



On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City

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Forty years in, the War on Drugs has done almost nothing to prevent drugs from being sold or used, but it has nonetheless created a little-known surveillance state in America's most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Arrest quotas and high-tech surveillance techniques criminalize entire blocks, and transform the very associations that should stabilize young lives—family, relationships, jobs—into liabilities, as the police use such relationships to track down suspects, demand information, and threaten consequences.

Alice Goffman spent six years living in one such neighborhood in Philadelphia, and her close observations and often harrowing stories reveal the pernicious effects of this pervasive policing. Goffman introduces us to an unforgettable cast of young African American men who are caught up in this web of warrants and surveillance—some of them small-time drug dealers, others just ordinary guys dealing with limited choices. All find the web of presumed criminality, built as it is on the very associations and friendships that make up a life, nearly impossible to escape. We watch as the pleasures of summer-evening stoop-sitting are shattered by the arrival of a carful of cops looking to serve a warrant; we watch—and can't help but be shocked—as teenagers teach their younger siblings and cousins how to run from the police (and, crucially, to keep away from friends and family so they can stay hidden); and we see, over and over, the relentless toll that the presumption of criminality takes on families—and futures.

While not denying the problems of the drug trade, and the violence that often accompanies it, through her gripping accounts of daily life in the forgotten neighborhoods of America's cities, Goffman makes it impossible for us to ignore the very real human costs of our failed response—the blighting of entire neighborhoods, and the needless sacrifice of whole generations.

On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City Details

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Aimen says

This sub-urban raised white woman does not have a good factual based scholarly approach to her book/dissertation. She is exposed to ONE neighbourhood, and now she believes the police are arresting too much? Imprisoning innocents too often? She was in ONE area. ONE!!! That's nothing. You can't base off your whole dissertation off one long experience in an area. This is what UPenn students do with their time-jack off to confirmation biases and look for reasons to cause sociological question. Alice Goffman needs to experiment in North Philly, and tell me that they need less police patrolling the city. Her writing portrays Philadelphia like it's ignoring its poverty stricken areas and legal conflict with its citizens. SHE LACKS sophistication in her whole conclusion. Only uses ethos to sympathise with her subjects / characters in her book. Living in Philadelphia, you are given resources, emphasised at a young age to pursue collegiate education and take advantage of the adversely seeming environment you're in to achieve better. Her whole book is bullshit, she hasn't lived here long enough to sustain such beliefs- no matter her degree or position in sociology...

Venessa says

Statistics from the introduction:

- Black people make up 13% of the US population, but account for 37% of the prison population.
- Among Black men, one in nine are in prison, compared with less than 2% of white young men.
- Approximately 60% of Black men who did not finish high school will go to prison by their mid-thirties.

A chronicle of life in an urban neighborhood of Philadelphia where Black residents living under police surveillance is the norm. Goffman obtains a job in food service at her school (The University of Pennsylvania) as a sociology project, a largely white student community served by a largely Black working class community. She becomes friends with her boss and begins tutoring young people in her neighborhood after the class ends. Goffman decided to write a sociological study of the women and their relationships with family and friends, then realized she didn't have much of anything new to add to what had already been written about. The lives of the young men, however, have not been and became her focus of interest once she started living in the neighborhood for over six years. Over the years she became embraced by the larger community, often seen as a sister, cousin, or goddaughter by the residents of the neighborhood.

Much of what Goffman witnessed and described is horrifying: young men murdered in front of her (and their families) by police; young men living the prime of their lives in prison because they can't pay outrageous court fees for misdemeanor crimes, which lead to their becoming involved with felonious crimes when they are released because a corrupt criminal justice system leaves them with no good options if they want to make a living and support their families. Young men living on the run, literally, from police, parole officers, and eventually the family members who are constantly harassed and pressured by the former to give them up. Goffman herself being harassed by police who assumed that as a white woman she was only interested in "black dick" because that is what people assume a white woman wants if she's hanging out with black men (I myself have experienced this assumption). Many things, however, would not be known to a general public not living on the run constantly, such as the heinous ways in which police turn family members and friends against each other, but most importantly WHY young men become victims of a corrupt system at such a

young age: because they are never given a chance to do anything else. With startling statistics, it is hard to deny that the United States still has a HUGE problem with racism, sadly. (Hello, Ferguson....) I'm not afraid to offend: if you think that there isn't you're living with your head in the sand, or buying into a lot of the crap mainstream society feeds you.

I recognized a lot of what Goffman described happening in my city, which is why I originally wanted to read the book, to get a better understanding of socioeconomic struggles that I, as a white woman, have never had to deal with. I also wanted to understand how a police state comes into being, as I fear it could happen here as gentrification continues its relentless pursuit of power and displacement. (Also, my own feelings of how I am unwittingly contributing to the gentrification that repulses me.) Not an easy book to read at times, but Goffman does a wonderful job with her reporting. An excellent, important book that brought tears to my eyes many times.

Leslie says

This is a great book, I hope a lot of people read it and get educated on what's happening in segregated, low-income black neighborhoods, and in turn I hope that enacts policy change. I'd heard about the 'new jim crow' before, but didn't know much about it. I assumed it was activist language threaded with a bit of truth (for instance, I knew POC were much more likely to be charged with drug possession than whites), but Goffman's years-long research and observation draws into focus how accurate that term is, our justice system actively works against people who have very little to begin with.

This book is written in a research style. So it's somewhat jarring when highly emotional things happen and they're dealt with dryly with little pause for reflection. This is somewhat compensated for by the appendix where Goffman describes her personal experience.

That said, I read it in two days, couldn't put it down.

Catherine says

I dinged this one star because there is a bit too much repetition of the lessons learned at the end of each chapter -- I suspect that is because about 2/3 of this book is a dissertation. But the author is an excellent reporter of what it is like for people of color in the inner city in Philadelphia, and in addition the final third of the book, about what it was like for her personally to become so immersed in this experience, is very powerful. Anyone who cares about "The New Jim Crow" and the impact it is having in the U.S. should read this book, but in addition it is worth reading to the end because the author was so transformed by her "research," and conveys so clearly how that felt.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

A very engaging ethnography - as a college student, the author moved to the inner city and spent her time hanging out with a group of young black men often on the run from the law. The book is a good look into how heavy policing affects all aspects of individual and community life. And the author is a good storyteller so it makes for engaging reading. Since she writes about one social network it's hard to tell how

representative this is, and I think the criticism that the author herself got in too deep is probably valid. She also contradicts herself a few times. Still, it is worth reading.

Lashaan Balasingam (Bookidote) says

This ethnography conducted by Alice Goffman on six years is definitely eye-opening and filled with fascinating anecdotes to stun readers. Making a statement that "high imprisonment rates and the intensive policing and surveillance that have accompanied them are transforming poor Black neighborhoods into communities of suspects and fugitives", this sociologist writes a compelling read to show us how individuals come together to create a completely different social world that they are forced to live in.

From strategies to run away from cops to ways to bypass the conditions that surrounds their parole, *On the Run* is filled with remarkable knowledge. It's one thing to hear about them, but to be able to live in it has given Alice Goffman an opportunity of a lifetime to study people who now have bonds almost as strong as family with her. Although this book reads really well and does a great job in throwing arguments and proving them with anecdotes and analysis, I'd still keep a critical eye on what is read.

While the tough-on-crime strategy is reproached and that policy changes are wished for, this book still depicts some situations and people in ways that make it hard for readers to see a direct link between policing and the behaviors of individuals. While a lot of the points seem relevant and do instigate a need for change, there still seems like a lot of angles haven't been explored.

This book still does a great job in illustrating some of the social phenomenonons that are created because of the peculiar conditions in which the people live in. The relationships between people is thoroughly investigated, and remains one of the strongpoints of this book. Definitely a great read for those who are interested.

P.S. Full review to come

Yours truly,

Lashaan | Blogger and Book Reviewer
Official blog: <http://bookidote.wordpress.com>

Mike E. says

It is hard for me to begin a book and not finish it . . usually.

Goffman's immersion into life in the crime-ridden "Sixth Street" of urban-poor Philly is beautiful--especially the mutuality and genuineness of her remarkably uncommon friendships. Goffman makes bold (& I assume accurate), infrequently told claims about incarceration rates in the USA. She states that arrest rates were basically the same in the USA until about 1970: approximately 1 in 1000. Today the rate is about 1 in 107. She states that our rate of incarceration is unparalleled among contemporary developed nations. To find similar rates, one must look across the timeline to dictatorial oppressors like Stalin. This is troubling and calls for analysis and change. But what needs to change?

In the early chapters of her book she repeatedly details the expansion of warrant departments in law enforcement. Her thesis seems to be that ever-expanding, intrusive police tactics prevent many who are born into poverty from even having a chance in life--they're destined for prison or a life on the run. However, her own meticulous first-hand reporting of these men's day-to-day lives details their frequent criminal actions. Causality is always hard to prove. Why are so many in the USA being locked up? I don't have any experience in this arena, but it seems to me that those who deal drugs, steal, lie to the police about their own names, etc., need a reformation of the heart, not of the police precinct.

My point is not that her thesis is false, as it misses the mark.

I have not finished this book . .

Kaylee says

I'll start this off with a compliment: Alice Goffman is a phenomenal writer. She tells stories and weaves a narrative that paints a vivid image of urban poverty, crime, and the failings of the criminal justice system in a striking and captivating way, and deserves credit for that. This book reads quickly and is fairly enjoyable given the subject matter.

The problem is in her methodology and the choices she made in writing this book. Goffman is a sociologist, and in spite of reading like it was written for a mass-market audience, this is putatively a social science research text. Goffman almost completely lacks any kind of reflexive thinking about her own status, identity, and privilege relative to her research subjects. She frequently includes gratuitous information about her informants without a clear connection to her arguments about mass incarceration and punitive police policies. These details serve only to scandalize the reader at best, and at worst they have the potential to reinforce negative racial stereotypes some readers may bring into reading this text.

As a social science book, "On the Run" lacks a clear theoretical framework. Anyone familiar with research ethics who reads her almost 100-page methodological note at the end will recognize serious and glaring concerns that are largely unaddressed in the main text of the book. Although the writing is phenomenal, the book as a whole is deeply problematic and should be read critically.

Ramona says

This book is garbage and here's a far more succinct summary of why than I could ever produce:

<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/black...>

Amar Pai says

Super depressing. The "War on Drugs," the prison industry, militarization of police, parole-- add it all up and you have a system of racial control. Parole especially. Fuck a piss test. Why should anyone have to take a drug test, ever? The number of situations where this seems legitimate is vanishingly small. Pilots maybe, people operating heavy equipment, cases where you'd ideally administer an sobriety test on the spot but it's

not cost effective. Other than that, fuck a piss test.

Let's end the "war on drugs," that would be a good start. Mandatory body cams on police. Get rid of the "are you a felon" box on job applications, make it more specific as the job requires. Give inmates job training and some chance of actually getting a legit job when out. Don't let cops monitor funerals and hospitals looking to catch anyone with a warrant. Nix the whole parole system. My platform if and when I'm elected.

Frank says

I devoured this 260-page book in two days. Coincidentally, my library request for it came through just as I was finishing *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, and I thought the two would make for an interesting comparison. In a way they are quite similar works: immersive works by women about a culture not their own. But while Katherine Boo hides the stitching in her work—erasing her own presence and narrating events as if her book were a novel, Goffman's book is first and foremost an academic work of sociology, and she is quite forthright about her own presence as a participant-observer, even concluding the book with a 50-page "Methodological Note" that explains how she got involved in the project and how the experience has affected her. This appendix to the book ends up being an absolutely stunning, gripping conclusion, a kind of meta-document that makes the whole book feel all the more real. Goffman's aim in the book is to provide "an on-the-ground look at mass incarceration and its accompanying systems of policing and surveillance." Having started immersing herself in a ghettoized Black Philadelphia neighborhood in college, when she gets to graduate school at Princeton she realizes that she "was documenting the massive expansion of criminal justice intervention into the lives of poor Black families in the United States." Alex Kotlowitz, in his NY Times review, expresses disappointment that the people with whom she spends her time don't emerge as more fully fleshed-out characters, as, perhaps, one might say the people do in Boo's book. Goffman's book is structured more as an argument, backed up with anecdotes drawn from her astoundingly in-depth field work and observations. Though the people's identities and even the name of their neighborhood have been changed (unlike in Boo's book), I think that they actually do come across pretty vividly. Indeed, some of the examples in the book have the resonant drama I associate with the short stories of Edward P. Jones. (I'm thinking of the story of Mr. George, Chuck's grandfather; and of Miss Deena, the Penn cafeteria manager who was Goffman's first contact in her research.) To sum up, I found this to be an immensely fascinating book, reminiscent of Beryl Satter's *Family Properties* in its blending of the academic and the personal, but ultimately unique and, I expect, unforgettable.

Melissa says

This is it. This book perfectly encapsulates what is wrong with our society. It shows what is wrong with the war in drugs, the stop and frisk laws, and the error of having intimidate and arrest be our go-to response to societal and economic problems. Read this.

Emily says

This is an incredible work of sociological scholarship, but more importantly, it's an amazing read. It's also an extremely important book, and I hope it is widely read and discussed. Dr. Goffman puts you right in the lives of these men and women, because she herself was there. Imagine what it would be like if you couldn't seek

medical treatment because cops hang out at the ER looking for men with outstanding warrants. Or if you had to choose between betraying the man you loved or losing custody of your kids. It's happening every day, and Dr. Goffman lays bare the impact that the War on Drugs and mass incarceration is having on poor communities. A must read.

Martin Zook says

On the Run is an incredibly authentic look at an emblematic neighborhood in Philly where more than half the men at some point have a warrant out for their arrest, causing them to be on the run. On the run from the police. On the run from parole officers. On the run from the courts. On the run from girlfriends. On the run from those who would use their vulnerability to victimize them.

This is the world behind the statistical sketch Alice Goffman paints in her preface. Briefly, the US locks up five to nine times more people than western Europe. More than in Russia, or China, excluding Stalin's reign. And it's the Black communities suffering the brunt.

Blacks, who make up 13% of the population, account for 37% of the prison population. 10% of black men are behind bars compared with 1% for whites. 60% of Blacks who do not finish high school will go to prison.

All of this is well known, and has been known for more than three decades. What Goffman does is bring the reader face to face with people caught in this cycle. She follows a group of young men in whose neighborhood she lived and shared their lives for six years while a student.

She introduces us to Chuck. His predicament with the law begins after a scuffle on the playground in high school. It sets in motion the cycle described in the statistics above. He does time for it. Upon release, he's denied re-admittance to high school because he's turned 19. A chippy arrest follows for failing to appear in court. Chuck is on the run.

There is an art to running. Chapter one begins with Chuck teaching his 12-year-old brother how to run: not to a relative's house - the cops armed with enhanced technology know places the refugee frequents. It's to a church lady's house ultimately. In addition to Chuck, Goffman introduces us to four other friends with legal entanglements. It's these entanglements and the subsequent running from them that form the warp and weave of their world, and the world of their families.

Running from the police is an art that according to Goffman resulted in 58% of the men succeeding in eluding the police despite the fact that the enforcement officers devote up to five squad cars in one instance to pick up one suspect on a minor charge. More than 70% of the time, the police had no idea who it was they were chasing in instances where the target escaped.

Running requires the ability to spot police well in advance.

For those who have done time and report to a parole officer, running from the parole officer also becomes an issue. In a quite humorous anecdote, Goffman recounts the instance of Jevon, a born natural actor, who develops a business on the side by taking curfew calls from parole officers. In addition to parroting his client's voice, he is briefed on identifying information the parole officer requests to ensure he has the right subject. It may seem like a lot of trouble to go to, but the penalty for missing curfew in the chippy world of

law enforcement in the Black community is two years.

The author herself is caught up and subjected to what might be considered enhanced interrogation. It's what the women of men on the lam suffer, midnight raids with their living quarters turned upside down and subjection to intimidation to reveal the whereabouts of their sons.

Of course, those caught up in these legal entanglements cannot go to the law for protection or to register grievances. Others know this and take advantage. In one instance, a boy's car is torched because he's late in making a payment to a drug dealer. In another, one of the boys is mistaken for someone else and beaten severely suffering injuries that have been with him into his adult life. He refused medical treatment at the hospital because a parole violation would be filed against him for curfew violation.

In one instance, however, the boys in the hood sought the protection of incarceration by turning themselves in to the law to avoid a shooting war that broke out. One even asked his parole officer for a urine test he knew he would fail.

This is well worth the read to better understand the numbers that are all too familiar.

Michael says

Working as an appellate defender (i.e. an attorney who represents indigent criminal defendants on appeals) gives one an interesting perspective on life in the inner city. I've read hundreds of trial transcripts and looked at lots of photos and videos, getting a partial but distanced look at a clientele whose lives are vastly different than mine.

Sociologist Alice Goffman's new book is a field study that sheds light and fills in gaps in my knowledge about the lives of the young black men that are the primary clients of public defenders in urban areas. Goffman spent over six years with a group of young men (and mothers and sisters, etc.) whose lives are spent in constant fear of arrest and harassment by the police.

This explains the word 'fugitive' in the book's title. Goffman notes that ghettos are no longer ignored by police. Instead, due to the tough-on-crime approach now prevalent, the police are a constant presence in the lives of young men who do not get adequate educational and vocational opportunities.

Considering this is an academic work, Goffman is a surprisingly good writer. Each chapter takes on a different aspect of what she encountered. What she establishes is that the government, through laws and policies, has created poor communities where the police are not trusted and a residual effect is that it's hard for anyone to trust anyone. In an environment where fear is constant and so many young men have no chance to better their lot, respect becomes a key factor in how people interact with each other. This creates a world where citizens take matters into their own hands, because the police have no legitimacy.

In this world, people don't bother to learn each others surnames (thus, you don't have information to turn over to the police), if you get shot, you try to avoid going to the hospital, because the police might execute a warrant (and they you can get a warrant for the most minor things), and you are constantly finding a new place to crash, hoping to avoid a raid on where you would normally live.

Because it's an academic work, there are some repetitious parts, and long summaries that aren't really

necessary. But what Goffman brings to light is so important, as this book provides so much insight into what is wrong with our justice system and how we treat poor African-Americans. This book confirmed some things that I thought I knew or suspected and further illuminated things that I would find strange when reading transcripts. Behavior that seems odd to someone raised in a middle class suburb makes more sense now.

Goffman adds a whole section where she explains how the project came about and provides more background on how she conducted this study that adds a lot to the book. This is essential reading.
