

Lessons of the Street Code

Policy Implications for Reducing Violent Victimization Among Disadvantaged Citizens

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Elijah Anderson argued that adoption of the street code should reduce victimization risk for individuals who have to navigate disadvantaged, high-crime neighborhoods. In a recent article, Stewart, Schreck, and Simons (2006) examined whether adopting the street code decreased violent victimization, as Anderson suggested. Stewart et al. found no support for the idea that adopting the street code reduces victimization. Instead, they found that individuals who adopt the street code have higher levels of victimization. In addition, the results highlighted that the street code is related to both violent offending and violent victimization. In this article, the authors focus on the policy implications of Anderson's "code of the street" thesis, violent victimization, and offending. They argue that improving police–citizen interactions may be a starting point for restoring legitimacy in the police and criminal justice system, which may in turn reduce violence in street code–dominated areas.

Keywords: *street code; violence; race; crime prevention policy*

More than a decade ago, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1995) characterized crime control policy as being unguided by theory. Rather, they asserted that the philosophy that lay behind favored policies reflected the parochial aims of "administrative criminology," where the solutions to crime resided within the criminal justice system. Should the crime problem be perceived by anyone as too high, the policy-maker's invariable solution is to demand more resources for law enforcement (including additional personnel, firepower, and hi-tech gadgetry), fewer restrictions on troublesome civil liberties so the authorities can "do their jobs," and a toughening

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of criminal sanctions. Unfortunately, as violent crime begins to move upward after years of decline, there is no evidence that officials have learned anything new. We are already beginning to hear more demands for tax monies to support the usual crime control policies that claim to protect society from criminal elements (Rosenfeld, 2007; Tonry, 2007).

The response of administrative criminology toward stricter enforcement, reflecting as it does the interests of political leaders and practitioners, nevertheless proves problematic for some segments of society (Rose & Clear, 1998). The consequences of these initiatives are indeed often dire, particularly in the most disadvantaged stretches of American inner cities where violence is endemic (Wilson, 1987) and African Americans are disproportionately exposed to violence as offenders and victims in socially isolated and disadvantaged neighborhoods (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hawkins, Laub, Lauritsen, & Cothorn, 2000; Lauritsen, 2003; Moore & Tonry, 1998; Reiss & Roth, 1993). Consequently, a significant portion of the U.S. prison population consists of African American males from the inner city (Pettit & Western, 2004). Concern about the high rates of violence and incarceration among African Americans has made identification of contributing factors a research priority (Anderson, 1999; Reiss & Roth, 1993).

In the current article, we focus on a crime control perspective that is shaped by theory and research on violence in disadvantaged areas and that provides us with ideas for curbing violence. Furthermore, we examine the context of areas where few economic and social opportunities for advancement exist. In particular, we look at the persistent disadvantage, racial segregation, and structural inequality that African Americans in these areas endure, which leads to what Elijah Anderson (1999) calls the "code of the street." We believe that policymakers who are serious about reducing violence in the inner city must consider how neighborhood structural problems fuel violence. In the sections that follow, we discuss the meaning of the code of the street, and how police practices facilitate the development of the street code, and how police-citizen interactions can improve order in areas where the street code is solidly entrenched as a way of reducing violence.

The Special Problem of the Code of the Street

Subculture-of-violence theories are not new in the fields of criminology and sociology (Cohen, 1955; Curtis, 1975; Magura, 1975; Miller, 1958; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). In fact, such theories have been extensively studied by scores of researchers (Agnew, 1994; Austin, 1980; Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Bernard, 1990; Cao, Adams, & Jensen, 1997; Erlanger, 1974; Felson, Liska, South, & McNulty 1994; Heimer, 1997; Luckenbill & Doyle, 1989; Markowitz & Felson, 1998; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Among this grouping is Elijah Anderson (1999), who provides the most detailed accounting of the complexities that underlie the code of the street for many African

Americans. In Anderson's book, *Code of the Street*, he presents a complex illustration of the interplay in which structural inequalities give rise to cultural adaptations. His basic argument is that particular areas of one's life are governed by sets of norms and expectations that are often not in line with the legal system. This does not mean that people mindlessly act out in a violent manner simply because local norms foster violence. Rather, the conditions on the street might force residents into a position where they have to choose between violence and suffering repeated victimization. In the view of residents from disadvantaged areas, the legal system, which had a monopoly on legitimate violence, has effectively failed, and it behooves residents to maintain order as best they can—by unilaterally assuming control of violence.

Anderson further explains that at the heart of the code of the street is "a desperate search for respect" (p. 9). Residents of disadvantaged, racially, and socially isolated neighborhoods do not trust the police to provide security; they feel the need to result to a kind of "people's law" based on "street justice" (p. 10). The code of the street is thus in large measure an adaptation to "a lost sense of security of the local inner-city neighborhood and, by extension, a profound lack of faith in the police and judicial system" (p. 323). In these disadvantaged neighborhoods, residents must cultivate and maintain respect or they become vulnerable to victimization, especially physical attack. Accordingly, people develop a heightened sensitivity to signs of disrespect and feel compelled to display a predisposition to violence. The code of the street thus increases the likelihood that violence will become commonplace in social interactions.

How does a community get to the point where violence is the most viable option for self-preservation? The simple answer is continual structural neglect and inequality of an area and its residents. According to Anderson (1999), the code of the street emerges in predominantly African American inner city areas where high rates of poverty, joblessness, violence, racial discrimination, alienation, mistrust of police, and hopelessness are characteristic (Bruce, Roscigno, & McCall, 1998; Miller, 1958; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Wilkinson, 2003; Wilson, 1987). In addition, within these areas, civic institutions have either failed or are ineffective such that they have lost legitimacy in the eyes of residents. For example, the police are the most visible social institution in distressed communities. However, it does not follow that the police contribute meaningfully—at least in a benign sense—to order within the neighborhood. Their purpose is primarily repressive, their responses are ineffectual and arbitrary, and residents are mistrustful (Jacobs & Wright, 2006). Moreover, in areas where there is confidence in institutions, disputes are nonviolently resolved. There are courts available, or neighbors can settle their differences informally (Ellickson, 1991). But within the primarily minority inner city, these institutions and alternatives have catastrophically failed or are grossly unrealistic given the circumstances. Disadvantaged citizens tend to have less access to the court system (e.g., Black, 1976). Informal peaceful means of control fail as well, given the isolated and weakened nature of

neighborhood social networks in socially disorganized areas (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Lacking any legitimate means of recourse, residents have few means short of violence with which to compel order. Anderson and others have noted that violence characterizes disadvantaged neighborhoods (e.g., Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994); and violence is thought to be one of the most important resources for gaining status, respect, and street credibility among those who subscribe to the street culture (Wilkinson, 2003).

What, then, is the code of the street? According to Anderson (1999), the code of the street is an informal system governing the use of violence, especially among young African American males. The code of the street emphasizes that one must maintain the respect of others through a violent and tough identity, and a willingness to exact retribution in the event of disrespect, or else risk being “rolled on” or physically assaulted (p. 73). As Anderson notes, “An important part of the code is not to allow others to chump you, to let them know that you are ‘about serious business’ and not to be trifled with” (p. 130). Implicit in Anderson’s work is the notion that responsibility for order and safety has essentially devolved on the individual. Excessive and violent retribution is the consequence of victimization or disrespect. Safety comes from having a “reputation” for using violence. The toughness and aggressiveness, as prescribed by the street culture, should communicate to others that one is dangerous and best left alone. In addition, displaying a violent demeanor not only commands respect but also serves to discourage others from “testing” or “challenging” those exhibiting the street code style. Anderson (p. 92) points out that “for those who are invested in the code, the clear object of their demeanor is to discourage strangers from even thinking about testing their manhood.” And if the street code demeanor is properly displayed, it should “check others who would violate one’s person, and it also helps build a reputation that works to prevent future challenges” (p. 92). Thus, on the street, the message must be that you are not a pushover and there are penalties for disrespect (p. 130). According to Anderson, the desire to protect oneself from victimization is one of the primary reasons for the emergence of the street code, which leads to “rough justice” in the streets if one is disrespected or experiences a perceived injustice (Baron, Kennedy, & Forde, 2001).

Alternatively, by not responding to victimization, a person becomes a “chump.” Chumps also try to rely on “legitimate” authorities to solve their problems. They are frequently objects of contempt, ridicule, and victimization. According to Anderson’s (1999) description, on the streets an individual who is seen as a chump or not street-wise “gets little or no respect, and those who resemble him are the ones who most often get picked on, tried or tested, and become victims of robbery and gratuitous violence” (p. 131). One earns respect by personally paying back others. Interestingly, such views have been recorded regarding medieval times as well, when governing institutions were primitive and ineffective. William Manchester (1993) in his colorful description of the mentality of the early middle ages wrote that the medieval person

did not turn the other cheek because an offender would bloody it too (for a more scholarly treatment of medieval dispute resolution and “blood feuds,” see Berman, 1983). The code of the streets, in short, has historical precedent.

Accordingly, adoption of street code behavior inherently leads to some form of violence or victimization. Baron et al. (2001) found that street culture behaviors (e.g., toughness, aggression, and retribution) were negatively related to victimization. The authors speculated that adherence to the street code may serve a protective function against victimization. In another study, Jacobs (2004) interviewed 33 street offenders who followed the street code. He found that these hard-core individuals used retaliation or the threat of retaliation to reduce their risk of victimization and to earn, maintain, or enhance respect. As such, those individuals following the street code must be ready to use violence for protection and let others on the street know that there are consequences for transgressions (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). To let transgressions go unchallenged, even small ones, demonstrates that one is soft and weak; therefore, all transgression must be avenged (Anderson, 1999; Courtwright, 1996; Horowitz, 1983; Jacobs, 2004; Rich & Grey, 2005). Similarly, Kubrin and Weitzer (2003) studied homicide victimization in disadvantaged St. Louis neighborhoods and observed that a disproportionate number of homicides were retaliatory, based in part on street code values. Furthermore, they found that disputes and disrespect had to be settled violently as a way to achieve status and protect against future transgressions because individuals involved in the homicides deemed local law enforcement as unresponsive.

Although the results of the above studies are consistent with Anderson’s arguments, we found contradictory evidence of the street code or victimization link. In 2006, Stewart, Schreck, and Simons examined whether the norms of the street code subculture protected individuals from violent victimization. A primary interest of this study was determining if those who followed the street code were indeed safer from being targeted for victimization. The results showed that following the street code worsened victimization risk even after controlling for actual offending behavior and risky settings (e.g., neighborhood danger and deviant peers). This study, along with the aforementioned research, highlights the notion that street code norms are related to violence, either through victimization or perpetration of violence (also see Brunson & Stewart, 2006; Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991).

The Street Code and Victimization Prevention Policy

An understanding of the street code offers valuable lessons for the prevention of victimization. In the following paragraphs, we highlight some of the areas where this understanding could inform victimization prevention policy, such as improving police-citizen interactions and providing meaningful and effective opportunities for residents in a dispute to peacefully settle their differences.

The problem of the street code is that individuals feel obliged to take violence into their own hands to resolve grievances, rather than rely on formal or informal peaceful means of dispute resolution. The origin of the problem, according to theory and research, is not so much the individual's preference but rather the context (Anderson, 1999; Kane, 2005; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2000; Weitzer, 1999). The specific structural conditions in neighborhoods, and the presence of local institutions lacking effectiveness and legitimacy, foster the street code. Individuals, whether through their own choice or the policy makers' design, might choose on their own to settle disputes peacefully, but the external reality of the neighborhood will frequently punish such decisions. Peaceful dispute resolution and trust in the authorities—at least as a matter of individual choice—is not often seen as realistic given the circumstances. To expect otherwise would be effectively to demand that residents act against what they see as their own interests. The implication, then, is that the conditions making the street code the only feasible source of order must change.

The entrenched structural problems described earlier create the natural conditions that allow the street code to flourish. Thus, the only permanent solution is to create environments where peaceful dispute resolution might occur. Or put another way, government must invest in the revitalization of the infrastructure and institutions within the disorganized neighborhood, politically empower its residents, and alleviate poverty. Less intensive (and perhaps more realistic) alternatives, which we will focus on here, might prove successful as well; however, one must be mindful that these expedients represent fundamentally artificial conditions for the peaceful resolution of conflicts that—should a city withdraw support—would not be self-perpetuating. When these conditions are removed and institutions begin to fail, the behavior of residents would naturally revert to the default rules of conduct appropriate to the external situation: the street code.

With this caveat in mind, one approach for mitigating the street code and reducing victimization is to promote the broad legitimacy of legal institutions. Because many residents of structurally disadvantaged communities feel estranged from formal institutions, they may lack much social and/or political capital to engage law enforcement to address various problems within their neighborhood. In addition, residents often complain of dissatisfaction with the police, inadequate police protection, and police abuse, with the consequence being strained relationships between residents and legal authorities (Anderson, 1999; Klinger, 1997; Smith, 1986; Walker et al., 2000). Repressive law enforcement tactics reinforce the street code and further destroy the legitimacy of legal authorities. If the public perceives that procedural injustice is widespread, they are less likely to view the law and agents of the criminal justice system as fair and moral (Tyler, 2006). This is especially pronounced for individuals, in particular African Americans, who live in structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods where police are viewed as untrustworthy and uncaring (Anderson, 1999; Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Miller, 2006a, 2006b).

To combat skepticism about the police, and build trust, it is necessary to improve police-citizen interactions and form *meaningful* partnerships between citizens and the police. Although there have been mixed results as to whether community policing is effective at improving police-citizen relations (Piquero, Greene, Fyfe, Kane, & Collins, 2000; Reisig & Parks, 2004; Skogan & Frydl, 2007), there is still some possible benefit for community policing to improve these strained relationships depending on how it is implemented (Stoutland, 2001). The goal of community policing initiatives vary, and include reducing crime or fear of crime, enforcing the laws fairly and competently, and providing courteous, responsive service to citizens (Stoutland, 2001). Police departments, and the larger criminal justice system, should work with community residents, churches, and schools to improve relationships with citizens in a neighborhood. Reisig and Parks (2004, p. 163) argue that community policing methods should incorporate mechanisms that allow for citizen input on police actions in their neighborhood, thereby possibly improving strained police-citizen relations. When residents are part of the community policing process, they may have the opportunity to have their own and their group's concerns addressed by law enforcement officials. Weitzer and Tuch (2004) note that "While most blacks and Hispanics desire more law enforcement and crime control, they are simultaneously interested in ensuring that police minimize abuses . . . of minority citizens, who are disproportionately the recipients of mistreatment" (p. 321). Furthermore, improving police-citizen relationships could improve trust and legitimacy among residents. Researchers have observed that when citizens believe they have been treated fairly and with respect, they tend to grant more legitimacy to the police and are more likely to comply with the police (Mastrofski, Snipes, & Supina, 1996; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Wakslak, 2004). We believe that strengthening police and community relationships in disadvantaged areas where the street code is most pronounced might reduce an individual's risk of violence as either an offender or a victim.

The recent trend in the criminal justice system toward mediation techniques, as with restorative justice, might yield greater legitimacy for the peaceful resolution of disputes (for more, see Dignan, 2005). A major goal of restorative justice is to conciliate victims and offenders, and the process is highly informal compared to that of a criminal court. There are no attorneys, and neither are the police involved. During the mediation process, both the victims and the offenders work together to reach a compromise that both can live with. Research indicates that participants in such programs, when they are implemented properly, tend to be more satisfied (e.g., Sullivan & Tifft, 2001; Viano, 1990). If these programs promote higher levels of understanding between residents at the community level, then the street code should become less necessary for order maintenance.

We have focused on improving police-citizen interactions and providing peaceful dispute resolution options to reduce violence and mediate the effects of the street culture. However, we would be remiss if we overlooked the harsh structural pressures of joblessness, poverty, segregation, and racial prejudice that many African

American families face in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Although we did not focus on this issue, we believe that it is imperative that structural pressures have to be addressed in disadvantaged African American neighborhoods to see long-term and sustained reductions in violence. For example, implementation of policies aimed at increasing employment opportunities, and promoting harmony among neighborhood residents will serve to build community and possibly neighborhood social connections (Sampson, 1988).

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