



---

Review: The Travails of Urban Field Research

Reviewed Work(s): On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City by Alice Goffman; This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South by Zandria E. Robinson

Review by: William Julius Wilson

Source: *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (November 2014), pp. 824-828

Published by: American Sociological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43185674>

Accessed: 01-05-2017 23:05 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*American Sociological Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Contemporary Sociology*

## The Travails of Urban Field Research

WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON  
 Harvard University  
 bill\_wilson@harvard.edu

Alice Goffman's book, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, is one of those rare publications by a sociologist that creates an immediate splash both within and outside academia. The book focuses on the impact of pervasive policing and other aspects of the criminal justice system on individuals and families residing in the neighborhood of "6<sup>th</sup> Street," a pseudonym for a poor black inner-city area of Philadelphia, which consists of five residential blocks and a wide commercial avenue. And what has drawn so much attention to the book is Goffman's reporting of events based on what could only be described as total immersion in her fieldwork.

Goffman spent six years living and conducting research on 6<sup>th</sup> Street—a project she began as a University of Pennsylvania undergraduate student—establishing close connections with families and individuals, including several young black males who were involved in a number of serious criminal offenses. Indeed, she spent some time as a roommate of one of these men, Mike, a part-time crack dealer, who anointed himself as a "protective older brother" and introduced her to his male friends, several of whom are also featured in the book. Through participant observation Goffman became so immersed in the lives of these young men that she limited herself to only the type of media they enjoyed, such as hip-hop, R&B, and gangster movies, and even adopted their male attitudes, vernacular, habits and dress.

Given America's current prison boom, with more than a third of black male high school dropouts under the age of 40 behind bars, Goffman's book is timely. Based on her close interaction with young men who are in trouble with the law, she describes the constant police surveillance they confront, creating a climate of suspicion and fear pervading everyday life. However, one question that is not addressed in the book

*On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, by **Alice Goffman**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 277pp. \$25.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780226136714.

*This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*, by **Zandria F. Robinson**. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 224pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781469614229.

is whether the vigorous police activity on 6<sup>th</sup> Street is strongly related to the fact that young men like Mike and his friends are the more serious offenders and therefore draw intense police scrutiny. Indeed, Goffman reports: "Between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-seven, Mike spent about three and half years in jail or prison. Out of the 139 weeks that he was not incarcerated, he spent 87 weeks on probation or parole for five overlapping sentences. He spent 35 weeks with a warrant out for his arrest, and had a total of ten warrants issued on him. He also had at least fifty-one court appearances over this five-year period, forty-seven of which I attended" (pp. 17-18).

That said, *On the Run* provides some interesting on-the-ground details on the experiences of these young offenders with police officers and the overall criminal justice system, as well as how these experiences affect their relations with families, girl friends and other people in the 6<sup>th</sup> Street neighborhood. We learn that the young men who are being pursued by the police adopt unique strategies when confronted with the risk of confinement. One the one hand, because of their compromised legal status, the basic institutions of family, work, and friendships are transformed into a "net of entrapment." For example, they avoid their mothers' homes because, as the last known addresses,

they are the first places the police will look when pursuing them. They do not show up at hospitals when their children are born, or seek medical care when they are injured or badly beaten, or seek formal employment, or attend family gatherings, or call the police when they are harmed. "Once a man fears that he will be taken by the police," states Goffman, "it is precisely a stable and public daily routine of work and family life, with all the paper trail that it entails, that allows the police to locate him. It is precisely his trust in his nearest and dearest that will land him in police custody" (p. 53). On the other hand, these young men cultivate a strategy of unpredictability by remaining secretive and dipping and dodging. Thus, they come and go in unpredictable and irregular ways to ensure that those close to them will not inform on them. They remain elusive and untrusting. They sleep in different beds, and deceive those close to them about their plans and whereabouts.

We also learn that the young men use their fugitive status as an excuse for their personal failings and unmet obligations by pointing to the constraints imposed by their warrants. For example, since officers routinely come to young men's workplaces to arrest them, they have a convenient justification for their lack of formal employment.

Also, Goffman provides a more complex view of snitching in poor inner-city neighborhoods. She acknowledges that a general norm against snitching does in fact exist. However, she reveals the considerable stress experienced by the young men's relatives and partners who are pressured by the police to provide information about their whereabouts, especially their female partners. "As officers raid women's houses, threaten to arrest them or get them evicted, take their children away, they must decide between their own safety and the freedom of the men they hold dear," states Goffman. "Women's pledges to protect the men in their lives dissolve under sustained police pressure, and some find they become the unwilling accomplices of the authorities. This descent from trusted partner to snitch or abandoner causes considerable personal anguish as well as public humiliation" (p. 197). And contrary to reports on the norms against snitching in poor inner-city neighborhoods, many residents who call

the police on others in 6<sup>th</sup> Street are judged favorably. According to Goffman, "this action is expected of them, and understood as part of their character as upstanding, clean people" (p. 202).

Finally, we learn about an underground economy that has arisen to address the needs of those involved in what she calls the fugitive life, including entrepreneurs who sell their clean urine to men on parole. Except for her analytic insights on the way the young men use fugitive status as an excuse for their personal failings and unmet obligations, all of these details represent on-the-ground descriptive data. Good description is important in sociology, and Goffman's study provides some really rich and interesting descriptive data. However, *On the Run* is rather thin on analysis, and this is most apparent in the part of the book that reveals the cultural and social diversity on 6<sup>th</sup> Street.

Her discussion of cultural and social diversity was ignored in some of the earlier reviews of *On the Run*. Reviewers attacked her for reinforcing racial stereotypes by focusing on individuals who are involved in the worst criminal activity.<sup>1</sup> Yet they fail to acknowledge or sufficiently discuss the section of her book that focuses on the more successful families and individuals on 6<sup>th</sup> Street—those who are "making it" despite overwhelming odds against them—individuals and families whose behavior stands in sharp contrast to the young offenders and a few of their female partners and relatives featured in most of the book.

Indeed, Goffman reveals that while the police actively pursue some neighbors through the streets, other residents in the 6<sup>th</sup> Street neighborhood are living a successful life apart from prisons, court dates, and probation rules. They carefully navigate the treacherous domains created by their legally entangled neighbors, friends and relatives to limit the damage they cause and the risks they bring. Some of these residents regularly go to school or work and succeed in easily distancing themselves from the young men running from the police or being arrested and incarcerated; others manage a more concentrated and sometimes distressful

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Betts (2014).

avoidance of the troubles around them (for example, she describes how one family steered clear of the problems on 6<sup>th</sup> Street by remaining indoors, isolating themselves from activities in the area, including the avoidance of contact and interaction with neighborhood families, and enrolling their son in a charter school outside the neighborhood), and still others negotiate a complicated interweaving of the criminal and non-criminal worlds.

Goffman's discussion of the difference between young men who are on the run from those not involved in criminal activity is particularly revealing. In March of 2004, her roommate Mike was sentenced to one-to-three years in state prison. Since she had not yet formed independent relationships with his friends and neighbors, she had no reason to hang out on 6<sup>th</sup> Street in his absence. And as she tried to figure out how to return, she met another group of young men who lived in a neighborhood adjacent to 6<sup>th</sup> Street, about fifteen blocks away; and who consistently avoided young men faced with warrants or who sold drugs. In contrasting the behavior of these two groups of young men, Goffman states: "The question of why some young men wind up in prison and others do not is an age-old one, and I can't pretend to fully speak to it, let alone answer it" (p. 194).

My problem with this section of Goffman's book is that she alludes to agency when talking about the differences between these young men and the families she describes as successful on 6<sup>th</sup> Street, but does not really elaborate. This part of the book cries out for a deeper interrogation of how individual agency engages with a restricted range of social and structural constraints. It would have been important for her to make the reader comprehend that agency is expanded or inhibited by the circumstances people confront. These include interactions in families, social networks and institutions in distressed environments, including neighborhoods featuring racial constraints.

In other words, it would have been good if she had discussed the issue in a way that makes the reader fully appreciate the restricted range of choices that are available to residents in poor segregated inner-city

neighborhoods, because they live under constraints and face challenges that most people in the larger society do not experience, or cannot even imagine. There is indeed cultural heterogeneity in such neighborhoods, as her study clearly reveals—but the challenging theoretical argument is to explain the multiple-structural forces that make it highly likely that a smaller proportion of successful families and individuals, like the one she describes in the latter section of her book, will populate poor inner-city neighborhoods than in more privileged areas. And, it is unfortunate that Goffman uses the folk terms favored by her research subject—"clean" and "dirty," which refer to individuals' previous encounters with the criminal justice system—to distinguish these families and individuals because they distract from the important social and cultural contrasts she draws. These folk terms tend to prompt moralizing critiques of her book about the use of disparaging terms to describe certain inner-city residents, as opposed to the more important substantive and theoretical critiques.

The long appendix in *On the Run* is a captivating, and in many respects, disturbing read, disturbing especially for scholars who conduct participant observation research. In one part of the appendix, Goffman talks about how upset she was when a member of a rival group murdered her friend Chuck, Mike's close companion, in a revenge killing. During the period surrounding Chuck's death, Goffman described a scene in which she was in a car one night with Mike while he was searching for individuals from this rival group to avenge Chuck's killing. Mike spotted someone walking into a Chinese restaurant. He got out of the car and hid in the adjacent alleyway, with his gun tucked in his jeans, while Goffman waited in the car with the engine running. However, when the man exited the restaurant Mike thought it wasn't the person he thought it was, and he walked back to the car and they drove on. "I don't believe I got into the car with Mike because I wanted to learn first hand about violence or even because I wanted to prove myself loyal and brave," writes Goffman. "I got into the car because, like Mike and Reggie, I wanted Chuck's killer to die. Perhaps Chuck's death had broken something

inside me. I stopped seeing the man who shot him as a man, who like the men I knew, was jobless and trying to make it at the bottom of a shrinking drug trade. I didn't care whether this man had believed his life was threatened when he came upon Chuck outside the Chinese takeout store, or felt that he couldn't afford to back down. I simply wanted him to pay for what he'd done, for what he'd taken away from us" (p. 260).

Here is an excellent example of how Alice Goffman got caught up in the culture of violence that terrorizes the residents of poor inner-city neighborhoods. I am referring specifically to the sharing of outlooks and modes of behavior among some young people in racially segregated inner-city neighborhoods that often results in violence; outlooks and modes of behavior, which are generated and sustained through social interaction, and represent particular cultural traits that emanate from or are the products of racial exclusion.

And instead of using her own experiences interacting with these guys to help explain this cultural phenomenon and reveal how she too had become influenced by this culture, we simply get a description of the incident; followed by her honest admission: "At the time and certainly in retrospect, my desire for vengeance scared me, more than the safety, certainly more than any fears of my own" (p. 261).

It is almost unfair to include Zandria F. Robinson's *This Ain't Chicago* with Alice Goffman's *On the Run* as a tandem in this review essay. Whereas Goffman's well-written book is difficult to put down once you begin reading, *This Ain't Chicago* is not an easy book to read. The writing style is somewhat pretentious, replete with pedantic words and jargon-laden language that often does more to obscure than illuminate. That said, *This Ain't Chicago* raises important arguments about the need to include regional differences when talking about racial identity. Robinson correctly argues that sociologists have often been guilty of using a northern lens to conceptualize black identity, resulting in discussions and analyses that overlooked or fail to acknowledge the existence of a distinct southern black experience.

Robinson conducted five years of field research in Memphis, Tennessee starting in 2003. She constructed a network of respondents representing a diverse cross-section of black Americans in Memphis who had been born and raised in the South. This network included Memphis's hip-hop artists, people who regularly attended hip-hop and soul music events, as well as people she met in various daily venues, ranging from grocery stores, schools, post offices, schools, football games to cultural events such as festivals, art showings, and concerts. In total, she formally interviewed 106 respondents, with 32 serving as key respondents who were interviewed multiple times during the period of her research.

Even though her urban field research was conducted in Memphis, Robinson maintained that the city serves as a proxy for past and present conversations about the South. And to extend her discussion beyond Memphis, she turned to popular media, including film, music and television, to capture regional identity in the South as a whole.

Robinson organizes her analysis of southern black identity around the original concept "country cosmopolitanism," which is applied as a theoretical frame for explicating black southern identities today. In effect, she uses the concept to show how rural values and urban sensibilities are blended together when black southerners navigate the post-civil rights South; arguing that the country cosmopolitan worldview incorporates tropes of the rural South—like family, home, community, and food—but modifies them for use in the urban South and beyond.

Robinson contends that country cosmopolitanism provides the theoretical validation for black southerners' sense of cultural superiority not only to whites but to non-southern blacks as well. However, whereas on a micro-interactional level southern blacks use country cosmopolitanism to distinguish themselves in socially beneficial ways from others, on a structural level, "country cosmopolitanism reifies existing gender and class cleavages in the African American community, but does so with a smile and down-home ease that belies its broader consequences for black politics in the post-civil rights era" (pp. 21-23).

Robinson's introduction and theoretical elaboration of the concept "country cosmopolitanism," which can only be outlined here, represent the real strength of *This Ain't Chicago*. However, the book falls short in the empirical application of the construct. Robinson's strong assertion about how country cosmopolitanism explains southern black identity is not matched by clear empirical evidence from her field research. Moreover, although considerable space is devoted to the discussion and interpretation of popular culture, the discourse does not really illuminate the issue of regional identity. Indeed, I found the material on popular culture to be a distraction, because it is only vaguely used to inform the central theoretical concept of this study, "country cosmopolitanism."

Furthermore, because she does not have a comparative sample of northern interviewees with whom to contrast empirically the different concepts of race, gender, class and region, many of her arguments and conclusions about the distinctive southern racial identity seem strained and arbitrary. The one notable exception is the discussion of her ethnographic data in Chapter Three. In this chapter, "Not Stud'n 'em White Folks," Robinson interprets her interviews with the respondents by pointing out that their extensive first-hand and second-hand experiences with whites result in a feeling that they have them "figured out." Instead of worrying

about instances of white racism, her respondents accept "its inevitability and structure their interactions with whites accordingly. Sensitive to the mediated South that circulates in third-hand stories about run-ins with Mississippi state troopers, respondents 'know their racists.' They offered a distinctively contrarian perspective on race, race relations, and progress in the contemporary South" (p. 28). It is clear that this argument emerges directly from her interviews.

However, many of Robinson's assertions about the importance of regional variation in racial identity in other sections of the book are only indirectly or vaguely supported by her data. Nonetheless, her strong theoretical assertions about the significance of regional black identity, highlighted by the discussion of country cosmopolitanism, provide clear direction for further definitive research; and this, I maintain, represents a useful contribution to the literature on racial and ethnic relations.

#### Reference

- Betts, Dwayne. 2014. "The Stoop Isn't the Jungle." *Slate*, July 10, 2014. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/jurisprudence/2014/07/alice\\_goffman\\_s\\_on\\_the\\_run\\_she\\_is\\_wrong\\_about\\_black\\_urban\\_life.single.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2014/07/alice_goffman_s_on_the_run_she_is_wrong_about_black_urban_life.single.html)