PUNISHED
Policing the Lives of
Black and Latino Boys

Victor M. Rios
A word of caution: our stories are not just for entertainment.
—Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony, 1977

You know nothing, and worse than nothing, about the working class. Your sociology is as vicious and worthless as is your method of thinking.
—Ernest Everhard in Jack London's The Iron Heel, 1907

An old, rusty refrigerator had been knocked over on the side of Pelon’s garage. It was white and dented on the edges and looked like it had not been used in a decade. Its metal cooling rods faced the open sky. A twenty-four case of Corona beer filled with empty bottles sat on top of the rods. We had tagged the refrigerator at the height of our delinquent careers; finely scrawled on the side in black marker were nicknames for sixty-eight of our “homies.” I was with Pelon, a former fellow gang member. We turned the refrigerator over and read aloud to each other, “Dre, Moreno, Sleepy, Conejo,” each homey coming to life as we said his name. Eventually we couldn’t help but count. Out of sixty-eight members in the gang—we estimated, based on memory and after making a few phone calls—twelve were in prison serving three years to life, sixteen were in jail or prison serving sentences ranging from three months to three years, and the remaining forty had been incarcerated at one point in their lives. We knew this because we had spent years on the streets together, looking out for one another, protecting each other, and taking part of each other’s lives, like family. At this moment, on a cool spring evening in 2002, in front of this old refrigerator, it dawned on us...
that by the time we reached our early twenties, none of the homies had avoided incarceration.

Most of us who were not currently locked up still fared miserably: seven murdered, six permanently injured from bullet wounds—one had been blinded, two paralyzed from the waist down, and three with permanent scars and debilitating injuries—and about a dozen were severe drug addicts, some of whom begged for money on the streets. From our estimate, out of sixty-eight homies, only two of us graduated from high school, and only I had made it to college. About a dozen had managed to evade major tragedies and, by the standards of the inner city, had become successful. Pelon had started a family and worked as a laborer for a moving company making twelve dollars an hour. He was the most stable homeboy I kept in touch with.

As we sat in front of Pelon’s old garage with splintering green paint chips scattered on the ground, we reminisced about “back in the day” when we first met Smiley. We were about fourteen years old and had just recently joined the gang. Smiley was a naive kid our age who was physically abused by his parents. They often kicked him out of his house and onto the streets as a punishment for questioning them or telling them about his teachers’ treating him negatively. We called him Smiley because no matter how bad his circumstances were—homeless, victimized, or hungry—he always kept a radiant grin on his face. But his smile got him in trouble. When we gave him the nickname, he told us he thought it was appropriate because he remembered always smiling in class, and the teacher always thought he was laughing at her. When he didn’t understand what was going on in class, he would smile, and when the teacher yelled at him, he would smile. I remember one time when we were hanging out on one of our gang’s street corners, on International Boulevard, rival gang members drove by shooting at us, and, as I turned to tell him to run, I could see he was looking at them with a big smile.

Smiley was an innocent kid who I felt was growing up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Smiley told us stories that from a young age his teachers treated him punitively. He was seen as a problem kid in school and spent many of his school days in the detention room. On the street, police often stopped him as he walked home from school, even before he joined the gang, because from their perspective the baggy clothes he wore marked him as a gang member. I was there many times when this happened. I had already joined the gang, but Smiley was not involved. Yet police treated him like the rest of us. He was followed around, constantly searched, handcuffed, and harassed. Over time, I noticed Smiley increasingly turn to the gang because he believed it was his only source of support.

I joined the gang seeking the protection that I thought police and other authority figures in my community had failed to provide. Smiley, like many other homies, wanted to join for similar reasons. When he was fourteen, we offered to jump him into the gang: a group beating that was the standard initiation ritual. He agreed, and that same night we took him to the side of Pelon’s garage, where, next to the abandoned white refrigerator, a group of about eight of us punched him in the face, slammed him to the ground, and kicked him in the stomach. One of the homies grabbed a tall umbrella and hit him with it until the umbrella’s aluminum structure collapsed and the fabric ripped off. After a few minutes we picked him up, gave him hugs, and handed him an “8 ball,” a forty-ounce bottle of Old English Malt Liquor. He was officially one of us, part of our “familia,” our “street family.”

Eventually, Smiley and I became best friends. We took care of each other. One day, when his parents permanently kicked him out of the house, I told him not to worry. “I’m going to find you a house,” I said. That night, I stole a 1980s Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme, breaking the steering column with a large, heavy-duty flat-head screwdriver to gain access to the ignition rod. I drove it to our neighborhood, walked up to Smiley, handed him a screwdriver, and told him, “Here’s your new two-bedroom apartment.” Referring to the front and rear bench seats, I joked, “I’ll sleep in the front room, and you sleep in the back room.”

A few days later, I was pulled over by police for driving this stolen car. When I stopped in the parking lot of a large drug store on the intersection of Fruitvale Avenue and Foothill Boulevard in East Oakland, the cops dragged me out of the car, knocked me on my back, and repeatedly kicked me in the stomach and legs. I remember yelling like a little boy: “Aww! Help! Aww! Help!” The officer kicking me shouted back, “Shut the fuck up! You want to be a criminal, then you’re going to get treated like one!” He stomped my face against the ground with his thick, black, military-grade rubber boots, his shoe’s sole leaving scrapes and gashes on
my upper lip and cheek bone. I was fourteen years old. After the beating, I was taken to “One-fitty,” the name we had given the juvenile justice facility in our county because it was located on 150th Avenue (in the city of San Leandro). Neither the beating nor the few days I was held at One-fitty taught me a positive lesson. Instead, while I was doing time, a boy I met by the name of Tony taught me how to sand down a 1980s Honda car key to convert it into a master key for all early-1980s Honda cars. The day after my release, I got a hold of a 1980s Honda key, scraped it on the cement over the course of a few hours, went to a BART (subway) station parking lot, and stole another car to pick up Smiley and “go cruising.”

A year later, after a few stints in juvenile hall and many experiences with violence, crime, drugs, and punishment, Smiley, Big Joe, and I visited some girls we had met. They lived in a neighborhood where many of our rival gang members lived. When we arrived, we spotted the girls sitting on their front porch. As we began talking with the girls, we noticed that a group of about eight rival gang members were walking down the street toward us. We were all about the same age, fourteen to seventeen years old, and all dressed the same: baggy, creased up, Ben Davis or Dickies brand work pants, with tucked in white T-shirts or baggy sports jerseys. The only difference is that we wore different colors to represent our affiliation. Apparently word had gotten out that we were intruding in their neighborhood. They recognized us from previous fights we had with them over the past few months. Trying to prove our toughness, we threw up our gang signs and called them out for a one-on-one fight. Their plan was different. They wanted to gang up on us and beat us down. Once they reached us, they surrounded us, and we began to fight. I fell down a few times, and the last time I got up, one of them pulled out a gun. I ran. Hearing gunshots, I leaped between two cars for protection. I turned back: our enemies faded away as they scattered behind apartment buildings. I checked my body for blood to see if I had been shot. I was fine. I found Big Joe lying on the ground. He stood up and told me he was fine. We looked for Smiley. He was nowhere in sight. I turned the corner on the car I hid behind. There he was, face flat on the ground. I ran over to him, kneeling over his body and grabbing him, trying to get him to stand up. Smiley had been shot.

[ x ]

Fresh human blood painted a picture of death on my brand-new pair of white Nike Cortez tennis shoes. I stood on that dark street knowing that my best friend was dying. I thought, as the movies had taught me, he should have been dead the instant the bullet hit his skull, but he continued to twitch and shake as we drove him to the hospital. We’d decided not to call an ambulance; we knew from previous experience that it wouldn’t arrive in time. In the past we had been told by law enforcement that standard procedure dictated that the police had to clear a crime scene before EMTs could move in, and we had lost many friends and relatives to this policy. The ambulance often took over forty-five minutes to arrive when someone was shot in my neighborhood. A few hours later at the hospital, Smiley was declared dead.

The police told me that it was my fault that my homeboy had died and threatened to arrest me for being present at the shooting, with a charge of accessory to murder. I asked them if they were “going to catch the murderer.” “What for?” one of the officers replied. “We want you to kill each other off.” Smiley’s death, and my negative interactions with police, forced me to reflect on the larger picture of youth violence and criminalization in Oakland. Without knowing it at the time, I began to develop a sociological imagination. I began to realize that in order to understand my personal predicament, I needed to find out how youth and police violence became so prevalent in my community. Although I could not articulate it at the time, it was at that moment when I recognized, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both.” It was at this critical juncture that I began to seek answers.

I made it “out the game” only because of the various support programs that I was fortunate enough to find. Before Smiley died, I had dropped out of high school for two semesters. After Smiley’s death, a teacher, Ms. Russ, found out about my troubles and reached out to me. She began to guide me. After ten years of schooling, I finally felt that a teacher cared about me. She contacted my probation officer, recruited university students to mentor me, and demonstrated a genuine commitment to my well-being.

One day, as I walked the line, deciding whether I would take my teacher’s support seriously and engage in my education, I had an encounter
with a police officer. His name was Officer Wilson. I had been drinking on a school day and provoked a fight with a rival gang member in front of Oakland High School. Officer Wilson arrived at the scene, breaking up the fight. He took me inside his patrol car and asked me if I was on probation; I told him that I was. Officer Wilson told my rival to go back to school. He put me in his patrol car, drove me to the police station, and dropped me off in an interrogation room. He told me, “You know I can arrest you and charge you with multiple infractions. . . . Tell me, man, what is going on in your mind?” I poured my heart out. I told the officer my story, my perspective. For about an hour, he listened. He then told me, “I’m going to give you a chance. . . . I’m going to let you go, but I want to see you make an effort to change your life around. Next time I catch you, I will make sure to lock you up.” This last chance, combined with the multiple opportunities offered by my teachers and mentors, motivated me to begin the transformation process. I was ready to change, and, at that very moment, I found key individuals who were ready to help me along the way. I returned to my teacher and told her that I was ready. She began the process of advocating for me and convincing administrators to give me a second chance. Ms. Russ and Officer Wilson shared an insight in working with troubled young people: if they were to make a change in gangs, youth violence, and negative police-community interactions, a pipeline of opportunities had to be provided for street-oriented youths.

By the time I was ready to graduate, I had brought up my grade-point average from 0.9 to 1.9. I was encouraged by college-student mentors to apply to college, and I did. A few months later, I received a letter of conditional acceptance to California State University, East Bay. The letter informed me that I was accepted under “probationary status.” I pictured myself being followed around campus by a probation officer. I told myself, “Probation? I’m already on probation, so it won’t matter.” I didn’t realize that probation in college meant I would be expelled if I received below a C average, not that I would have someone constantly watching over me.

I completed my B.A. degree in four years while I worked full-time to help support my siblings. I chose not to live in the university dorms, instead moving in with my mother, Raquel; my sister, Rosa, aged twelve; and my brother, Miguel, aged fourteen, who was in a gang, addicted to crack cocaine, and in and out of juvenile hall. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, my family had lived on 88th Avenue and D Street in “Deep” East Oakland, 33rd Avenue and East 15th in East Oakland, and the “Lower Bottom” of West Oakland—wherever my mother could find an affordable apartment. During my first two years of college, we lived in a small, dilapidated shack in West Oakland. It had a cracked foundation that made the termite-infested house rock any time we walked up the stairs. Crack dealers usually sat on our steps in the middle of the night. They were often loud, yelling, and beating up on their girlfriends or crack-addict customers.

Despite my making it into college, conflict continued. Again, I asked the police for help, and again, they ignored me. We were forced to move after my mother’s brother, my uncle Dario, was gunned down and killed while he stood between my mother and me on the corner of our street. It seemed that police were there selectively, to arrest my family and friends for petty acts but not to arrest the main drug dealers and victimizers who continued to prey on my community. As a researcher in the making, I wanted to understand why and how these officers would ignore certain major crimes and at the same time arrest so many residents for such minor infractions.

These experiences made me hanker for an understanding of urban violence and the government’s treatment of the poor. In my college courses, I read books that discussed the government’s neglect of the poor. While insightful, these books missed a key process that I had personally experienced: the state had not abandoned the poor; it had reorganized itself, placing priority on its punitive institutions, such as police, and embedding crime-control discourses and practices into welfare institutions, such as schools. In my perspective, the state, in my community, had punitively asserted itself into civil society. However, I could not be certain that the ideas I developed from my personal experience applied to anyone else. I needed to see if these experiences applied more broadly to the youth growing up in the flatlands of Oakland during a different time period. I applied to graduate school to pursue this study. In 2000, I was accepted as a Ph.D. student at the University of California, Berkeley. Given the opportunity to study race, inequality, and crime with some of the leading intellectuals in the country, I decided to try to understand the
social forces that impacted the community where I was raised. To begin to understand this process, I befriended, mentored, observed, and interviewed Black and Latino boys in Oakland for over three years. As I spent more time in the field, I realized that while violence was very prevalent in the community, criminalization was also a “fabric of everyday life” for the youths I studied. As my research unfolded, it became clear that in this community there existed a powerful culture of punishment, which shaped the ways in which young people organized themselves and created meanings of their social world.

The insights I gained by observing and interviewing these young men, as well as participating in the environment they navigated daily, helped me expose the role that criminalization played in their lives. I define criminalization as the process by which styles and behaviors are rendered deviant and are treated with shame, exclusion, punishment, and incarceration. In this study, criminalization occurred beyond the law; it crossed social contexts and followed young people across an array of social institutions, including school, the neighborhood, the community center, the media, and the family. The young men in this study found themselves in situations in which their everyday behaviors and styles were constantly treated as deviant, threatening, risky, and criminal by adults in the various social contexts they navigated. I define this ubiquitous criminalization as the youth control complex, a system in which schools, police, probation officers, families, community centers, the media, businesses, and other institutions systematically treat young people’s everyday behaviors as criminal activity. The youth control complex was fueled by the micropower of repeated negative judgments and interactions in which the boys were defined as criminal for almost any form of transgression or disrespect of authority. Young people, who become pinballs within this youth control complex, experience what I refer to as hypercriminalization, the process by which an individual’s everyday behaviors and styles become ubiquitously treated as deviant, risky, threatening, or criminal, across social contexts. This hypercriminalization, in turn, has a profound impact on young people’s perceptions, worldviews, and life outcomes. The youth control complex creates an overarching system of regulating the lives of marginalized young people, what I refer to as punitive social control. Hypercriminalization involves constant punishment. Punishment, in this study, is understood as the process by which individuals come to feel stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless as a result of negative interactions and sanctions imposed by individuals who represent institutions of social control.

Although I began this project from the perspective of my own life experience, I resumed with a systematic and empirical examination of the lives of the youths in this study. Life stories and voices of youths teach us about the mechanisms of criminalization that are a part of their daily lives. Observations allowed me to uncover the contradictions between what was being said and what actually occurred and to corroborate or confute what young people told me. From this point forward, the generalizations that I make come from the empirical data, unless otherwise noted.

My central argument is that criminalization was a central, pervasive, and ubiquitous phenomenon that impacted the everyday lives of the young people I studied in Oakland. By the time they formally entered the penal system, many of these young men were already caught in a spiral of hypercriminalization and punishment. This cycle began before their first arrest—it began as they were harassed, profiled, watched, and disciplined at young ages, before they had committed any crimes. Eventually, that kind of attention led many of them to fulfill the destiny expected of them. Criminalization left these marginalized young people very few choices, crime and violence being some of the few resources for feeling dignity and empowerment. Previous theorization has stopped there, describing this entrapment, blocked opportunity, and victimization. I move beyond these ideas and demonstrate that agency is very prevalent among these youths. A paradox existed among the youths in my study: criminalization became a vehicle by which they developed political consciousness and resistant identities. Unjust interactions with the youth control complex created blocked opportunities, but they also ignited the boys’ social consciousness and developed worldviews and identities diametrically opposed to the youth control complex and mass incarceration. Some boys even developed a more formal political identity that called for a change in the system which so oppressed them.

My hope is that the first-person account and evidence I provide of the overarching reach of criminalization and punitive social control in
the lives of young people will inspire policymakers to create alternative, more reintegrative approaches to law and order; that education, criminal justice, and community practitioners will change punitive practices and establish genuine caring relationships with these youngsters; that researchers will shift their levels of analysis so that we can account for other processes in the inner city beyond violence, pathology, or fixed typologies; and that by reading this book, young people will become further inspired to succeed despite the obstacles they might find in common with the boys in this book.

There is a way to transform punishment, to generate creative means of social control, which provides viable rehabilitation for delinquent youths and which does not spill over and affect young people who have yet to commit crime. It will take imagination and the courage to adopt successful models that attempt to transform the punitive way in which young people are treated in marginalized communities. There are a few individuals, such as my teacher, Ms. Russ, and Officer Wilson, who have broken away from punitive social control and aim to change the way young people are treated, and they can serve as examples. Maybe then a new generation of former gang members and delinquents will read names from an old refrigerator and celebrate multiple high school graduations and college degrees, instead of mourn the incarcerated and excluded lives of their friends and family.

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Dreams Deferred

The Patterns of Punishment in Oakland

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? . . . Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?
—Langston Hughes, "Montage of a Dream Deferred," 1951

Just as children were tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers, word processors, and fast-food workers, there were also tracks for some children, predominantly African American and male, that led to prison.
—Ann Arnett Ferguson, Bad Boys, 2000

Fifteen-year-old Slick, a Latino kid born and raised in Oakland, showed me the "hotspots": street intersections and sidewalks where life-altering experiences linger, shaping young people's perspectives of the area. As he walked me through the neighborhood, he pointed to the corner of International Boulevard and 22nd Avenue, where a few months before his best friend took a bullet in the lung during a drive-by shooting. He watched his homey die slowly, gasping like a waterless fish, gushes of blood inundating his respiratory system. We approached the corner of 23rd Avenue and International, and Slick warned me that "at any given
moment something could jump off, fools could roll up, and shit could go down.” He did not have to tell me; I had been on these streets in the past as a resident and as a delinquent and later on in life as an ethnographer, observing the young people who spent so much of their lives on these streets. We stopped at a mobile “taco truck” to order a burrito. Standing on the corner watching cars and people pass by, Slick continued to “break it down” for me: “Just the other day, mothafuckas rolled up on me and pulled out a strap to my head. . . . Fuck it, today is my day, . . . so I threw up my [gang] sign and said, ‘Fuck you.’ . . . The thang [gun] got stuck or some shit, ‘cause I saw him pulling but nothing came out.” Slick seemed to pretend to show no trauma as he told me the story, but his lips quivered and his hands shook ever so slightly as he grabbed his soda from the taco vendor.

As we took our first bite and wiped our hands on our baggy jeans, an Oakland Police Department patrol car pulled into the taco-truck lot. Two officers emerged from the car and ordered us to sit on the curb: “Hands on your ass!” Slick looked down at his burrito, and I realized we were being asked to throw our meal away after only taking one bite. The officer yelled again. Our fresh burritos splattered on the chewing-gum-dotted concrete, and we sat on the curb with our hands under our thighs. An officer grabbed Slick’s arms and handcuffed him. Another officer did the same to me. One of them lifted us up by the metal links holding the cuffs together, placing excruciating pressure on our shoulder joints.

As they searched us, I asked the officers, “What’s going on?” They provided no response. They took out a camera and took pictures of Slick and me. “Who is this guy?” they asked Slick, pointing to me. Slick told them, “He’s from UC Berkeley. He’s cool, man!” The officers unlocked our handcuffs, told Slick to stay out of trouble, and got in their cars and drove off. The officers had noticed me in the neighborhood and had asked many of the boys about me. They knew I was some kind of college student trying to help the boys out. One of them later told me that I was doing the boys no good by studying them and advocating for them. The officer told me that I was enabling them by harboring their criminality and that I should be arrested for conspiracy.

I looked around and saw that a crowd of pedestrians and taco-truck patrons had gathered a few feet away from us. I made eye contact with a Mexican man in his fifties wearing a cowboy hat. He nodded his head with a disappointed look and said, “Pinches chelos” [fucking gangsters] and walked away. I turned to Slick and said, “You OK?” He replied, “That happens all the time. They got nothin’ on me.” “How often does it happen?” I asked. “Shit! Come on, Vic! You know whatup. It happens every day,” Slick replied.

This kind of interaction with the police was common in my observations and in the accounts of Slick and the other boys I studied. All forty of the boys whom I studied in depth, and most of the other seventy-eight youths whom I informally interviewed and observed, reported negative interactions with police. Only eleven of the one hundred and eighteen youth reported any positive experiences with police. The majority of interactions between police and youth that I observed over the course of three years were negative.

A paradox of control took precedent: based on informal conversations with officers, I found that many of them seemed to sympathize with the poverty and trauma that many young people experienced; however, in an attempt to uphold the law and maintain order, officers often took extreme punitive measures with youths perceived as deviant or criminal. However, police officers were not the only adults in the community involved in criminalizing young men like Slick. As school personnel, community workers, and family members attempted to find solutions to rule breaking, defiance, crime, and violence, they seemed to rely on criminal justice discourses and metaphors to deal with these young “risks.” In this social order where young people placed at risk were treated as potential criminals, social relations, worldviews, and creative responses were often influenced by this process of criminalization. In order to understand the process by which young people came to understand their environment as punitive and to observe, firsthand, how criminalization operated in their lives, I shadowed a group of young men for three years. This chapter describes this process and begins to show the way that ubiquitous criminalization operated in some of their lives.
Ubiquitous Criminalization

Leaving the corner where the police had stopped us, Slick and I continued to walk through his neighborhood. As we walked away from the avenue and through an alley to Slick’s house, he told me he started evading school at age fourteen in fear for his own life, threatened by the same boys who killed his friend. Slick told me that teachers treated him differently after his friend’s death, as if he were responsible for the shooting. When he arrived late to class a few weeks after the murder, his teacher picked up the phone and called the police officer stationed at the school. She told the police that Slick was a threat to her and to other students. The officer took Slick to his office and told him that he was on the verge of dying, just like his friend. Slick was sent to the vice principal. “The vice principal told me, ‘I have to kick you out because you have missed too many school days,’” Slick explained.

I found that schools pushed out boys who had been victimized. Six of the boys in this study reported being victims of violence. All six of them returned to school after being victimized, and all six described a similar process. The boys believed that the school saw them as plotting to commit violence as a means to avenge their victimization. As such, the school commonly accused the boys of truancy for the days that they missed recovering from violent attacks and used this as justification to expel them from school. Four of the boys were expelled from school under truancy rules shortly after their attacks. After being expelled from school, feeling a sense of “no place to go,” Slick spent most school hours hanging out with friends in front of the same intersection where his homeboy was gunned down, risking further victimization.

On our way to Slick’s house, we took a break, sitting on his neighbor’s squeaky wooden steps. As we began to talk, the resident opened the door and told us to leave “or else.”

“Or else what?” asked Slick.

“Or else I will call the police!”

Slick cussed out the neighbor, murmuring out his frustration. The neighbor slammed his front door. Nervous about another encounter with police, we walked away. Defeated by the degrading events of the day, we continued walking toward his house, our heads bowed and mouths shut, both of us silenced. Slick and I sat on his steps until 7 p.m., when his mother arrived. She greeted me. She knew me as the “estudiante” [student] who was trying to help her child.

I talked with Slick’s mother, Juliana, for about an hour. She told me her frustrations with Slick. I listened attentively and told her that I would try to convince him to join Youth Leadership Project, a local grassroots youth activist organization that helped young people involved in gangs transform their lives by becoming community organizers.

I drove home, to 35th Avenue, in the same neighborhood, where I had taken residence to be closer to my research participants. I wrote some field notes and opened up Policing the Crisis, a book about how the media and politicians create scapegoats to deal with economic crises by sensationalizing crimes committed by black people. I read about moral panics, those events or people—for example, black muggers, AIDS, pregnant teens, gang members—deemed a threat to mainstream society. According to the book, moral panics are often constructed as a result of economic and cultural crises. Often, it is the media and politicians who become central players in determining who or what becomes the moral panic of the time. They generate support for an increase in spending on crime or a decrease in spending on welfare for the “unde-serving” poor.

I asked myself whether Slick and his homies had become the moral panics in this community, and if it was this attention on their perceived criminal behavior which had led to the intense policing and surveillance that I observed and that the youth spoke about more broadly. This is where my research questions for this project became clear: How do surveillance, punishment, and criminal justice practices affect the lives of marginalized boys? What patterns of punishment do young people such as Slick encounter in their neighborhoods in Oakland? What effects do these patterns of punishment have on the lives of the young men in this study? Specifically, how do punitive encounters with police, probation officers, teachers and administrators, and other authority figures shape the meanings that young people create about themselves and about their obstacles, opportunities, and future aspirations?
Shadowing Marginalized Youth

To answer my questions about criminalization, I observed and interviewed young males who lived in communities heavily affected by criminal justice policies and practices. Delinquent inner-city youths, those at the front line of the war on crime and mass incarceration, were the best source of data for this study. Their experiences spoke directly to the impact of punitive policies and practices prevalent in welfare and criminal justice institutions. I got to know forty Black and Latino boys who were between the ages of fourteen and seventeen when I began the study. I interviewed them, conducted focus groups with them, met with their friends and their families, advocated for them at school and in court, and hung out with them at parks, street corners, and community centers during the course of three years, from 2002 to 2005. Thirty of these young men had been arrested and were on probation. Ten of them had not been arrested but were related to or closely associated with boys who had been arrested.

I shadowed these young men as they conducted their everyday routine activities, such as walking the streets, “hanging out,” and participating in community programs. I walked the streets and rode the bus with them from home to school and as they met with friends or went to the community center after school. There were days when I met them in front of their doorsteps at 8 a.m. and followed them throughout the day until they returned home late at night. I met their parents, probation officers, and friends. I attended court with their parents when the boys were arrested. Shadowing allowed me access to these young people’s routine activities, exposing me to major patterns prevalent in their lives, including criminalization.

Shadowing enabled me to observe regular punitive encounters and the way these became manifest in the lives of these youth in a range of different social contexts, across institutional settings. Interviews with the boys supplemented my observations and allowed me to hear their perspectives on these patterns of punishment. By getting to hear these young people’s definitions of criminalization, I was able to conceptualize aspects of their lived experiences that would be difficult to see otherwise. I decided to make young people’s perspectives central to my understanding of crime, punishment, and justice in their community. Sociologist Dorothy Smith explains that “we may not rewrite the other’s world or impose upon it a conceptual framework that extracts from it what fits with ours... Their reality... is the place from which inquiry begins.” I took this goal to heart in conducting this study. The voices of these young men supplement the scholarship, much of it theoretical, that attempts to explain the expansion and social consequences of the punitive state. These observations and voices would help me to test these theories on the ground and, if needed, to develop new ways to understand the consequences of the punitive state on marginalized populations.

Although a study of authority figures and social-control agents—school personnel, police, politicians, and other adults who hold a stake in overseeing the well-being of young people—could have provided a broader array of perspectives on punishment, I decided to focus on the voices of the youth. This is partly because I found that the perspectives of social-control agents were commonly represented in the media and institutional discourses and practices. For example, in the news media, when youth crime becomes an issue, police are often the “experts” who are interviewed to discuss their perspectives on why young people commit crime. However, the perspectives and experiences of the youths experiencing this violence, criminalization, and punishment are rarely taken into account in public discourse.

Readers may consider the accounts of the youth in this study to be one-sided. I urge readers to eradicate a dichotomous, either/or, perspective and instead focus on how young people come to understand their social world as a place that sees them and treats them as criminal risks. Even if adults make individual attempts to treat young people with empathy and respect, some youngsters have come to believe that their environment is systematically punitive. How do young people come to believe that “the system” is against them? I could provide interviews with police officers that discuss their desires to help these young men. However, the point of this project is to show the consequences of social control on the lives of young people regardless of good or bad intentions. A sociological cliché clarifies my point: “If men [and women] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” If young people believe that the social ecology in which they grow up is punitive and debilitating, then they will experience the world as such. If institutions of social control believe that all young people follow the “code of the street” or that
defiant or delinquent poor, urban youth of color are “superpredators”—heartless, senseless criminals with no morals—then policies, programs, and interactions with marginalized youths will be based on this false information.⁹

In order to create a study that would uncover the process of criminalization that young people experienced, I combined the methods of critical criminology with urban ethnography to develop an understanding of the punitive state through the lens of marginalized populations. Both methods offered me tools essential to understanding and documenting the lives of the young men I studied. Critical criminology, the study of crime in relation to power, which explicitly examines crime as a socially constructed phenomenon, allowed me to bring to light the mechanisms responsible for the plight of marginalized male youths in the new millennium. Urban ethnography, the systematic and meticulous method of examining culture unfolding in everyday life, allowed me to decipher the difficult and complex circumstances, social relations, and fabric of social life under which these young men lived.

Recruitment

I began recruiting participants at a youth leadership organization and a community center—which I refer to with the pseudonyms “Youth Leadership Project” (YLP) and “East Side Youth Center” (ESYC)—in Oakland, California. YLP was located in Oakland’s Fruitvale District, where Latinos made up 49 percent and Blacks made up 20 percent of the population. ESYC was located in the Central East Oakland District, where Blacks made up 50 percent and Latinos made up 38 percent of the population. I told the community workers about the study and asked them to connect me with “at-promise” (“at-risk”) young men, ages fourteen to seventeen, who had previously been arrested.¹⁰ I was introduced to four Latino boys through community workers at YLP and three Black boys through community workers at ESYC. While both organizations focused on consciousness raising and politicizing young people as a means for transformation, I recruited young people who had spent less than one month working with these organizations. This way, I would gain insight from young men who had yet to be influenced by this approach.

After meeting with these young men, I asked them to refer me to other youths in similar situations, as well as to young men who they knew had not been arrested but who hung out with guys who had, a technique known as snowball sampling.¹¹ With snowball sampling, I was able to uncover a population of young men who were surrounded by or involved in crime and who had consistent interaction with police. Only the eight initial boys had contact with the youth organizations I initially contacted. The other thirty-two boys were not involved in any community programs at first contact. Although many of the boys ended up knowing each other and formed part of a social network, my goal was to understand how boys in these networks of crime, criminalization, and punishment made sense of these processes and to observe their interactions with authority figures.

The young men in this study were not representative of Black and Latino youths throughout the United States, in the inner city, in Oakland, or the criminal justice system. These were unique cases of young men from unique communities who reported and were seen to live in an environment where criminalization was an everyday part of their daily lives.¹² While many marginalized young people face the wrath of punitive social control and criminalization, it was difficult to generate an in-depth study that found a representative sample of young people in such a predicament. The alternative strategy was to utilize unique cases, young people who had already been marked by the system and who believed that they were being systematically criminalized. I ended up with a particular group of young people, those who were implicated in the regime of punishment in the inner city.

It is obvious that the majority of young people living in poverty are not delinquent. I specifically sought delinquent young people and their peers. This approach would help me to locate the mechanisms of control put in place to regulate this population, already formally labeled as deviant. Observing these young people might teach us more about the culture of punishment and criminalization prevalent in marginalized communities in the era of mass incarceration. After getting to know the boys and having them connect me with their friends, I began to interview them and gain enough trust to observe them. Field observations were carried out in three Oakland neighborhoods and eventually also in San Francisco and Berkeley, places where some of the young men in this study eventually moved. I also conducted observations at one continu-
ation school—a school for students who had been expelled from “regular” high school—where eight of the boys in this study were eventually enrolled. Whereas traditionally urban ethnographers study a specific site as their case study, such as a neighborhood or a street corner, I studied a group of young people, each of them representing a case. This approach was crucial in order to keep track of the trajectories that developed for each of the young men in this study.

During the time I was in the field, the communities that these young men came from were becoming gentrified. Since the late 1990s, high rent increases and urban-development policies had forced many working-class families in the San Francisco Bay Area to constantly move between neighborhoods and cities in search of affordable housing. Many of the young men in my study consistently moved around because of this situation. This meant that I had to shadow participants wherever they ended up: sometimes to a neighboring city or neighborhood (and sometimes to juvenile facilities by way of their parents). Some of them I followed to their new neighborhoods. By the end of the study, I had lost track of eight of the forty youths I studied in-depth. Therefore, I ended up with thirty-two young men whom I studied in-depth for the entire three years.

Observing Masculinity

This study focuses on the experiences and stories of young men. Young women’s experiences with punishment are unique and therefore may require a different methodological approach and conceptualization to understand their predicament. Researchers have shown that young women experience domestic abuse, criminal justice abuse, sexual abuse, and violence in qualitatively different ways than boys do. Recent scholarship is finding that poor young women are heavily impacted by a “violent girl” trend in which young women who are considered violent are being incarcerated in record numbers. I recognize the importance of gender in the experiences of youth, but analyzing the experiences of young women is beyond the scope of this current work. I offer an in-depth analysis that deals with the ways that masculinity affects the lives of these boys and the way it spills over to impact the lives of young women—from expectations of violence to the enactment of sexism and misogyny. By interrogating the ways that gender, in this case masculinity, impacts the worlds of these youths, I hope to provide a more nuanced understanding of how gender norms are particularly affected by punishment.

O.G. Sociology

When this study began, I was twenty-five years old. I had grown up in the flatlands of Oakland and had lived in two of the neighborhoods where these young men came from. These factors, along with the snowball sampling approach, in which the young men’s friends vouched for me—often by saying, “He’s cool; he’s not with the five-o [police]”—allowed for most of the young men in the study to comfortably gain trust and develop a sense of camaraderie with me. Many of the boys acknowledged me as someone they could trust and look up to. The majority referred to me as “O.G. Vic.” “O.G.” stands for “original gangster.” This label is often ascribed to older members of the neighborhood who have proven themselves and gained respect on the street and, as a result, are respected by younger residents. I told the young men not to consider me an O.G. since I believed, and still do, that I did not deserve the label. My belief was that any researcher who considered himself an O.G. was being deceptive. Although I grew up in most of the neighborhoods where I conducted this study, the reality was that at the time of the study I was a graduate student with many privileges that many of these young people did not have. I was an “outsider” as much as an “insider.” This was important to recognize in a study that examined the lives of marginalized subjects. Throughout the study, I remained reflexive about my insider/outsider role and the power relations that emerged and solidified as I studied these young men.

At the same time, if the youths looked at me with the kind of respect that they gave to O.G.s, some who often led them in the wrong direction, I would guide them toward positive alternatives as much as I could. I often saw myself conducting “O.G. Sociology,” similar to John Irwin’s “Convict Criminology,” where someone who had previously been incarcerated—in my case, someone who had also “put in work” (belonged to a street gang)—became an analyst of this very same experience.

I wanted to avoid swaggering about my experiences gaining entrée, hanging out, witnessing violence, or “going rogue,” as sociologist Sudhir
Venkatesh called it in his 2008 book, in which he claimed to have been allowed to “be a gang leader for a day” by a notorious Black gang in Chicago. Narratives such as Venkatesh’s create what I call a “jungle-book trope.” This very familiar colonial fairy-tale narrative in the Western imagination of the “Other” goes something like this: “I got lost in the wild, the wild people took me in and helped me, made me their king, and I lived to tell civilization about it!” Unfortunately, some of my colleagues who study the urban poor continue to perpetuate this self-aggrandizing narrative, perpetuating flawed policies and programs and a public understanding of the urban poor as creatures in need of pity and external salvation.

This book is not for those expecting to read about bravado, blood, and irrational violence—dominant allusions when discussing inner-city youths. In this study, I decided to normalize “dangerous settings” and discuss what happens on a routine basis—people living life, striving for dignity—and not what happens during extreme moments: people victimizing one another, often in response to marginalization. I discuss these extreme cases only when they apply to the production of knowledge and not when I think they will have some emotional appeal to the reader or when I feel like “going rogue.” Sociologist Nikki Jones describes the process by which some ethnographers portray a false reality of marginalized populations: “In an attempt to explain the inner workings of one group of people to another, many contemporary ethnographic texts begin from a point of ignorance instead of from a point of understanding and commonality. . . . In an attempt to enlighten those with the power to effect change [these ethnographies] have the effect of making others under study more unintelligible than they ever really were.” Like Jones, I conducted this study with the assumption that the young people I studied were normal everyday people persisting in risky environments, striving for dignity, and organizing their social worlds despite a dearth of resources.

Sociology and feminism scholars Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins have argued that all knowledge is rooted in experience and that those who have lived on the margins may provide crucial insights to specific social problems. I believe that my standpoint epistemology, the knowledge I have gained from my personal experiences, brings much insight to this conversation. However, it is my obligation as a social sci-

entist to provide a road map for those who have not had my experience to be able to replicate a similar study and find the same patterns and processes I encountered. Although I brought my own social situation to this study, that was not enough to give me the insights I needed to develop an understanding of the conditions that marginalized young men from Oakland were facing. From my experience and from my reading of theories of crime, delinquency, race, and punishment, I had my own ideas about youth and punishment in Oakland. I wanted to go beyond my own experience. I wanted to create an empirical study that would uncover the process by which criminalization impacted the lives of young people.

One of my graduate-school professors warned me, “Go native, but make sure to come back.” When I returned from the field, I told him, “I took your advice and went native in the academy, but I made sure to go back to the community where I come from.” All quips aside, I acknowledge that my insider status limited my observations. As a researcher, participants’ responses and my own assumptions may have resulted in “bias [of] the description to please the ethnographer.” In addition, my own assumptions and negative experiences with police may have shaped my view of observed events. However, I proceeded with caution and acknowledged that I was a participant in the creation of the stories that follow. I became part of the study and part of the forces that both created and resisted the very power relations I sought to expose. The fact that I also encountered harassment by police and other community members for looking like the boys allowed me to embody a keen sense of what these young people were experiencing. After all, as Erving Goffman put it, fieldwork requires “subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality . . . to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation . . . so that you are close to them while you are responding to what life does to them.”

I was able to conduct an in-depth study on youth who saw me as an adult they could trust. With trust comes obligation—the obligation to give back by actively engaging in the lives of the youths I studied. It became my obligation to address their questions in a world full of faulty answers. By the time I met them, many of their pathways were already set. They had already experienced a young life of adjudication and crim-
inalization. Therefore, even if I represented the possibility of change in their lives, I could not negate the forces of criminalization and patterns of punishment already established. Helping a young person attain a job is a risk worth taking, even if we believe that this will change our findings. I think that it is naive to believe that one’s subtle interventions in marginalized settings will change our findings. While I have power, privilege, and resources, my individual actions are not godly in any way to change structural conditions, entrenched processes that grind away, impacting the lives of abandoned populations on a day-to-day level.

My biases were very much part of this study. Howard Becker explains that “an observer unwittingly imposes normative judgments on what is observed.” These judgments are based on the observer’s own politics and epistemologies. However, helping people and generating solid empirical research are not mutually exclusive in my view. Therefore, to ensure validity, I only bring out themes and cases that typify recurring patterns in my observations and interviews, and I also conduct a systematic search for disconfirming evidence. In other words, every story that I tell in this book represents a reality that many other youths in the study experienced as well.

Youth Demographics

Of the forty youths I studied in-depth, thirty had previously been arrested when I met them. An additional ten had never been arrested but lived in a neighborhood with high violent-crime rates and had siblings or friends who had been previously involved with crime (see table 1.1). Most of the offenses committed by the delinquent youths were nonviolent; only three had been arrested for a violent act. All the youths in this study reported, as first contact, having persistent contact with police officers while growing up. Twenty-two had spent at least a week in juvenile facilities, and thirty were assigned a probation officer at the time that I met them. Nineteen of the youth I studied in-depth reported gang involvement. Out of seventy-eight others that I interviewed, met with in focus groups, and observed, fifty-two reported gang involvement. The neighborhoods in which these youths had grown up had at least four major Black gangs and four major Latino gangs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice Status at First Contact of Forty Youths Studied In-Depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previously arrested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend or relative of previously arrested youths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported negative interactions with police at first interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One week or more spent in juvenile facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned a probation officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent in jail or prison</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gang involved (confirmed through self-reports or observations)</td>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Status at First Contact of Forty Youths Studied In-Depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two parent, low-wage incomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$16,000–$34,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yearly household income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-eight of the young men I studied in-depth came from single-parent households. Twelve of the boys were what I would define as working class: they had at least one parent who worked full-time in a viable and stable job, were able to afford a basic standard of living, and occasionally enjoyed some luxuries such as a family vacation or a new car. Sixteen boys were from working-poor families that had at least one working parent but were barely able to make ends meet, especially in an extremely expensive housing market, in which some families spent over 70 percent of their income on rent. Twelve boys came from extreme poverty, where they lived in an unemployed single-parent household, often in unhealthy living conditions, such as living with nine other people in a one-bedroom apartment or living in an apartment known to be used for drug use or drug sales.

Twenty of the boys were Black, and twenty were Latino. Because East Oakland was 40 percent Latino and 50 percent African American at the
time that I began this study, I decided to focus on the experiences and perspectives of these two dominant groups. Although other cities or communities may host a majority African American population that experiences the brunt of punishment, Oakland, as I will demonstrate, criminalized Blacks and Latinos in similar ways. Boys from both of these racialized groups reported and were observed to encounter punishment almost identically, albeit to varying degrees. Oakland was one of the first traditionally Black cities in the United States to see an influx of Latino immigrants, which eventually transformed it into a Black/Latino city. Many other traditionally Black cities across the country continue to see an increase in the Latino population. What I found in Oakland was that the punitive patterns of punishment designed to historically control Black youths were also being applied to young Latinos. By understanding this process and the overall patterns of punishment in Oakland, we may be able to understand patterns of punishment among Blacks and Latinos in other multiracial urban settings.

In my observations, I found that Black youth encountered some of the worst criminalization in Oakland. One example is that light-skinned Latinos gained respect from teachers and police once they chose to dress more formally. Black youths, however, still faced criminalization, even when they dressed more formally. Research on the impact of the criminal justice system and race continues to show that Blacks face the direst consequences and that Latinos are sandwiched in between Blacks and Whites. Latinos have a higher chance of being arrested, incarcerated, and convicted than Whites do for similar offenses, but they do not face the same severity as do Blacks. In Oakland, I found that both groups were criminalized in similar ways but that Black youths faced harsher sanctions than did Latino youths. I also found that both groups formed a common subculture which resisted punishment. I found that Black and Latino youths understood punitive social control as a collective racialization-criminalization process in which they saw themselves caught in the same web of punishment.

Consequences

Although parents, police officers, and school officials may have had good intentions, they were consistently understood by youths in this study as adversarial and excessive in their punishment. Experiences with punishment led young people to develop a specific set of beliefs, thoughts, actions, and practices in order to survive the cruel treatment they encountered and to strive for their dignity. But delinquent kids, those who had been arrested for breaking the law, were not the only young people who were criminalized. Young men who were not delinquent but lived in poor neighborhoods also encountered patterns of punishment. They were also, for example, pulled over by police officers, questioned by teachers and administrators, and looked at with suspicion by merchants and community members. Kids who were considered good, those who had not broken the law and did relatively well in school, experienced part of this stigma and punishment as well. In order to avoid this punishment, they had to constantly prove that they were not guilty, that they were not criminals. These boys frequently felt that they were treated as guilty until they could prove themselves innocent, and much of their worldviews and actions were influenced by this process. Many of their social relations were structured by their attempts to prove their innocence, what I refer to as “acting lawful.”

Although I focused my attention on a small number of young men in one American city, I believe, as many other scholars do, that this criminalization is occurring in other marginalized communities throughout the United States and in multiple institutional and community settings. This study, while grounded in Oakland, California, may provide a deeper understanding of the punishment that other youth experience in other marginalized communities. For example, the Jena Six, who entered the national spotlight in 2007, encountered patterns of punishment and criminalization that are similar to those analyzed in this book. In the fall of 2006, two Black high school students in Jena, Louisiana, sat under the so-called White Tree at their high school. The White Tree was named by White students who specifically sought to exclude Black students from this space. The Black students asked their principal for permission to sit under the tree, despite its perceived sta-
 tus as belonging to White students. When the principal responded, “Sit wherever you want,” and the Black students did, White students reacted by hanging nooses from the tree. When Black students protested the light punishment (a three-day suspension) given to the students who hung the nooses, District Attorney Reed Walters came to the school and told the Black students he could “take [their] lives away with a stroke of [his] pen.” Walters’s statement proves true for many of the youths in this study; their life chances are impacted by the discretion of multiple authority figures in the community. A district attorney’s intervention to solve a school conflict is indicative of the trend to use crime-control metaphors and material resources to solve non-criminal, everyday social problems. This was the trend in Oakland, and it seems that hypercriminalization has become a primary form of social control in several marginalized communities.

In Jena, in December 2007, a fight broke out between Black students and a White student who threatened them and called them “niggers.” The White student sustained minor injuries from the fight. The Black students involved were arrested and charged with aggravated battery and second-degree attempted murder. Mychal Bell, the first defendant to go to trial, was convicted as an adult, despite being sixteen years old when the event occurred. He faced up to twenty-two years in prison. The case produced protests around the nation against Bell’s conviction and called national attention to the racism informing the punishment of these young Black men. As a result, Dr. Phil, Oprah, Nightline, and other major media outlets provided detailed coverage of the case. Most coverage emphasized the victimization of the White student who had been beaten by the Jena Six and the “racial demons” that haunted Jena. Few outlets, however, provided equal time to the extreme punitive treatment that the Jena Six students received. Jena showed how race matters in crime and how young Black people become criminalized. Media, political, and community explanations for these kinds of personal troubles often blame Black criminality, racial tensions, or White supremacy for events of this kind. However, it is time to find a systematic explanation for the public issues of punitive social control that affect poor marginalized youths in local settings, throughout the globe.

Book Overview

What follows is a snapshot of the complicated world of some boys growing up in Oakland, California, in the midst of a system of punishment which, from their perspective, maintains an ironclad grip on their everyday lives. I attempt to understand the processes by which marginalized boys become enmeshed in punishment. Ultimately, I argue that a system of punitive social control held a grip on the minds and trajectories of the boys in this study. What this study demonstrates is that the poor, at least in this community, have not been abandoned by the state. Instead, the state has become deeply embedded in their everyday lives, through the auspices of punitive social control. Fieldwork allowed me to observe firsthand the processes by which the state asserts itself into civil society through various institutions, with the specific intent of regulating deviant behavior and maintaining social order. This punitive social control becomes visible when we examine its consequences. These include oppositional culture, perilous masculinity, and other actions that attempt to compensate for punitive treatment. But not all consequences of punitive social control are detrimental. The mass and ubiquitous criminalization of marginalized young people, what I refer to as hypercriminalization, brings about a paradox. One response to criminalization is resistance. Some of this resistance is self-defeating. However, other components of this resistance have the potential to radically alter the worldviews and trajectories of the very marginalized young people that encounter criminalization.

Part 1 examines this system of punitive social control that has developed in Oakland, California. In chapter 2, Oakland is analyzed as a case study in which young Black and Latino males have had a history of criminalization and punitive social control. Chapter 3 introduces the reader to two young men who typify the recurring patterns I encountered with most of the young men in this study. I delve into the life stories of these boys, whose experiences provide the reader with an understanding of the deeply embedded day-to-day criminalization that marks them from a young age. I discuss their perceptions of growing up in an environment that renders them as criminals and the defiance that they develop to cope with and resist the unresolved shame and stigma imposed on them by punishment.
In chapter 4, I analyze the everyday cultural and institutional aspects of criminalization and provide a conceptual framework for understanding this system of punishment, which I call the youth control complex. Specifically, I examine the family, schools, police, and probation. I show how interactions with these different institutions of social control have a combined effect on youth which forces them to understand their social world as one where various institutions and individuals systematically criminalize them, generating ubiquitous punitive social control.

In part 2, I examine the consequences of this punitive treatment. I show how criminalization and punitive social control shapes young people's decision-making, actions, worldviews, and identities. Chapter 5 examines the significance that defiance and resistance have for inner-city boys. What types of resistance do they deploy? I argue that what some scholars have understood as “oppositional culture” and “self-defeating resistance” is often a form of resilience that, if channeled in the right way, is capable of transforming the lives of boys such as those in this study.

Chapter 6 examines how the criminal justice system is a gendered institution that heavily contributes to young men's understanding of manhood. I examine how these boys enter manhood in relation to patterns of punishment. Whether they comply with the system or resist it, these young men form specific types of masculinity that often lead them to enact symbolic and physical violence against young women.

Chapter 7 examines the lives of non-delinquent boys. I argue that the non-delinquent boys who lived in marginalized neighborhoods inhabited a double bind: they had to overcompensate to show authority figures that they were not criminal by rejecting their peers and family members who had been labeled as such. This rejection often led these “lawful” youths to be labeled as “sell-outs” or “snitches” by their peers, while at the same time authority figures continued to see them as suspects despite their extraneous efforts. This also rendered “lawful” young men as vulnerable to victimization for not being “man enough.” Police told them to “man up” and provide information about their “criminal” friends and relatives, while the streets told them to “man up” and “don’t snitch.” I discuss how the “don’t snitch campaign” became influential among these boys because of criminalization. In other words, “snitching” developed a new definition. “Snitching,” for the young men in this study, meant collaborat-
The Coupling of Criminal Justice and Community Institutions

No public safety officer shall be prohibited from seeking election to, or serving as a member of, the governing board of a school district.


In its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating.

—Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 1977

I drove to Spider’s house late one afternoon after a long day of discussing inequality with urban sociologists at the University of California, Berkeley. Some claimed to have found answers to the problematic questions they asked: “Why do African Americans commit disproportionate crime?” “Why does the inner city produce a culture of violence?” and “Why do immigrants become involved in gangs?” As these, primarily White, male, and middle-class, graduate students and faculty continued to dissect the ghetto from the comfort of the university, it dawned on me that I had to hit the streets and catch up with Spider, who had recently been stabbed. While I would be asking Spider about violence and gangs, an equally pressing topic, in his mind, was that of criminalization and police misconduct. I knew I had a short window before Spider decided to leave his house. I grabbed my backpack, ran to my car, and drove to his house. As I left Berkeley, majestic oak and redwood trees faded from my rearview mirror, replaced by old cars, dilapidated Victorians, and track houses that had been turned into multiple apartments by slumlords.

So far, from youth accounts and my observations, I had discovered that school personnel, police officers, and other adults in the community had created an environment that made these young people feel criminalized from a young age. Although I had encountered a few racist cops and even a few racist teachers, I knew that most people in the community were well intentioned and had a genuine interest in the well-being of boys. How was it possible that all the young men whom I followed believed wholeheartedly that most adults in the community worked to ubiquitously punish them? In the minds of these young men, the community had conspired to impose detrimental sanctions on them. My observations led me to uncover a complex process by which even well-intentioned adults participated in the criminalization of the boys. Some people in the community did believe that the boys were irreparable criminals and needed to be locked away. But others, those who cared dearly for these boys, did not conspire to criminalize them. Instead, these caring adults were caught up in a system of imposing punitive social control, which influenced their actions despite their having a genuine interest in the well-being of the boys.

Criminologist David Garland reminds us that “punishment does not just restrain or discipline ‘society’—punishment helps create it.” He contends that punishment is one of the many institutions which help construct and support the social world by producing the shared categories and authoritative classifications through which individuals understand each other and themselves. I use Garland’s analysis of punishment as an institution to understand the role that criminalization, as a form of punishment, plays in the lives of the boys in this study. Garland argues, “Like all social institutions, punishment interacts with its environment, forming part of the mutually constructing configuration of elements which make up the social world.” If Garland is correct, the workings of punitive social control set the stage for the development of specific meaning-making and cultural practices among youths who encounter criminalization. Their subjectivities are partially constructed by punishment. But young
people also have agency and develop systems of interaction and resistance to cope with these patterns of punishment and to create an alternative world, an escape from their punitive reality.

Labor historian Robin Kelley argues that young people become involved in "play"—the seeking of personal enjoyment despite their detrimental circumstances. Social scientists, according to Kelley, have confused this "play" for a form of social disorder: "The growing numbers of young brown bodies engaged in 'play' rather than work (from street-corner bantering, to 'mailing' [hanging out at shopping malls], to basketball) have contributed to popular constructions of the 'underclass' as a threat and shaped urban police practices. The invention of terms such as wilding, as Houston Baker points out, reveal a discourse of black male youth out of control, rampaging teenagers free of the disciplinary structures of school, work, and prison." In 2010, groups of Black youths in Philadelphia were placed in the national media spotlight when the city called in the FBI, made student transportation passes invalid after 4 p.m., and implemented a policy to cite parents when their children broke curfew laws. This crackdown occurred in response to "flash mobs," large numbers of people who gather after being organized through text messaging. Although the majority of these gatherings did not involve delinquency, a few events, where violence and vandalism took place, led to the criminalization of young Black people gathering in groups in downtown Philadelphia. These flash mobs can be analyzed as creative responses to social isolation and a lack of recreation spaces. According to Kelley and consistent with my findings, marginalized young people's "play" has become criminalized.

Criminalizing the Victim

I pulled up to Spider's house, a two-story Victorian. The house looked as if it had not been maintained since it was first built in the early 1900s. Bare, splintered wood protruded through the flaking khaki paint. The gutterless roof had allowed rainwater to seep through the wooden paneling on the house, creating warps and cracks on the surface as if an earthquake had shaken the house from its foundation and dragged it from its original location. His mother rented a one-bedroom apartment conversion in the rear of the house. The side of the house had a driveway that had been fenced off. This is where Spider kept two dogs he owned, a red-nose pit bull and a small mutt. Both dogs looked malnourished, with their ribs visibly showing and their stomachs tucked deep into their hind legs. I knocked on Slick's metal gate door. After a few knocks, Slick answered the door. "Wassup, Vic?" "Wassup, Slick?" I replied. I had not seen him in two weeks, and the last time I saw him was in a hospital bed.

Spider was fifteen years young when he was brutally attacked by gang members on a night when he sat on his front door steps talking with friends.

I was kicking it in front of my house with some homies and stuff, and then a few of them were wearing red. And they thought we were claiming [members of a gang]. And they rolled by and passed once and came a second time. And we was fighting. And I was running by myself, and my brother went that way [pointing to the right]. Then I came down this way [pointing to the left], and they caught me. And they just shanked [stabbed] me. They shanked me four in the stomach, one in the chest, and eight in the leg. They were like twenty-five years old. . . . You don't feel nothing, but then, after, I just blacked out and woke up at the hospital. My mom came, and I told her I was OK and blacked out.

Spider nearly died. He was hospitalized for three weeks. The detectives who investigated his case paid him a visit a few hours after the incident:

When I woke up, that's when they came, the detectives I mean. Molina [the detective investigating his case] and shit came to the hospital. And they tried to see if it was Sureños that stabbed me and tried to label me as a Norteno [rival gang to Sureños]. No! But I am not Norteno, I don't gang bang, but when I was there, they tried to make me say that I was Norteno and stuff. I couldn't remember who stabbed me. I just know it was Sureños 'cause they kept yelling MS [Mara Salvatrucha, the name of another gang]. Yeah, and, you know, you gotta make a police report and shit. But they arrested a juvenile, and then they tried to make me testify, but I didn't want to go to court. I already know they didn't got the dudes that got me 'cause those dudes were grown men and stuff. And I wanted to be left alone. And then that's why we dropped the charges, and all that. And then the DA wanted me to go to court.
After this near-death experience, Spider was registered by the Oakland police as an active gang member. Prior to this event, he had never been arrested or registered by police as a gang member. During his stay at the hospital, one of the gang detectives asked his mother for his personal information and asked her how long he had been in the gang. His mother insisted that he was not in the gang. The officer told her, “That’s the reason your son got stabbed. You’re ignoring his gang involvement.”

During my time in the field, I verified that Spider was not in the gang. It was not difficult to find out who was actively gang involved. There were many indicators: whom the young person hung out with, who self-identified as a gang member, and how the young person interacted with known gang members. Community workers were also good sources. Most gang members were honest, because if their homies found out that they had negated the gang, the consequences could be devastating. I had found no signs that indicated that Spider was involved in the gang. However, the gang detective came to a different conclusion and placed him in the gang database.

The rampant use of the gang database was an additional factor which accentuated the criminalization process. Police officers constantly placed young men in this database, allowing any other officer who came into contact with the boys to have detailed information about what “turf” they belonged to or where they were last stopped or when they were last questioned. It appeared that the police classified young people as gang members in order to benefit from the ability to keep track of them and impose harsher restrictions and policing on them. This categorization later affected Spider during a criminal case, in which he was charged with assault with a deadly weapon, for the benefit of the gang, after he got into a fight with a guy who was making fun of him for getting stabbed. The gang enhancement carried an added five-year sentence.

When the police classified Spider as a gang member, school staff, community workers, and other adults in the community also adopted this categorization. The punishment that Spider encountered, after being viciously attacked, was not an isolated case of individual rogue gang detectives: there was a recurring pattern of criminalizing the victim in the lives of these young men. Meanwhile, police officers, school personnel, probation officers, and even community workers supported the labeling of Spider as a culprit, despite his being the victim who had been stabbed.

Spider’s School

Two months before Spider was stabbed, I visited the East Oakland Continuation School (EOCS), which Spider and six other boys in this study attended. The EOCS was a school for those students who had already been officially labeled as deviant and delinquent by the Oakland Unified School District and who were no longer allowed to attend the “regular” high school. The school welcomed me in as a community member who could mentor some of the youth at the school. The first person at the entrance of the school was a security guard named Shirley, a short, chubby Black woman who looked about thirty-five years old. She spoke with a deep voice and always seemed to stand on her toes. Her modus operandi was to “mean mug” (stare down) every student who walked in through the gate, as if to remind them whom they would have to face if they were defiant that day. Once the students were inside the school, another security guard checked them with a handheld metal detector to make sure they did not bring a weapon to school. As Spider dragged his left leg across the school yard to keep his baggy pants from falling, the middle-aged, six-foot-tall, White, male school principal walked by us. “Mr. Juarez!” he called in a deep voice. “You’re not going to give us any trouble today. Right?” “I’m cool, Mr. Ellis,” replied Spider. The school was small, made up of three dilapidated World War II-era bungalows placed perpendicular to one another to form a courtyard. The courtyard was all cement, with a few benches and two basketball hoops. On rainy days, Spider and the other students wore their hoods in class, in case the roof started leaking on their heads.

Spider and I walked into class. Although class had already started, the teacher was missing. Students sat in groups of four, facing each other. The class was composed of seven Latinos and eight Blacks. One of the students played a rap song on his cell phone’s speaker: “I’m raw, I’m raw, I’m raw . . .” the song continued, then the sound was interrupted by a young Black lady who talked on her cell phone: “Yeah, bitch. You crazy bitch . . . Yeah, bitch . . .” One of the Latino males, Julio, looked at his Black classmate, Jason, and said, “You got some coke?” “Coke? Nigga! Is you crazy? You do it all?” replied Jason. Julio looked at him with a serious look and said, “Everything: pills, crystal, smoke, drank. Tienes de la negrita? [You got some little black stuff?] You know, heroin?” I found that the boys I observed often pre-
tended to use more drugs than they were really using. Julio was always at school, and rarely on the streets, during the times I conducted my observations. He was headed for graduation and never displayed any signs of major drug use such as being on the streets, not attending school, or being distracted in the classroom. I believe Julio was pretending to use various drugs in order to appear “crazy” around the other boys and possibly to gain their respect. The school later suspended Julio and reported him to the local police officer for asking other students if they had drugs to offer.

The teacher finally walked into the classroom. He was a substitute. The school had trouble finding permanent teachers. One possible reason was the school’s notoriety: recently a student had placed a chokehold on the principal. As the substitute, a fifty-year-old, light-skinned Black male, walked in, a seventeen-year-old Black male, Deandre, said to him, “Hey, bra [bro], what’s up with it, bra.” The substitute ignored him and turned to the girl who was using her cell phone: “Hang that up.” She told her friend, “I’ll call you back, bitch. My teacher wants me.” The teacher told the students to open their Earth Science books to page 223. “Today’s lesson is about rocks,” he told the students. Deandre grunted, “I don’t care about no rock.” The substitute responded, “You will when it starts shaking!” Deandre replied, “That’s when niggas start running!” The teacher dropped the book and scolded the students, “You know where you are headed? . . . Narcissism is gonna lead you to prison.” The students all looked down. At this point, I turned to Spider. He gave me a look, raising his right eyebrow, as if to tell me, “I told you so.” I looked down. The teacher finally convinced another student to read to the class.

A few minutes later the bell rang. I asked the substitute about his narcissism remark. He replied, “You know, these students have some internalized nihilism [sic]. They are just here out of the rain from the streets. They come here wanting you to bring them up-to-date. What causes unconformity? That is what we have a lot of here.” Spider walked into the classroom to check on me and overheard the last part of the teacher’s remarks. “You saying I’m slow?” he asked. “No, I’m saying that if you keep acting slow and continue gang banging, you going to prison,” the teacher replied. Spider insisted, “I ain’t no gang member. You trippin’, cuz.” The school had a high turnover rate with teachers and substitutes. When new teachers arrived, they attempted to use their unique pedagogical approaches to connect with students; some of them were really nice, others really mean, and many in-between. But all the teachers had one practice in common: whenever any student misbehaved, the teachers would threaten either to call the police, to send them to jail, or to call a probation officer (sometimes, even for those students who were not on probation). In the school’s attempt to maintain order, it used the full force of criminal justice institutions to regulate students’ behavior. Although this school was for students already labeled delinquents, these boys reported receiving the same treatment at the “regular” schools they attended as well.

Later on in the day, Spider and I walked outside the school gate. As we walked past the security guard, I heard a walkie-talkie buzz, and the guard said, “Officer Miles, we have a few of them walking your way.” We walked a few blocks to International Boulevard, and an all-black patrol car, with no police markings—what the kids referred to as a “Narc”—turned the corner. The officer stared us down. He drove down the street, made a U-turn, and drove slowly right behind us. “Shit! That’s the mothafucker that beat down Marquill the other day in front of McDonald’s, remember?” I remembered: two weeks before, a Black male student walked into the school at the end of the lunch period, his extra-long white T-shirt soiled with black tar and his lip busted open, with red flesh showing. One of his friends asked him, “What happened?” “The Narc, they beat my ass.” He replayed in monotone, with little emotion as he walked, head bowed, to the boys’ bathroom. Slick had witnessed the beating. According to Slick, Marquill had talked back to the police officer. The officer got out of the car, grabbed Marquill by his T-shirt, and slammed him onto the grunge-covered cement parking lot of the McDonald’s. The White officer stood over Marquill for a few minutes. Then Marquill was released and returned to school.

I had never seen Slick display so much fear, even when he recounted his stabbing story. I turned to Slick and told him, “Let’s just keep walking. We’ll be fine.” The officer continued to follow us, driving slowly behind us. Slick became paranoid, turned around, and gave the officer a dirty look. I turned to look. The officer, a White man with a shaved head in his late thirties, looked at us, grinned, and drove off. Police officers played a crafty cat-and-mouse game in which the boys remained in constant fear of being humiliated, brutalized, or arrested.
This officer often stationed himself at the McDonald’s parking lot. Most of his work appeared to revolve around looking for traffic violations or waiting for the school to call when a student misbehaved. The school had impeccable communication between the security officer, the administrators, and this police officer. I witnessed eight events when police were called by the security officer for students talking back, cursing, or other minor school-rule transgressions. At EOCS, stigma, labeling, detention, harassment, and humiliation were just about the only consistent experiences that young people could count on as they entered the school. If students attempted to resist this criminalization by acting up, a violent police officer lurked.

For the boys, the school represented just another space where they were criminalized for their style and culture. The school, in the eyes of the boys, was indistinguishable from the police officer stationed at McDonald’s, the adults in the community who called the police on them, or the community-center staff who ousted them. Jose, who also attended the school, put it into perspective: “Man, it’s like every day, teachers gotta sweat me, police gotta pocket-check me, mom’s gotta trip on me, and my PO’s gotta stress me... It’s like having a zookeeper watching us at all times. We walk home, and we see them [probation officers and police]; we shoot some hoops, and we see them; we take a shit at school, and we see them.”

After school, Jose would take a two-hour bus ride to Berkeley to visit his cousins and attend a court-mandated community-center program facilitated by his probation officer. Since Jose lived in Berkeley at the time of his last court hearing, he was assigned a probation officer stationed at a Berkeley community center. Jose was required to check in with him once a week.

Parents

The young people I interviewed also perceived themselves to be criminalized by parents. School personnel, police, and probation officers provided the boys’ parents with “courtesy stigmas.” A “courtesy stigma” is a stigma that develops as a result of being related to a person with a stigma. The conversations that school personnel, police, and probation officers had with one another about troubled youths almost always followed the same trajectory: “These parents need to learn how to discipline these kids”; “It’s their parents’ fault for letting them do whatever they want”; “It’s no surprise that they’re this way—look at their parents.” These are just a few examples of countless depictions of parents as deviants, like their children. Authority figures often attempted to intervene and teach parents the “right way” to parent. For instance, a probation officer periodically visited Jose’s mother in Oakland and attempted to influence how she parented. Jose’s mother, Rosario, explained, “The [probation officer], he frightens me. He comes over and tells me, ‘Why don’t you learn to be a mother? Take away all this gangster stuff from Jose. You are at fault for what he does.’” This process sometimes changed the relationship that youths had with their parents. Some parents came to have similar perspectives as police and probation officers. Fourteen of the boys reported not having trusting relationships with their parents and believed that their parents would turn them in to authorities for arguing with them. Parents felt compelled to obey the discourse provided by the youth control complex: “Your child is a deviant, your child needs to be scrutinized and policed, and when your child acts negatively in any kind of way, such as dressing like a ‘thug,’ you need to call probation and police.”

For Jose and most of the other boys, their perceptions of being watched, managed, and treated as criminals began at a young age and became exacerbated after their first offense, in most cases, a misdemeanor. Their minor transgressions branded them with a mark that would make their one-time criminal act into a permanent criminal identity. Part of the process of making Jose feel that he was constructed as a criminal was his mother’s participation in his criminalization. He believed that she was forced to listen to school and criminal justice authorities’ agendas on how to parent, especially after his first arrest. According to Jose and his mother, he was first arrested for carrying a ten-dollar bag of marijuana. They found that everyone in the community treated Jose differently after his first arrest. Jose began to feel watched, police began to randomly stop and search him, and his teachers would threaten him with calling his probation officer if he disobeyed at school. And, despite his mother’s empathizing with the negative treatment he was now receiving, she constantly reminded him that he would end up in jail if he misbehaved, and she used these threats as a means to discipline him.
Probation

According to the boys I interviewed, probation officers served the purpose of punishing them by branding them criminals in front of the rest of the community and by marking their territory in the settings through which the boys navigated. Community centers made office space available for probation officers. Parents were constantly interacting with probation officers and were often being chastised and influenced by them. Teachers had direct contact with probation officers, in order to inform them when boys misbehaved. Schools also provided office space for police and probation officers to check in with trouble students.

The probation experience varied for the boys. Some of the boys had probation officers that required them to check in once a week. Others knocked on doors at 7:45 in the morning once a week to make sure the youngster was getting ready and planning to go to school. Most, however, had high and unrealistic expectations of the boys but did not play a role in aiding them in meeting these expectations. For example, Deandre's probation officer, Ms. Moore, wrote a contract for him, full of unreachable goals, which he showed me soon after meeting with her: “Find a job. Pass all your classes. Do not get caught hanging out with your old friends.” Weeks went by, and Ms. Moore did not check in with Deandre. Although he attempted to “stay legit,” he found no work. I watched and helped him apply to twelve jobs. After a few weeks, he had not received one call. Meanwhile, he did not pass all his classes because the two weeks he spent in juvenile hall led to a failed semester at school, and he could not stay away from his old friends because they all lived in the same apartment complex and went to the same school he attended.

While Deandre seemed like a victim of his circumstances, I also noticed that he developed creative ways to walk the tightrope between the contradictory expectations of the streets and those of his probation officer. I observed Deandre’s crafty strategy to avoid trouble around his friends. After being placed on probation, Deandre took a passive role in his “crew.” He shied away from partaking in visible activities, such as walking in a large group or playing dice on the sidewalk. Instead, he “chilled,” mostly on his front steps, and avoided joining the crew when they talked about fighting. Despite strategic attempts to stay out of trouble, the sys-
While probation officers did not give good advice or connect youths to programs, they did maintain close contact with police and community workers. The overpolicing-underpolicing paradox existed here: probation officers were rarely around to help young men through the process of staying free but were consistently there to chastise or arrest them when they were purported to have violated the law.

At the end of the boys' initial arrest, all of them were placed on probation and required to report to their probation officer. The meetings would sometimes take place at neighborhood community centers located near the youngsters' homes. The boys did not like the community-center arrangement because everyone knew when they were checking in with their probation officer. Although at one point, some of the boys believed this to be “cool,” after a while, boys such as Deandre became frustrated and felt stigmatized by the reality of having to walk into a community center to check in with a probation officer in front of the entire community. Theoretically, this kind of shame might help someone like Deandre “reintegrate” into the community, by feeling ashamed to have committed a crime due to the public shaming, which held him accountable to the entire community for his misdeeds. However, the community seemed to respond to Deandre and the other boys not through an “I will help you learn your lesson,” “tough love” perspective but through an “I hope you get arrested again” punitive perspective.

From the perspective of juvenile probation and many school personnel, the point of the probation officer’s being present at community centers and schools was to make sure that youths who were on probation did not commit another crime. Often, the probation officer served as a coercive force, which constantly reminded youngsters that a pair of handcuffs was waiting for them as soon as they committed their first infraction. Fourteen of the boys were released from probation during the three-year study. Twelve of the boys were arrested soon after. Their violations, all minor, included being drunk in public, violating curfew, being suspended at school, and hanging out with old friends. Despite being off of probation, the boys continued to be tracked.

Probation officer-youth relations were overwhelmingly negative and punitive, with probation officers being a disruptive control force in the boys’ lives, waiting for them to, as Jose put it, “fuck up.” By being present in all aspects of the youths’ lives, probation officers could potentially have a positive impact on the boys’ rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Often, the boys did follow the strict orders of the probation officer, but only in the direct presence of the officer. Probation officers’ punitive approach failed to teach young people how to desist on their own, through self-control instead of through external threat. This threat often developed resentment in the boys and led to resistance, which was sometimes articulated through deviance and criminality.

While direct punitive control kept many of the young men from committing crime, many of them ended up being arrested anyway, for the most minor of infractions, which were no longer independent crimes but “crimes” of violating a probation contract. This occurred because the young men resisted many of the unrealistic expectations which probation imposed, including being home by 8 p.m. and checking in with the probation officer at the local community center, where peers would see them interacting with law enforcement and sometimes ask them if they were “snitches.” Probation placed the boys between a rock and a hard place; if they followed their probation program, they ran the risk of being victimized by others who saw them as snitches. This, in turn, led many of the boys to be rearrested for simple infractions. Probation created a magnifying-glass effect for the boys, which led them deeper into the criminal justice system for the most minor of infractions, violations which were often outside of criminal code and fell under the purview of school or community rules and norms, such as being suspended, having an argument with parents, or cursing at a store clerk.

Slick’s probation officer, Mr. Johnson, a Black man in his forties, always wore a cowboy hat and cowboy boots. He was about six feet tall. His demeanor was gruff. He reminded me of characters that actor Clint Eastwood played in vigilante Wild West movies. When I first introduced myself to him, he asked me what I was going to do to keep Slick off the street. “Either you are helping him, or you are in his way,” he told me. On another occasion, I was at Slick’s home talking with him and his mother. Mr. Johnson paid a surprise visit, pounding Slick’s metal door gate. Slick knew it was Mr. Johnson by the way he knocked. As he heard the pounding he turned to his mom and said, “Ese cabron ya luego a cagar el palo. Me va querer llevar a la carcel.” [That asshole is here to harass me. He is
going to want to take me to jail.] Slick had been scared into following his probation program by Mr. Johnson. However, fear tactics generally did not work with the boys, since the effects of such tactics were short-lived. Sure, Slick was afraid of being arrested the first few times that Mr. Johnson yelled at him. But after a while, Slick began to resist this punitive treatment, sometimes even purposely breaking probation rules.

Philosopher Michel Foucault argues that the practices and architecture of constant surveillance, what he calls “panopticism,” makes individuals internalize their punishment and become self-disciplined, docile bodies. But in Oakland, young men were not being taught this self-discipline. Instead, the criminalization which existed in this context led the boys to manipulate the system, by agreeing to obey under coercion and, at the same time, resisting this coercion by breaking the rules which they had agreed to follow. In Foucault’s formulation, the disciplined subject sits at the periphery of the panopticon, with the disciplinarian power at the center, keeping a constant gaze on the subject. This soft surveillance is intended to reform the soul and produce an obedient subject. The ultimate goal of the panopticon, according to Foucault, is to create self-discipline in the prisoner. This process is scientific, neat, and controlled. The kind of discipline I found in the streets of Oakland differs drastically. The boys in Oakland were placed at the center of the panopticon. Punitive treatment surrounded them, beaming itself in high intensity, from multiple directions. Different from Foucault’s panopticon, the punishment I found in Oakland was aimed at controlling and containing the young men who were seen as risks, threats, and culprits. The boys in Oakland were not seen as souls that needed to be disciplined but as irreparable risks and threats that needed to be controlled and ultimately contained. The discipline imposed on the boys in Oakland did not do much to reform the soul. Instead it incapacitated them as social subjects; it stripped them of their dignity and humanity by systematically marking them and denying them the ability to function in school, in the labor market, and as law-abiding citizens. The boys did not learn to self-discipline; instead, they resisted, became incapacitated, or both. The boys knew they were being watched, and so they resisted; they created a spectacle of the system, exposing its flaws and contradictions, which in turn led to an altered sense of having recovered some dignity. In a secu-

ritized Oakland, Foucault’s panopticon had been flipped on its head: it had become inverted, placing the boys at the center of the complex, with forces of punitive social control surrounding them, delivering them constant ubiquitous punishment and criminalization, leading many to resist.

Although direct threat and coercion from probation officers worked well in changing youth behaviors, it was only a temporary fix. As soon as the boys were taken off the intensive probation program of electronic monitoring, weekly meetings, and home arrest, they began to commit acts which further criminalized them and which often led to a second arrest. They often expressed that being contained, monitored, and threatened for so long made them unable to control themselves when the direct authoritative treatment was removed. They had been trained to live under forceful supervision and sanctions from the state, and, now, there was no other mechanism by which to regulate their behavior or to teach them how to function as healthy young adults.

The boys had not been able to find positive, informal social control based on nurturing, guidance, and support; instead, they had encountered a system of control which disciplined them through punitive force. The system may have been fooled by the fact that the boys followed orders when they were under direct supervision. In Slick’s case, the immediate threat of violence and incarceration led to short-term desistance. However, once the threat was removed, Slick was left with no guidance to continue to avoid crime. This punitive approach did not work, because the boys did not develop navigational skills necessary for becoming productive citizens. The boys needed to learn how to desist on their own behalf, through internal controls, so that a punitive and highly expensive system of control would no longer be necessary. Criminologists John Hagan and Bill McCarthy explain the difference between debilitating social control and rehabilitative social control: “Normal shame and shaming produce social solidarity, whereas pathological shame and shaming produce alienation.” Normal shame is the process by which a community member is held accountable for his or her transgressions by way of shaming, so that he or she learns, makes amends, and becomes reintegrated into the group or society. Pathological shaming is the process by which the transgressor is permanently stigmatized, shamed into feeling like a permanent outsider, and perpetually humili-
ated for his or her negative behavior. This in turn leads the transgressor to become disintegrated from the group or society. When young people are integrated back into society and “taught a lesson” through self-reflection and the development of internal controls, they see themselves as part of the community and hence hold themselves accountable. When they are shamed through criminalization, young people resist and lose hope, often leading to more crime or criminalization.

Eighteen of the youths in this study had probation officers who placed the burden on them to immediately change their social worlds by avoiding their friends or to face further punishment and criminalization. They all felt that their probation officers had given them advice which did not work on the streets with their peers. And many of the youths did attempt to use the threat of probation or juvenile hall as an excuse to stay away from some of their old peers, in order to avoid being stigmatized for attempting to improve in school, avoid drugs and alcohol, and avoid committing violence. However, because many of their friends had already been to jail, they knew the storyline: probation officers exaggerated their threats, and youths who began to hang out again with old friends did not immediately go back to jail. Probation officers had minimal credibility with the boys. Peers who had been to jail would simply explain to their friends that the probation officer was exaggerating and that most of the time they would not get caught if they broke probation. “Come on, fool, just kick it with us,” I heard Slick’s friends tell him one day at the park, “That busta ain’t gonna arrest you. They just tell you that to scare you.” Because probation officers often tested the boys for marijuana use through a urine test, some of the boys became cocaine users after they were placed on probation. “Cocaine,” as Slick described, “stays in your system for two days. Dank [marijuana] stays in your system for thirty days.” This obsession with finding marijuana use in young people is indicative of how cracking down on less harmful offenses often led young people to “graduate” into more harmful yet less targeted offenses.

Police and probation officers often communicated with shopkeepers and community members about the “criminals” whom they should look out for. Ronny, a Black youth who moved back and forth between Oakland and Berkeley, began to realize a few weeks after being placed on probation that everyone in the community knew about his arrest and probation program. “I walked into the liquor store, and the Arab told me, ‘I know the police are after you, so if you do anything, I’m gonna call them.’” I asked him, “Did you steal anything? Had you ever stolen anything there?” “No. I just talk shit to him because he won’t front me a soda when I’m broke.”

Community Centers

Eight of the boys who had been previously arrested and four of the boys who had not been arrested were enrolled in community-center programs. Two were enrolled in a community center in Berkeley, because they had previously lived there. The rest of the youths were enrolled in two different organizations in Oakland. Each center claimed to serve between two hundred and seven hundred youths per year. Community workers estimated that over ten thousand young people lived in the neighborhoods which their centers serviced. The lack of community programs for young people, in all the neighborhoods where the boys lived, was observable. When the boys were asked, “Would you join a program that took you on field trips or where you could play sports or talk to a mentor or get a job?” all of them responded, “Yes.” However, only four of them were able to enroll in community programs without any strings attached. The other eight enrolled because they were mandated by probation. This was a common pattern: criminal justice institutions sometimes held a stake in youth programs. During the three years of this study, I noticed that funding for case workers from foundations and non-criminal-justice government agencies declined, and funding from criminal justice entities became available. At one point, a former gang member turned community worker, Joey, had been funded through various grants to provide mentoring for gang youths in the community. As the money for this position expired, the community center turned to the county probation department to continue to fund the position. The county agreed but wanted direct oversight of Joey. Over time, youths who had grown to trust Joey and respect him came to see him as a “snitch” for the probation department and the police. Eventually, Joey lost the boys’ respect, became ineffective in the community, and was laid off by the community center.
Although these organizations claimed to serve “at-risk” youths, very few of the boys in this study were accepted or invited to enroll in programs. Instead, the community centers focused on youths who they thought would respond to their programming. This made sense, because their funding was dependent on their “numbers.” Angelo, a youth-programs director at Communities Organizing Youth (COY), explained:

ANGelo: You see, I try to help the at-risk ones, you know, the ones that are on the street. But they [his boss] tell me, ‘If you help them, we won’t get funded,’ because, as you know, when you put time into the crazy youth, they take up a lot of time.

VR: So, are you able to give programming to any of the street youth?

ANGelo: The one, two programs we have for them come from probation. One is anger management, and the other is life skills.

VR: What do they do?

ANGelo: They learn about controlling their anger and about living a healthy lifestyle.

VR: Who runs the programs? Counselors? Community members?

ANGelo: POs [probation officers] mostly.

Although the community centers hired some charismatic individuals with transformational skills, people who in the past had helped to transform the lives of some of the toughest youths in the community, their hard work and youth-development approach was rarely institutionalized. Charismatic individuals were given a large caseload and were burdened with high expectations from many people in the community. This led many of them to burn out. Nene, another former gang member turned charismatic youth worker, explained, “Man! I like working with the youngsters, but this red-tape bullshit of having to feel like a snitch for probation is getting to me. . . . The other day I caught myself threatening one of the boys to call the police if they kept talking in my workshop.” Although many youth workers did not use this approach—to contact a police officer or to report an incident to a probation officer—many of the boys reported having this experience when the community center called probation or police for non-criminal activity.

In recent years, an influential program known as Cease-Fire has been implemented in communities across the country, including in Oakland. The Cease-Fire project calls for identifying hard-core community members who may potentially commit violence, calling them in for a meeting with law enforcement and community workers, threatening the potential transgressors that they will be watched and punished if they commit a crime, and offering programs to them if they choose to “go legit.” Although this study did not document Cease-Fire because it started after I left the field, a program such as this may pose the risk of entangling law enforcement with community workers even further. Dire consequences result from this process. Community centers sometimes seemed like criminal justice centers to some of the boys, places where programming was provided by law-enforcement officials, instead of youth-development workers. However, if police stick to their terrain to protect the community, and programs are created to help young people who have expressed an interest in change, then a program like Cease-Fire may prove promising. The key is to invest enough resources in social programs which are independent from, and set clear parameters between, themselves and criminal justice institutions. Otherwise, young people perceive the various institutions in the community as accomplices in a plot to criminalize them. The young men in this study compared encounters with police, probation officers, and prosecutors with interactions they had with school administrators and teachers who placed them in detention rooms; community centers that attempted to exorcise their criminality; and even parents, who felt ashamed or dishonored and relinquished their relationship with their own children altogether. It seemed, in the accounts of the boys, that various institutions were collaborating to form a system that degraded them on an everyday basis. As such, these young men’s understanding of their environment as a punitive one, where they were not given a second chance, led them to believe that they had no choice but to resist.

These institutions, though independently operated with their own practices, policies, and logics, intersected with one another to provide a consistent flow of criminalization. The consequences of this formation were often brutal. Young Ronny explained,
We are not trusted. Even if we try to change, it's us against the world. It's almost like they don't want us to change. They rather we stay crazy than to try to pick ourselves up. Why they gotta send us to the ghetto alternative high school? We don't deserve to go to the same school down the street? . . . And when we try to apply for a job, we just get looked at like we crazy. If we do get an interview, the first question is, "Have you been arrested before?" . . . We got little choice.

Ronny understood his actions as responses to this system of punishment, which restricted his ability to survive, work, play, and learn. As such, he developed coping skills that were often seen as deviant and criminal by the system. Sociologist Elijah Anderson reminds us that young men, in these kinds of situations, react by demonstrating mistrust of the system: "Highly alienated and embittered, they exude generalized contempt for the wider scheme of things, and for a system they are sure has nothing but contempt for them." Spider's experiences with police not protecting him and instead marking him as a gang member solidified his mistrust and contempt for the police. In addition, his experiences in a school where teachers warned him about his inevitable entry into the criminal justice system and where security guards reported students to police for minimal transgressions led Spider to believe that he was caught in the center of a web of punishment, which consistently and ubiquitously constrained him. This web of punishment, the youth control complex, added to the boys' blocked opportunities but also generated creative responses, which allowed the boys to feel dignified. Sometimes these responses even led to informal and formal political resistance.