guy has faith in me. Maybe, maybe, he can guide me to hope.’ And that’s all I am; all I want to be... is a beacon of light in this very, very dark place called Skid Row” (Siegler 2014).

Another officer, “Officer G,” as young people refer to him, is a Latino officer in Riverside. He also represents this kind of demeanor. He is well respected by the community, but other officers, as we learned in ride-alongs, see him as the “soft guy,” the “community guy,” the “hug-a-thug,” as “one of them.” Instead of officers like Joseph and “G” being exceptions—outcasts and stigmatized in their own departments—they should be the norm. Incentive systems, like promotions and pay increases, should be determined by how police officers engage with community members and by the quality of their interactions.

It is important to develop and implement quality-of-interactions measures in schools and in police departments. These would include personnel evaluations that would take serious input from young people on how educators or police treat them. Teaching evaluations filled out by students might help to provide this kind of information. In the case of police, a website where citizens could rate their interactions with individual officers might provide information to supervisors. We can expect a plethora of unfair negative accounts, but the point is to have information in place that will help us to change the incentive system so that quality of interactions become a top priority for individuals working in systems that play a crucial role in young people’s life trajectories.

Understanding other people’s cultures as Officer Joseph and Officer “G” do requires emotional intelligence and high-quality interactions. Emotional intelligence is loosely defined as the ability to empathize with others, to recognize emotions, and to use this information to guide thinking and action. Understanding students’ emotional well-being allows authority figures to develop practices that students perceive as fair. In turn, perceptions of fairness can shape how individuals react to the enforcement of rules and conduct. In her excellent study on schools and criminal justice, Carla Shedd (2015) found a “carceral continuum” where systems of punishment followed young people across settings and where young people’s perceptions of justice and fairness were jeopardize by negative encounters with the system. In this study, I found that the majority of youths did not have a problem following conventional rules and norms, as long as the right incentive systems were in place and as long as they perceived the system as treating them fairly. So if a gang-associated youth encountered a perfect storm of conventional support systems such as a well-paying job, positive interactions with authority figures, and a mentoring relationship with a role model in the community, that youth would be extremely likely to desist from crime and engage in productive activities, including attending school and working.

Likeability is important, too; if young people find that the things they enjoy—like movies, foods, or sports—are also things that authority figures like, it creates the conditions for better connections that, in turn, can improve interactions. How can one treat a friend
with disrespect? Of course, friendships are not required here as authority figures have roles to play as educators or enforcers of the law that go beyond the confines of friendship. However, to relate with the young people one engages with brings a deeper connection that allows for better educational and social order opportunities. Getting to know young people minimizes fears that authority figures might have of them. My findings suggest that fear plays a key role in how authority figures treat young people. Fear is a powerful force in our culture, and it is a pillar of the racial divide. When a police officer fears a young Latino or black man, he is more likely to treat him as a severe threat, often ending in harassment or brutality, and sometimes even death. Providing educational programming like ongoing ethnic studies courses to teachers and police provides a context and historical background for these individuals to begin the process of losing their fears of the other.

Incentivize Local Businesses

Some businesses refuse to participate in the criminalization of young people, embracing their presence in the neighborhood and sometimes providing employment opportunities. For me, as a teenager, the auto body shop that provided me my first job gave me an incredible opportunity to manage the turmoil I faced growing up. In Riverland, Abijit of Golden State Liquors afforded the south side boys a modicum of respect and a place to hang out. Taking these examples a step further, public investments could provide subsidies for shop owners like Abijit to hire youths to help keep the store and street corner clean and in order. Such measures would empower Abijit and other well-intentioned business owners to expand their support for marginalized young people and, by extension, their families.

Hire Outreach Workers

School districts should hire outreach workers who can work as cultural translators and cultural educators for both authority figures and youths. Sociologist Patrick Lopez-Aguado (2012) found that street outreach workers—individuals who were former gang members or grew up in rough neighborhoods, acquired higher education, and returned to work with youths in marginalized—developed “street liminality,” a position between social worlds. Such case-workers are in a unique position to navigate multiple contexts and relate within multiple cultural frames to both adults and youths. They are well positioned to teach authority figures how to understand neighborhood youths and to help young people understand the system. They can serve as relevant positive adult role models and healthy examples of gender roles.

As mentors, outreach workers can make a powerful difference in the lives of marginalized young people and counter the fatalistic attitudes that lead to more crime. One goal that outreach workers might have is to help young people see themselves as living longer, more productive lives. By teaching civic engagement, community service, and personal empowerment, the outreach worker might help young people feel empowered to make a change and to improve their communities. Outreach workers should also play the role of advising police and teachers on how to engage and be culturally relevant with marginalized youths. However, their role should be considered one in which they are not required, coerced, or compelled by schools or police to provide information that would set young people up for discipline or punishment.

Invest in Civic Engagement Employment Opportunities

In response to the Great Depression in the 1930s, the federal government invested federal dollars to hire individuals to work in their local communities on projects to benefit the public. One such project, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), hired millions of young men to build hundreds of parks, lay miles of roads, and plant millions of trees, among many other projects. The program’s benefits included better employment opportunities, elevated morale, and
improved health conditions for young working-class men. At the
time, some believed that the CCC was building roads to nowhere,
but many of these roads now provide access to national and state
parks and serve as commuting routes throughout the United States.
The benefits to millions of young men were tremendous, and no one
today seriously questions the value of the CCC program or its accom-
plishments.

Similarly, the odds are stacked against populations in many inner
cities with high rates of unemployment, victimization, crime, and
incarceration. A program at the scale of the CCC, combined with
programming to help individuals acquire trade and academic cred-
dentials, could increase educational attainment, job security, and
crime desistance among gang-associated and at-promise youths. A
system of opportunities and skills training could strengthen those
cultural frames that call for hard work while enabling a new genera-
tion of young people access to mainstream success.

Father Greg Boyle, a renowned Jesuit priest and gang outreach
worker in Los Angeles, shares his mantra on violence prevention:
“Nothing stops a bullet like a job.” His program, Homeboy Indus-
tries, is world renowned for transforming gang-associated indi-
viduals. One of his central strategies is to find employment for his
clients, and Father Boyle has persuaded many local companies to
hire individuals with prison records and facial tattoos but who are
committed to changing their lives. Homeboy Industries operates a
bakery and several restaurants—including the Homegirl Café in one
of the Los Angeles International Airport terminals—that employ
those who have been rejected by other employers because of their
criminal records, tattoos, or cholo demeanor. Having a job creates a
sense of belonging, hope, opportunity, self-reliance, and transfor-
mation. In short, jobs change lives, prevent further descent into a
criminal lifestyle, and satisfy a basic yearning many youths express:
simply to be given a chance, to feel a sense of purpose and belonging.

Although an exemplary model, Homeboy Industries relies mainly
on revenue from its businesses, soft monies, grants, and private
donations. We also need local, state, and federal governments to in-
vest consistent monies in creating and sustaining programs similar
to Homeboy Industries and the once-successful CCC. In the latter
model, clients worked in public service and public works initiatives
that provided them an opportunity to have a purpose as they helped
their communities. Hand in hand, both models could synergize a na-
tional program for employment and life skills. Short-term invest-
ments would be well met in the long-term as dollars spent on imprison-
ning people shifted to a civic and social good. In the words of artist
and political activist Mike de la Rocha, “we need a new, new deal” for
marginalized urban communities.

Invest in Educational and Legal Fairness

When individuals believe institutions like schools and the legal sys-
tem have treated them unjustly, they are more likely to scoff at the
rules, or at least appear to do so. For example, research in procedu-
ral justice has affirmed that when citizens perceived that police-
citizen interactions were fair, they viewed the police as legitimate,
which influenced how the police were received. Similarly, educa-
tion research has shown that Latinos' perceptions of fairness and
justice in schools impacted their academic achievement. What if
institutions invested in improving perceptions of fairness? This
might lead young people to believe that they had a chance to make it
through the system and, therefore, to become invested in complet-
ing their program within the system—whether a probation plan or
a high school degree.

But gaining legitimacy with marginalized populations must not
be the end goal for schools and police departments. This step is just
the beginning. It is after gaining trust that the real work begins—
the work of generating and facilitating positive resources, symbolic
and material, so that viable opportunities open up. Authority figures
must connect with the populations they work with while finding cre-
ative strategies for implementing policies and programs that bring
about resources that help to promote more sustainable livelihoods.
Recognizing and accepting young people's multiply complex selves
is a first step in helping marginalized youths contend with adversity. Providing them resources and reflecting on how we treat them, and assessing how fear of the other plays a role in our everyday interactions, are essential in this process. In order to help people not only to survive but also to thrive, institutions must restore their dignity, provide viable resources, recognize and work with their full human complexity, and dismantle punitive policies and practices. Crime, violence, police brutality, and school failure all seem like unsolvable social issues. However, with enough human recognition, with treating marginalized young people as if they are our own children, with stripping away from schools and law enforcement the permission to treat racialized, criminalized youths as less than human or less than white humans, we will expand the possibility to eliminate the system that creates human targets and instead propagate a system—a youth support complex—that promotes human well-being across institutional settings.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

The data for this study comes from five years of extensive observations on street corners, at a continuation high school, at a conventional high school, in courtrooms, at a community center, and during police ride-alongs. In addition, I supervised 218 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifty-seven males and twelve females and thirty-four focus group sessions. I hired a team of graduate and undergraduate research assistants to help run the focus groups and interviews; they conducted 102 of the 218 interviews. While a few of the students conducted informal observations and took field notes, primarily at school sites and at the community center, unless otherwise noted in specific chapters, the observational data reported in this book come from my own fieldwork.

We held focus group interviews at a community center in their neighborhood where they would be welcomed and not subject to the stigmatization they expressed feeling in many public spaces. This technique also allowed us to keep close tabs on a population that is difficult to track down in the field. I went to them whenever possible, but in case I could not reach them, I created a regular time and place that remained consistent for over a four-year period, even during holidays, where they knew they could show up and check in. I also met up with these youths regularly throughout the week in the street or at local parks in their neighborhood. These more informal meetings were useful for collecting observations and personal narratives, but also helped me build rapport with the youth and recruit them for the weekly focus groups at the community center.

My three-fold methodology—observations, focus groups, and interviews—facilitated multiple perspectives in the research process, allowing for comparisons and disconfirming evidence. Focus groups helped me develop and test interview questions and provided