

## Book Review

### SOCIAL LIVES OF BLACK AND LATINO BOYS

**Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys.** By Victor M. Rios. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011. 237 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-8147-7638-4). \$20.00 (paperback).

The societal consequences of the War on Drugs may already be clear to the majority who read this review: mass incarceration, escalating correctional and other criminal justice costs, neighborhood deterioration, and the erosion of basic American civil liberties. In contrast with this societal perspective, Victor Rios has provided a powerful microscopic perspective from shadowing the lives of 40 African American and Latino adolescents for three years (2002 to 2005) in Oakland, California. Participants were recruited through snowball techniques and the inclusion criteria required previous identification as an at-risk delinquent. Thirty had been arrested but all lived in high-crime neighborhoods and had siblings or friends who had been involved with crime. Nineteen reported gang membership. In addition to the 40 participants he shadowed, Rios interviewed an additional 78 youths of which two-thirds reported gang membership. Their stories and Rios's conclusions contain much that can inform social workers, law enforcement and probation officers, school personnel, and others concerned about addressing the social problems anchored in poor, urban communities.

Rios conducted this study as a 25-year-old doctoral student at Berkeley but has personal roots in a poor, urban neighborhood in Oakland. By his own reckoning, only two of the 68 homies in his adolescent gang had graduated from high school, and he alone had attended college. There is little doubt Rios's personal experiences significantly influenced this study. He was quickly accepted by the adolescents he recruited and received the respect-filled label O. G. for "original gangster."

Rios assumed his participants were "normal everyday people persisting in risky environments, striving for dignity, and organizing their social worlds despite a dearth of resources" (p. 14). Accordingly, the research questions Rios asks are framed within his understanding that the most significant social forces in the lives of these young men stemmed from power and control dynamics that treated them as criminals. Readers will not find here a catalog of the personal deficiencies of youth gangs or recommendations that at-risk

youth behave in a manner more socially acceptable. The antagonists in the lives of these young men are the forces of criminalization.

There are only seven chapters, but Rios has organized them into two sections that address the system of control he observes and how this system impacts the young men in his study. In chapter 1, Rios provides the demographic information on his participants, an overview of his research methodology, and a brief summary of the rest of the book.

The second chapter is a description and history of Oakland informed by the last thirty years of mass incarceration, the escalation of collateral consequences associated with involvement in the criminal justice system, and the development of what Rios calls the *youth control complex*. The youth control complex combines the material criminalization resulting from “police harassment, exclusion from businesses and public recreation spaces, and the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies that lead to detention rooms, school suspensions, and incarceration” (p. 40) and the more symbolic criminalization associated with surveillance and racial profiling. At the heart of the youth control complex is punitive social control—the presumption of criminality and the preemptive imposition of sanctions.

Tyrell and Jose are the foci of chapter 3. In Tyrell’s story we learn how easily the presumption of criminality can lead to participating in criminal activity. In Jose’s, the spatial disparities between overpolicing and underpolicing are highlighted. Although only a few of the young men in Jose’s apartment complex were dangerous delinquents, the abrogation of law enforcement responsibilities within the complex resulted in frequent crime therein; rigorous law enforcement just outside of the complex criminalized all the young men living there. Spatial criminalization intensifies in the schools as every minor childhood indiscretion is criminalized. Intense surveillance in school and other public areas leads to arrest records for minor violations that lead to inclusion in the statewide gang database, assignment to probation supervision, and the loss of civil liberties. Distrust of law enforcement, the protective association with gangs, and an anti-snitch culture result among the young men so criminalized. Chapter 4 concludes Rios’s description of the youth control complex shows the interconnectedness between police, schools, probation, and even parenting.

Rios turns to the consequences of the youth control complex in the second section of the book; however, I found this section to be best understood as identification of the inevitable conflicts that arise in the lives of poor youth subjected to unremitting and punitive social control. Ronny cannot find a legitimate job even after Rios’s coaching because the interpersonal skills necessary to survival on the street communicate disinterest (chapter 5). When Mike steals a bag of chips worth only a quarter, it is not a criminal act but rather an assertion of his right to dignity. Darius’ ability to “act dumb” (i.e., switch between defiance and compliance at school and on the street) may reveal some of the absurdity of the youth control complex. However, each of these boys finds these acts of defiance or resistance lead to ever deeper

involvement in the youth control complex. Rios points to these acts as an incipient social and political movement for reform, but there is scant evidence their resilience and resistance is up to the challenge of withstanding incarceration in early adulthood.

Chapter 6 provides an in-depth look at the complexities of proving one's manhood in the criminalizing environment in which these boys live. The subservient passivity preferred by the youth control complex is juxtaposed against the hyper-masculinity required to survive on the streets. Most intriguing is the variety of mixed signals the youth receive from law enforcement officers who exhibit their own form of hypermasculinity while disdaining weakness.

Some of the youth Rios shadowed were not identified as delinquents at the beginning of his study. Chapter 7 relates the skills and challenges these boys faced living in the same neighborhoods and attending the same schools. Stigmatized by the youth control complex and distrusted by their delinquent peers, "punitive social control provided . . . perpetually infertile conditions, robbing [the non-delinquent youth] of the opportunity to sprout" (p. 156).

In his short conclusion, Rios condemns the social incapacitation wrought by the youth control complex and argues for the development of a youth support complex. An appendix provides additional detail on Rios's methodology and interview protocols. The book ends with an extensive collection of footnotes and a detailed index.

Ethnographies are most powerful when they open an unknown world for the reader's understanding, and there is much in Rios's work that can be applauded in this regard. I do believe Rios was a bit too quick to jump from narratives about the youth to sociological commentary. As I re-read the book for this review, I found myself skimming over the commentary in search for more stories. I also felt somewhat disappointed by Rios's suggestions for a youth support complex. A fundamental attitudinal shift away from punitive social control to youth empowerment initiatives may be required, but the means to achieve such a shift eludes his discussion.

I recommend this book for anyone working with delinquent youth. A better and clearer understanding of their world and their perspective seems to be a prerequisite for anyone hoping to make a positive effect on these adolescent lives.

*Peter A. Kindle*  
*The University of South Dakota*  
*Vermillion, South Dakota, USA*