

22 Review Essays

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Poverty Police

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Daily life for poor people in America has been transformed by historic growth of the criminal justice system. Sociologists studied the rise in prison populations and the effects of incarceration on life chances. Research showed that imprisonment became common particularly for black men with little schooling. Incarceration was closely associated with low incomes, poor health, and diminished family well-being (Travis et al. 2014 summarizes the research). The evidence suggested that mass incarceration was creating a second-class citizenship, mostly among poor people of color, reproducing poverty from one generation to the next.

As Forrest Stuart shows in his new book, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row*, incarceration is the tip of a vast iceberg. Around 600,000 people are sent to prison each year, but 10 million

Down, Out, and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row, by **Forrest Stuart**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. \$19.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226370811.

spend time in jail awaiting trial; and millions more are arrested for misdemeanors or given citations. Sitting at the base of this apparatus that watches over millions of poor people are the police. As the prison population has grown, police have come to interact in new ways, and more often, with the residents of low-income communities. "Revenue-driven policing," observed by the U.S. Justice Department in Ferguson, Missouri, represents one example. Stop-and-frisk in New York City represents another.

Stuart offers a fascinating and original study of a third variant in Los Angeles's Skid Row. Skid Row is a fifty-block area in the heart of the city and a way station for Angelenos who have met with catastrophe and find themselves without money, housing, or food. In 2006, the LAPD launched the Safer Cities Initiative that put 80 additional officers into the area. The police adopted a "zero tolerance" policy in which "officers made nine thousand arrests and issued twelve thousand citations in the initiative's first year alone" (p. 6)—all in the space of less than one square mile.

Whereas the Ferguson police were economically motivated and the NYPD were trying to seize guns, the goal in Los Angeles was to reform the attitudes and behavior of Skid Row residents to lift them out of poverty. The initiative was part of a coordinated effort by LAPD's Central Division and three mega-shelters that were newly built in the area. The Safer Cities Initiative used extensive police powers of detention, arrest, and incarceration to channel a largely poor, black population—often struggling with addiction, mental illness, and homelessness—into shelters and rehabilitative programs.

Drawing on five years of field work, Stuart tells the story of how a disadvantaged, closely policed community operates. The three-part empirical analysis—observing police, citizens, and political activists—is beautifully designed. Part of the innovation is to "incorporate the voices" of the line officers "charged with carrying out [policy] on a daily basis" (p. 257). But the method also helps make a theoretical point. Reminiscent of Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* (2016), which studied poor renters and their landlords, Stuart came to know both the police who patrolled the streets and the denizens they arrested. With this design, policing is not just what police do but a relationship between citizens and law enforcement in which citizens also have agency. By conducting fieldwork with a local political organization, Stuart further examined how the political agency of community residents can transform their relationship with the authorities.

The book is built around two core concepts: therapeutic policing and cop wisdom. Therapeutic policing emerged in the

1990s in tandem with a new style of anti-poverty policy that aimed to change attitudes and behaviors to instill a work ethic and a sense of personal responsibility that could defeat addiction, idleness, and poverty.

Where do the police come in? The three mega-shelters in Skid Row worked with the LAPD and the L.A. city attorney on a variety of programs that offered treatment as an alternative to jail time and widened police powers to intervene against drug dealers and disorder. In the twenty-first-century era of poverty governance, the LAPD worked to arrest their way out of the public health crises of drug addiction and homelessness.

Police powers of arrest and detention may seem poorly suited to building sobriety and upward mobility, but Stuart finds that line officers were deeply committed to these goals. Police used arrests and citations to move people into the mega-shelters and compel enrollment in rehabilitative programs. As one lieutenant said, "Our job is to help them make the *right* choice. If they don't want to make the *right* choices to get better, to move up and out of here, then we have to step in" (p. 108). Arrests and citations were not so much punishment for refusing treatment, but incentives to seek help. "When criminal justice contact is reframed as therapeutic intervention," Stuart writes, "coercive and sometimes violent measures become deployed as a perverse form of care" (p. 258).

Therapeutic policing changed the social dynamics of Skid Row. One group that Stuart followed met regularly in a park to lift weights and to encourage each other to stay out of trouble. In the intensely policed environment of downtown Los Angeles, obeying the law was not enough to avoid repeated arrests and citations. The weight lifters tried to avoid contact with police using their practical knowledge of police behavior—cop wisdom.

Acting on cop wisdom partly involved projecting sobriety, good health, and walking briskly on unpatrolled routes. While urban dwellers might stay away from high-crime blocks and intersections, the copwise residents of Skid Row moved through their community to dodge the officers who watched the streets from police cruisers and horseback.

To explain public safety in urban areas, sociologists have appealed not to the power of intensive policing but to all the informal sources of monitoring and social control provided by neighborhood residents. For example, Mitchell Duneier (2000) explored how sidewalk vendors in New York's Greenwich Village contributed to order and safety on city streets.

Stuart also examined street vendors' influence on sidewalk crime and disorder. Under conditions of intensive policing, however, the vendors' eyes on the street offered little to the social solidarity of the wider community. Police avoidance governed the routines and social interactions of those who sold bootleg DVD's, written matter, and loose cigarettes. The vendors did drive drug dealers off the block, but they also chased away the homeless who sat down to rest, the elderly who walked too slowly, and white people suspected of buying drugs. All these figures, many harmless and law-abiding, might draw police attention and so attracted the vendors' hostility. Thus, intensive policing came to deform the informal regulation of street life.

Besides the erosion of community cohesion, therapeutic policing also produced countless arrests that resulted in "insurmountable fines; disqualifications from work, housing, and services; and the constant fear that the next run-in with police may end behind bars" (p. 258). The criminal justice entanglements of Skid Row residents created another barrier to mobility out of poverty.

For the weight lifters and street vendors of Skid Row, cop wisdom helped with the defensive maneuvers of police avoidance. For the L.A. Community Action Network (LACAN), being copwise lent an edge to grassroots politics that resisted the new police initiative. As he had with the police and Skid Row residents, Stuart became embedded with LACAN, joining in their work to videotape interactions between police and citizens.

To fully document an arrest, the LACAN videographers had to anticipate where police would be and what they would be doing. They knew the routines and sometimes adopted the tactics of their film subjects, quickly turning innocuous conversations into cross-examinations that touched on the

constitutional protections against illegal stops and searches. LACAN's video evidence contributed to successful lawsuits that limited police power to search and confiscate property. The LAPD later invested in body cameras in response to LACAN's pressure for police accountability.

Stuart's rich and thoughtful book speaks to current debates about the future of criminal justice in America. The gist of his therapeutic policing can be seen in a host of other reforms—the swift and certain sanctions used by some probation agencies, problem-solving courts for drug offenses, veterans, and the homeless, and so-called police deflection efforts for drug overdose and mental illness.

These initiatives share three characteristics. First, they represent efforts by criminal justice agencies to manage combustible conditions of poverty that often combine with physical and mental disorder. In this scenario, treatment is obtained through a police stop, an arrest, a guilty plea, or a probation order. Second, the focus on coerced treatment tends to neglect conditions of material hardship—unemployment, poverty, homelessness, hunger—that turn physical and mental disorders into social problems. Overcoming disadvantage is viewed as a behavioral achievement to be encouraged by the threat of sanctions. Third, and this is the great paradox of coerced treatment, the regime demands extraordinary acts of agency precisely from those whose will and intentions are clouded by disability, addiction, and mental illness. The ethics are backwards: Punishment is threatened against those who are suffering.

These elements come together in a new form of hard-edged poverty governance. It is something different from pure punishment that eschews rehabilitation in favor of incarceration. "Punitiveness and rehabilitation are, in fact, far from antithetical," Stuart writes. "In some contexts, they are mutually dependent" (p. 254).

David Garland (2001) termed the old model of rehabilitative criminal justice "penal welfarism" because penal institutions shared in the project for social citizenship mounted by the welfare state. Stuart's account of Skid Row shows that the correctional impulse lives on; but in the era of mass incarceration, the liberty of poor

people is trivialized and the use of force is naturalized.

Behind the opposition between therapeutic policing and cop wisdom lies an anarchist's intuition: States are powerful but lumbering, and people are beleaguered but nimble. (Throughout the book, James Scott whispers behind the scenes about weapons of the weak and seeing like a cop.) Therapeutic policing intended to crack down on people and behaviors that undermined the self-discipline and sobriety that paved the way out of Skid Row. But instead, the police rooted out positive forms of social organization like the weight lifters. They created a flurry of police-avoidance activities, some of which were outright illegal. In their zeal for rehabilitation, police violated civil liberties, alienating the citizens they hoped to reform.

Skid Row residents adapted to this reality, learning the routines and operations of law enforcement. The weight lifters and street vendors changed their daily rounds, clothing, and posture to reduce the risk of police contact. For LACAN, being copwise enabled political activity that challenged and reformed police practice, despite the great imbalance in power and resources.

The main political implication of Stuart's book, I think, is that reducing the repressive impact of the police depends on exposing them to democratic pressure, opening their routines and operations to community influence. Perhaps this happens through grassroots pressure, like the activism of LACAN. Perhaps it can happen in a more routinized way. Civilian oversight boards, community meetings, and relationships with community leaders have historically been the means by which police departments have been opened to community voices.

There is a paternalism to therapeutic policing, however, that rejects the competence of very disadvantaged residents. The familiar institutional channels of community oversight may feel illegitimate to the authorities who doubt the capacity and moral standing of the residents they police. A context like this may present few alternatives to LACAN's guerilla activism.

I learned a lot from Stuart's book, but its lumbering state contrasted to a nimble citizenry left two larger questions unanswered for me. The difficult policy question raised

by the book asks, what should public assistance look like in very disadvantaged communities? Infusing social policy with police power made sense for a politics that was morally suspicious of poor people, but it failed to do much to reduce poverty.

The book extols the charitable efforts of the Catholic Worker movement and hints that this may be an alternative. Following the Catholic Worker model, assistance should attend to conditions of material hardship, providing meals, housing, and health care. Without the threat of arrest, the provision of material support is a non-blaming intervention that offers help to those who want it. The goal is to alleviate hardship, not improve the conduct and attitudes of the poor. By suspending the criminal justice reflex to assign blame, public assistance becomes more conditional on need than on good behavior. This goes some way to reversing the criminalization of poverty.

As challenging as that would be, even improvements in public assistance seem an incomplete proposal. In Stuart's account, therapeutic policing didn't just fail at the individual level. The policing on Skid Row also created a collective life that was mutually suspicious and besieged. Can we think of social policy as doing something more than individual uplift? If intensive policing wore away at community life, what would foster solidarity in which individual residents are, at least to some degree, invested in the welfare of their neighbors? Community well-being may well be necessary for individual well-being in poor neighborhoods that struggle with crime. Social policy should be designed to improve community well-being too.

The second large question that I think Stuart leaves open concerns violence and other serious crime. It is easy to make the case for police overreach when a community suffers mostly from poverty, not violence. Stuart's rendering of Skid Row sometimes feels like this. People arrive at Skid Row in the wake of a personal tragedy looking for a bed or a hot meal. There is violence, but it's mostly disputes among residents who are tired, hungry, or mentally disturbed.

This account contrasts with the violence of extreme poverty described by anthropologists like Philippe Bourgois or Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992). For them, poverty

itself can be tantamount to violence, ravaging the mind and the body. Poverty also provides the context for the brutal interactions between individuals under extreme pressure or exploiting vast power differentials. Young men exchange gunfire. Women and girls are raped and beaten by their boyfriends and families. Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg (2009), for example, liken the homeless encampment of heroin users they studied to an “ethical gray zone” in which violence was ubiquitous.

Violence creates special challenges for communities and criminal justice agencies. It tears at the social bonds that hold communities together. Violence is a social problem ready-made for a criminal justice solution, satisfying our appetite for moral judgment and punishment. Violence looms in the background as a rival explanation that must be explored. To what degree does violence form part of the context in which Central Division embarks on an aggressive program of policing? The book says little about the problem of violence one way or the other; but for those who are interested in reform, the social problem of violence in disadvantaged communities poses one of the biggest obstacles to a non-punitive and socially integrative criminal justice.

Poor communities and attempts to manage them now stand at a crossroads. Wars on drugs and crime are being discredited. Incarceration rates are falling. Community

advocates have forced a national conversation about race and policing. At the same time, public assistance for the poor has become more stingy and conditional on employment. The poorest who have dropped out of the labor market are, for the most part, on their own. *Down, Out, and Under Arrest* provides a penetrating snapshot of this juncture and sees hope in community activism. But while activists might resist intrusive policing, solutions to the problems of neighborhood poverty, homelessness, and violence remain elusive in communities like Skid Row.

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How to Think like an Economic Sociologist

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According to Google Scholar, over his long and distinguished career Mark Granovetter has written a remarkable number of “blockbuster” publications, with two very influential articles at the top of the list: “The Strength of Weak Ties” (Granovetter 1973) and “Economic Action and Social Structure” (Granovetter 1985). These have generated more than 43,000 (!) and 34,000 (!) citations, respectively. Even without Google Scholar’s “big data,” however, almost all sociologists

Society and Economy: Framework and Principles, by **Mark Granovetter**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 243 pp. \$39.95 cloth. ISBN: 0674975217.

would recognize Granovetter’s seminal contributions to network analysis and economic sociology, among other topics. With