

Still I Rise: Youth Caught Between the Worlds of Schools and Prisons

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Published online: 23 September 2011
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Abstract The US has one of the most inequitably funded school systems and the largest prison population in the industrialized world. These two factors help to construct what is known as the school to prison pipeline. The past 30 years has included punitive policies within schools and the criminal justice system that have resulted in a disproportionate number of Latino and African–American youth being suspended from school, dropping out, and/or incarcerated. In this article, the lived experiences of incarcerated youth framed by institutional policies within prisons and schools are discussed. In total, fifteen interviews with incarcerated youth who spontaneously discussed drug trafficking were analyzed using criminological theory. A key theme for many youth was how a lack of educational opportunity and success shifted their focus to attaining economic opportunities through drug trafficking. Policy implications are discussed relating to school and corrections funding along with the costs to society.

Keywords Drug trafficking · School-to-prison pipeline · Discipline · Urban

When you're 14 and you're making \$4,000–5,000 in 2 days, school doesn't seem as important...I felt like as long as I had money I was safe—meaning I could do anything I wanted. It made me proud of myself.
—*Darren, incarcerated youth.*

When I interviewed Darren, from the quote above, his statement initially shocked me but over time I began to hear similar sentiments from other incarcerated youth—that school had not provided them something meaningful, not even hope for a better future. Instead, many of the youth expressed finding hope and meaning through

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being able to make money on the streets, most often through selling drugs. Their experiences were so foreign from my own and their stories so tragic, that I began searching for answers: How did school lose meaning for these youth? How did they get connected with selling drugs? How did they end up in a jail cell rather than a college classroom? What I discovered was that their individual stories could not be separated from the “stories” of schools and prisons as institutions in our society. I believe the stories of the youth were largely shaped and determined by the institutional stories. In fact, the connection is so strong that you cannot really separate the stories of the youth from the institutions.

In this article, I am going to share with you three “stories.” The first two stories are about the institutional policies of schools and prisons that directly shaped the lived experiences of the youth in this article. These two stories are derived from the literature. The third story is of the incarcerated youth and their decisions, motives, and opportunities to sell drugs. It is drawn from data collected as part of a larger study of prison education. In conclusion, I will discuss the consequences and implications of the stories.

Bad Boys: The Story of School

Just as children were tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers, word processors, and fast food workers, there were also tracks for some children, predominantly African American and male, that led to prison. (Ferguson 2001; p. 2)

Ferguson (2001) addresses the power of schools, “to create, shape, and regulate social identities” through the idea of “bad boys” that starts as early as elementary school by punishment targeted toward children of color (p. 2). The school to prison pipeline depicts the patterns of school socialization, school discipline policies, and low educational attainment by inmates that help to explain why many youth, especially low income, African American and Latino males, end up in a jail cell rather than a college classroom (Zeiderberg and Schiraldi 2002). What has largely been left unexplored are the specific ways schools may contribute to students becoming incarcerated and a “more accurate and complete understanding of these relationships is urgent,” (Wald and Losen 2003; p. 11).

The US has one of the most inequitably funded school systems in the industrialized world with a 10-to-1 funding ratio between the highest versus lowest funded districts nationally (Darling-Hammond 2006). In general, poor children with the least amount of access to high quality childcare, educational resources, healthcare, affordable housing, and nutrition are sent to the poorest schools while wealthy children, typically having access to those things listed previously, attend the wealthiest schools (Kozol 1991, 2005). These differentials in funding are related to class sizes, access to technology, teacher quality, library resources, extracurricular opportunities, proper heating and cooling, and up-to-date curriculum materials to name a few of the implications (Kozol 1991, 2005; Oakes 2005; Darling-Hammond 2003). Additionally, many of these under resourced schools have become racially

resegregated as “majority minority” schools and are located in urban areas (Anyon 1997; Kozol 2005).

In addition to attending under-funded schools, low income Black and Latino youth are more likely than white students:

- To attend schools in older buildings with fewer resources (Kozol 1991, 2005).
- To have teachers that are less qualified and/or provide pedagogy that emphasizes rote memorization and skills (McLaughlin and Talbert 2001; Finn 2009).
- To be inappropriately placed in special education classes (Harry and Klinger 2006).
- To be unfairly tracked into lower level classes (Oakes 2005).
- To experience a curriculum that does not represent their culture or history (Nieto and Bode 2007; Banks 2007).
- To have lower expectations placed on them by teachers (Eccles and Jussim 1992; Marx 2006).
- To attend over-crowded schools (NCES 2000).

These are just a few of the obstacles that are placed in their paths and contribute to the high numbers of low income students of color disproportionately leaving school before receiving their high school diploma (Lee and Burkam 2003). According to 2001 statistics, only 51% of American Indian, 53% of Hispanic, and 50% of Black students graduated in comparison to 75% of White students (Swanson 2006). Without a high school diploma, these youth are far more likely to end up unemployed, in prison, and living in poverty (Orfield 2004).

Although many of these youth have been framed as “drop-outs” the truth is that many of them have been pushed-out (Fine 1991; Valenzuela 1999). Since the implementation of policies such as Zero Tolerance in the 1990’s, the number of students suspended from school has nearly doubled since the 1970’s (U.S. Department of Education 1995). Students of color have consistently been found to be suspended at rates two to three times that of other students, and similarly overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and school expulsion (Skiba 2000). Nationally, Black students are 2.6 times as likely to be suspended as white students (Wald and Losen 2003). These patterns of racial disparity exist even when controlling for poverty, urbanization, and other relevant factors (Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2009).

Zero Tolerance became national educational policy with the passage of The Gun Free Schools Act of 1994. The law requires a mandatory 1 year expulsion for possession of a fire-arm and that law violating students must be referred to the police. Many state legislatures and school districts have expanded the policy to include mandatory expulsions for drugs and alcohol, fighting, gang membership, threats, and/or swearing (Skiba and Knesting 2002). Furthermore, by 1995, almost all states had passed laws that encourage the prosecution of juveniles as adults, “where they are at a higher risk of not only attack and rape, but of suicide” (Casella 2001; p. 4).

Zero Tolerance policies have led to a dramatic increase in the number of incarcerated juveniles, despite a drop in juvenile crime rates in the late 1990’s (Wald and Losen 2003). As Wald and Losen (2003) state, “Adult prisons and juvenile halls are riddled with children who have traveled through the school-to-prison pipeline”

(p. 10). With Zero Tolerance policies, the linkage between schools and prisons became stronger with schools feeling more like prisons through the increased presence of school police officers and security devices and more students directly entering the criminal justice system through schooling policies and practices (Casella 2001). Youth of color have disproportionately been affected by these policies in representing four out of five new juvenile detainees between 1983 and 1997 (Hoyt et al. 2002). African American youth account for 16% of all youth, 28% of all juvenile arrests, 35% of the youth waived to adult criminal court, and 58% of youth admitted to state adult prison (National Council on Crime and Delinquency 2007).

In summary, the story of schooling involves low income youth of color, especially males, overwhelmingly receiving unequal educational opportunities. Simultaneously, they are often labeled from an early age as “bad boys,” which has led to higher suspension rates and influence of Zero Tolerance policies on their lives. The majority of the youth I interviewed, entered the correctional system before the age of eighteen, never received a high school diploma, and were destined to face a life of obstacles with the label of “felon” following them upon release.

Furthermore, the majority of the youth made money through illegal means prior to incarceration. The spike in juvenile arrests were largely due to an increase in the number of youth arrested for drug trafficking, manufacturing, and possession, which increased dramatically between 1982 and 1999 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001). In the next section I detail the story of prisons through the War on Drugs and its influences on youth of color.

Second Class Citizenry: The Story of Prison

He [President Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.

– H.R. Haldeman, Nixon Adviser, quoted in Alexander (2010, p. 43)

During the past 30 years, the US has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people incarcerated and currently has the largest prison population in the world (Mauer 2006). A substantial portion of this increase can be attributed to the War on Drugs where African-Americans and Latinos are overrepresented in arrests and convictions for drug offenses (Mauer and King 2007). For example, although African Americans represent only 14% of regular drug users, they include 37% of those arrested for drug offenses and 56% of persons in state prison for drug offenses. Furthermore, “African-Americans serve almost as much time in federal prison for a drug offense as whites do for a violent offense” (Mauer and King 2007).

In regards to the Latino community, by 2005 Latinos comprised 20% of the state and federal prison population, a rise of 43% since 1990 (Mauer and King 2007). As a result of these trends, one of every six Latino males and one of every 45 Latinas born today can expect to go to prison in his or her lifetime (Mauer and King 2007). These rates are more than double those for non-Hispanic whites (Mauer and King 2007).

President Nixon was the first to coin the term “War on Drugs” and to declare illegal drugs an enemy. However, it was President Reagan who made the War on Drugs an official federal policy in 1982 (Alexander 2010). Between 1980 and 1984 FBI antidrug funding increased approximately 1,200% along with similar increases in funding to the DEA (Becket 1999). Furthermore, large cash grants were made available to state and local law enforcement agencies to encourage proliferation of the War on Drugs, which resulted in these agencies receiving special narcotics task forces, free training, and specialized equipment including helicopters, rifles, and grenade launchers (Alexander 2010). By contrast, anti-drug funds allocated to the Department of Education were cut from \$14 million to \$3 million and funding for agencies responsible for drug treatment and prevention were dramatically reduced as well (Becket 1999). As a result, persons in prison with a history of regular drug use are 50% or more *less* likely to receive treatment today than they would have in 1991 (Mauer and King 2007).

The consequences of mass incarceration targeting communities of color are substantial when considering the rights someone is likely to lose once incarcerated. Alexander (2010) in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, argues that mass incarceration in the United States is a new form of Jim Crow policies to ensure African Americans remain second class citizens and are legally denied such basic rights as voting. As an example, Alexander provides the following story:

Jarvious Cotton cannot vote...Cotton’s great–great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole. (Alexander 2010; p. 1).

She discusses the ways major institutions, such as schools and prisons, are designed to permanently lock, “a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy” (p. 13) and that this has largely been accomplished through the War on Drugs. A task force of the American Bar Association described the obstacles facing a minor drug offender this way:

[The] offender may be sentenced to a term of probation, community service, and court costs. Unbeknownst to this offender, and perhaps any other actor in the sentencing process, as a result of his conviction he may be ineligible for many federally-funded health and welfare benefits, food stamps, public housing, and federal education assistance. His driver’s license may be automatically suspended, and he may no longer qualify for certain employment and professional licenses. If he is convicted of another crime he may be subject to imprisonment as a repeat offender. He will not be permitted to enlist in the military, possess a firearm, or obtain federal security clearance. If a citizen, he may lose the right to vote; if not, he becomes immediately deportable (Cited in Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2003)

Essentially, the War on Drugs has placed an emphasis on punishment rather than treatment and has been implemented in such a way that low income communities of color have been targeted. The consequences are substantial when considering federal laws that deny for life anyone with a felony drug charge from receiving college financial aid, section 8 housing, or public assistance. For example, as a result of the federal welfare legislation of 1996, there is now a lifetime ban on the receipt of welfare benefits for anyone convicted of a drug felony, unless a state chooses to opt out of this provision (Alexander 2010).

Prison Industrial Complex

The story of prisons would not be complete without a discussion of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). The PIC refers to the growing corrections and detention industry in the United States. The combination of Zero Tolerance and War on Drug policies resulted in a huge growth of the prison industry and corrections and detentions became framed as money-making opportunities including the production and sales of security equipment and the privatization of prisons (Meiners and Winn 2010). Under President Reagan, prisons became privatized and today are a \$2 billion industry.

The collapse of rural economies created the perfect location for the construction of these new privatized prisons. “So, while most prisoners in America are from urban areas, most prisons are now in rural areas” (Huling 2002; p. 197). Before 1980, only 36% of prisons were in rural communities. Between 1990 and 1999, 245 prisons were built in rural and small town communities—with a prison opening in rural America every 15 days (Beale 2001). The speed of development has kept pace with a new prison being built every 12 days between 2000 and 2005 (Stephan 2008).

A substantial consequence is the overall loss of political representation and power of urban communities. Prison populations are counted as a part of the population for Census data. With many prisons shifting from urban to rural areas, the population size of political districts and representation have shifted as well. Since in most states these prisoners cannot vote but are counted as part of the population, their votes are essentially given to those who live near the prison, which has become overwhelmingly rural and white. Research indicates a large number of elections would have had different outcomes if felons been allowed to vote (Uggen and Manza 2002).

Essentially, the prison story describes an institution that for the past 30 years, through War on Drug policies, has unfairly targeted low income, people of color to the point that a Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison and a Latino boy has a 1 in 6 chance (Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2003). This rate is higher than the incarceration of blacks at the height of apartheid in South Africa (Alexander 2010). As Alexander (2010) states, “Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race” (p. 13). The story of prisons is a tragic, oppressive story

that can begin to influence the life of a child at 12 or 13 years of age as a result of fighting at school, being accused of being in a gang, or being too easily influenced by peers or older adults to sell drugs. The consequences they receive are some of the harshest in the industrialized world (Alexander 2010).

Still I Rise: The Stories of the Youth

The data for this third story come from an evaluation of a prison educational program in a southeastern state in the US. As a part of the program, evaluators, including myself, traveled around the state and interviewed youth offenders between the ages of 18–24 about their educational experiences inside and outside of prison. Many challenges existed in collecting the data. Often, there was no control or say which inmates were interviewed and, at times, it was questionable whether the inmates were given an actual choice in being interviewed by prison staff. There was also a lot of negotiating with prison staff over privacy during the interviews, tape recorders, and time allowed to conduct the interviews. Due to IRB regulations, direct questions about illegal activities were not permitted. Although a set interview protocol was utilized, the context of the interviews varied greatly and participants were selected at times purposefully and other times at random due to the prison context. Furthermore, some of the interviews were digitally recorded while others were recorded through handwritten notes.

The data for this article arise from youth who spontaneously mentioned drug trafficking while being interviewed. I became interested in drug trafficking because it was an unsolicited prevalent theme in many interviews. Additionally, I have a brother who has been incarcerated for possession and trafficking of methamphetamine. Due to my personal experiences with him, I was especially interested in trying to understand the world of illegal drug usage and trafficking. In total, 15 interviews were analyzed using Wolcott's (2008) description of analysis as involving three steps: description, analysis, and interpretation. These steps begin with a holistic process of data analysis (i.e. What is going on?) followed by systematically identifying key factors and relationships in a grounded fashion to transcending the data, "to probe into what is to be made of them," (p. 36).

The stories of the youth will be analyzed according to Sparks et al. (1984) theory regarding crimes for gain. Involvement in drug trafficking will be discussed in relation to three basic concepts (i.e. motivation, ability, and opportunity).

Drug trafficking is not an equal opportunity employer. Sparks et al. (1984) claim that three issues must be taken into consideration when exploring crimes for gain: motivation, opportunity, and ability. According to Sparks et al. (1984), motivation, which is usually the focus of criminological theory, is not enough to explain criminal behavior. Instead, many people may have the motivation to commit crime but lack the ability or skills necessary along with the opportunity to actually perform the act. Sparks et al.'s (1984) work will be used to as an analytical framework for this third story.

Motive

The motives for why youth become involved with drug trafficking are complex. Mohamed and Fritsvold's (2009) work with "dorm room dealers" who are male, white middle class college students, goes against previous research that suggests the motivations for drug dealing are largely connected to economic hardship and a lack of opportunity for social mobility. For the "dorm room dealers," the motivations were connected to economic gains but also to constructions of masculinity, the thrill of deviant behavior, and ego gratification. But in regards to motivation, identity politics matter. Many of the "dorm room dealers" were not incarcerated after being caught due to family influence and money available to hire a defense attorney. Additionally, many of them escaped surveillance due to having white privilege. Alternatively, the majority of the incarcerated youth we interviewed did not grow up in affluent circumstances and were Black or Latino. A predominant theme for many of them was economic hardship and a lack of opportunities to make a liveable wage as motivators in selling drugs. For example, William stated, "I come from a family that didn't have a whole lot. I wanted stuff of my own so I went the other way. I wanted to get more. I wanted to be independent, I guess...My mother disapproved of it completely." When asked why he thought so many youth offenders return to prison, James replied: "It's really hard to readjust—especially to find a job...Most people have kids and want to take care of them. They get stressed out. They may feel like they're not getting paid enough for their jobs so they resort to robbing or selling dope." Many of the youth expressed the need to support themselves or their families as an important priority and they felt there were few opportunities available to them to make the kind of money they were able to do so through selling drugs. For example, some youth described making as much as \$1,000–\$2,000 in a single day. Minimum wage at a fast food restaurant can hardly compete.

MacCoun and Reuter (1992) did an analysis of economic factors and drug dealing. They computed a mean hourly wage of \$30 per hour for drug dealing, compared to \$7 per hour for legitimate employment. Research also suggests that youth prefer to get involved with drug trafficking rather than making money through legal means because it allows them to keep their pride and self-esteem. Many of the jobs available to youth are labor oriented and pay minimum wage. In these kinds of jobs, youth are required to submit to their boss and customers or bourgeoisie culture (Bourgois 1998).

Although not a motive necessarily, a significant factor for many of the youth was seeing education as a waste of time or not an avenue to achieve the kind of lifestyle they desired. Rex, a white male, stated, "Education was something you obtained to be successful in life. I found another way. We grew up poor, and I sold drugs to make a living, and I made a really good living...I found that I didn't need an education to obtain the things I *did* desire." Rex went on to state that ever since he was little, school was difficult for him and he was labeled "behaviorally disabled." He stated, "In middle school I was in a special class, 'the crazy class.'" All of us had behavioral problems; things were really loud. There were only a couple of us who were able to go out into mainstream classes." The teachers, he explained, "didn't want to deal with us." He said, they looked "at you like they expect(ed) trouble."

They looked at us as being unsuccessful; because of discipline problems, we got sent to the principal.”

Rex shared that although his mother and one teacher in a “mainstream class” encouraged him, the majority of the messages he received in school reflected both wholly dismissive attitudes and doubt over his ability and future. He remembers that teachers told him, he was “nothing” and that he was not going to amount to anything. Such insults contributed to Rex’s feelings of isolation in school. He disclosed, “we were labeled as failures ... we were on our own.”

Bly and Daryl also described negative experiences in school. They both were talkative and admitted to not really paying attention in class. Daryl described the system of discipline in school as a “game,” asserting that a student’s reputation dictated what happened. He retraced an incident in which he was not involved but for which he was suspended anyway until the administration could “figure it out.” Daryl felt as if the school administrators did not care. Similarly, Bly stated that as a boy, “I hated school. I stayed for the beginning of school to play basketball; that’s the only time I paid attention to my grades, to stay on the basketball team.” He said, “I didn’t like any of my teachers, the teachers would take offense and scream at me. I wasn’t really the detention kid. They’d just kick me out, they’d suspend me.” Rex, Daryl, and Bly’s experiences all connect to the previous story of schooling where students had low expectations placed upon them by school officials and were quickly suspended from school.

The theme of struggling to find high paying legitimate work without educational credentials and with a record was also common. When Matt was asked about selling drugs and coming back to prison a second time, he replied:

It got to the point where my mom really was going downhill and I had two baby sisters. I got set up selling drugs, trying to take care of my little sisters and my mom, ended up doing three years. First time I ever been in trouble. [Second time] I came home, tried to stay on the right track. I had a little job at the Waffle House. I kept it for maybe like 8-9 months, but that’s not really gonna take care of my family...Once you get a felony on your record, that can be a lifetime thing...When I seen I couldn’t get the help as far as the financial aid for schooling, and bettering myself and my education, I took the easy way out and I gave up and decided, “hey, this is easy for me, this is what I know,” and I did it...After a while I lost patience as far as trying to look for jobs. You know, won’t too many people willing to give you another chance.

Many of the youth described feeling financially responsible for family, especially for their own children or siblings. Some described, such as Matt, trying to do “legitimate” work but became frustrated with trying to find work with a felony record and a lack of educational opportunity.

A less persistent theme but one that was shared across some of the youth included a desire for respect, power, or to be perceived as a successful provider for their family. Daniel claimed, “I could go home and I’d be straight, but it wasn’t the straight that I wanted to be. You know what I mean? I was seeing so many things on TV. I wanted to live like this; have the fancy cars and all that.” In addition to selling drugs because high paying work was difficult to find, Matt also discussed the selling

drugs as an “illusion” that results in people from “the projects” ending up in prison or dead. He stated: “The illusion. For me, mine was seeing drug dealers. Seeing ‘em with money. Seeing ‘em with cars. Seeing ‘em with what I thought was power. Seeing ‘em with what I thought was respect.” For some of the youth, possessing the image of wealth, power, and respect was important to them and they perceived selling drugs as a way to achieve that image. Research by Whitehead et al. (1994) support these findings. Whitehead et al. (1994) surveyed approximately 600 low-income African–American males with most being between 14 and 29 years. The majority of the participants expressed the desire to provide money for their families and to achieve status, respect, and a reputation through drug trafficking.

This motive could be connected to the construction of masculinity. Messerschmidt (2001) explains that, “specific forms of masculinity are available, encouraged, and permitted, depending upon one’s class, race, sexual preference, and social situation...specific types of crime can provide an alternative source for...affirming a distinct type of masculinity” (pp. 67–68). Drug dealing could offer youth a route to masculinity grounded in wealth and profit-making that had been denied to them through discriminatory schooling practices.

Opportunity

Not just anyone could decide that they wanted to become involved with drug trafficking and then successfully do so. One example Sparks et al. (1984) uses is someone wanting to climb Mt. Everest but who never leaves a small town in Indiana would not be able to accomplish their goal. The same applies to drug trafficking. In order for someone to become involved they must also be in a space where it occurs or can occur.

In order to understand the circumstances of opportunity, Hochstetler’s (2001) theory of interactional dynamics provides the best organization. Hochstetler claims that, “Antecedent events and copresent others open group participant’ eyes to opportunity...” (p. 747). This suggests that opportunities arise for youth to become involved with drug trafficking depends upon who is present and the context of the situation. In order for opportunities to arise, youth need to have access to a social network that includes people who are involved with drug trafficking. Someone who is not connected to that social sphere may have the motive to sell drugs but not the opportunity.

Family and social networks seem to be key in placing youth in the “right” place at the “right” time. One example is that youth involved with drug trafficking claim their initial requests to become involved were made by family members or acquaintances (Li et al. 1999). In fact, more than one third of urban youth report that they have been exposed to trafficking through family members or friends (Centers and Weist 1998). Additionally, youth whose peers or family members are involved with the drug trade are more likely to become involved or to state intentions of becoming involved (Li and Stanton 1996; Li et al. 1999; Stanton and Galbraith 1994).

This research reflects the experiences of many youth in this study. In fact, some of the youth interviewed for this study referred to this social network as their

“family.” Cope stated, “The streets was my father,” when referring to the fact that his father died when he was very young. Daniel talked about looking to the streets to get the love and attention he was missing from home. He stated referring to his parents, “But they used to fight all the time, police coming, and that’s when I really took to the streets because I couldn’t get the love that I needed at home so I went to the streets to look for it.” Finally, Michael mentioned his best friend who he claimed was more like family to him than his biological family and stated, “All my friends that I grew up with and that I know real well are in prison. R.J.’s my best friend. He’s been in prison probably nine times. He’s only 22.”

Other youth talked about having parents who were involved in either dealing or taking drugs or a lifestyle resulting in incarceration. Tony stated when mentioning his father, “He passed while he was incarcerated in prison so I don’t know why I got here because I got a fear of dying while I’m in here sometimes because it happened to my father. Like father, like son.” Matt had a similar story and shared that he started selling drugs at age 13 and that his father died dealing drugs while his mother struggled with drug addiction. For some of the youth, they felt the pull of this social network was so strong that it was key factor in whether they would be able to avoid coming back to prison. In relation this issue, Stan commented that he needed, “To get away from the environment. Ya know, I know so many people, and everybody know me. Even the police. I just wanna go somewhere where I can just, you know, I wanna just live.”

Ability

According to Sparks et al. (1984), ability refers to the capability of successfully completing crimes for gain. Sutherland’s (1947) theory of differential association provides the best framework for understanding Sparks et al.’s concept of ability. Specifically, I would like to use McCarthy’s (1996) interpretation of Sutherland’s theory.

Sutherland’s (1947) theory is based on the premise that all criminal behavior is learned. What is learned includes not just techniques but also attitudes directed towards criminal behavior. Sutherland’s theory explicitly recognizes the direct exposure of others’ criminal behavior and testifies to the centrality of this contact as a source for learning the skills required by certain offences. The process of learning where to get the merchandise to sell, how to sell, customers to sell to, how much to charge, how to manufacture the drug, how to avoid getting arrested, etc. according to research are taught by people whom are closely related either through being family, friends, or neighbors (Adler 1993; Bourgois 1998).

I argue that the key shift from opportunity to ability is the knowledge or street smarts necessary to know how to successfully complete the necessary tasks. Street smarts come from experience with navigating life struggles or “the streets” and cannot be learned by reading a book (Hatt 2007). Youth whose identities are rooted in street culture find their experiences and knowledge as an asset within drug trafficking rather than a drawback as in the legal workplace (Bourgois 1998).

A common theme regarding ability was the certainty many of the youth felt in their street smarts or ability to make money from dealing drugs. Stan stated, “I

know how to make that quick dollar...That's my first option. After I'm not achieving my goals, and not getting a job, I was like, I'm fed up. So, I got back up. Packed up my clothes. Went right back to where I knew I could get money at." Another youth stated, "I'd have had some pretty decent jobs, you know what I'm saying? But, they all been temporary jobs and I can't get a grip, so, that's what turns me back to the drugs again. I know I can move this. I know I can." As a result of the opportunities available to the youth through their social networks mentioned previously, the youth are able to build the necessary skills and knowledge base for making money by selling drugs. In fact, this socialization of ability is so strong that the youth see this skill set as a factor that can pull them back into dealing while trying to make money through more traditional means.

Conclusion and Implications

The stories of the youth included distinct themes according to motivation, opportunity, and availability. The motivations included a lack of economic opportunities, a lack of educational opportunity, and a desire for respect and power. Many of the youth also had easy access to becoming involved in selling drugs through family members or friends. Through these relationships, the youth were not only able to learn all of the aspects of drug trafficking, many of them developed a stronger confidence in their ability to succeed through selling drugs than through education and traditional employment.

To add to the tragedy of the stories, since the 1980's federal funding has made a shift to funding k-12 education less and corrections more with the end result being that 4 billion dollars more was spent on corrections than education by 1995 (Karp et al. (1998). During the 1980's federal, state, and local funding for corrections grew by over 900% while per pupil funding grew by only 26% (Miller 1997; NCES 1994). Furthermore, between 1980 and 2000, state spending on corrections nationwide grew at six times the rate of state spending on higher education (Zeiderberg and Schiraldi 2002). This shift makes little sense considering it costs on average \$25,000 a year to house an inmate with the highest cost being \$44,379 in Maine and the lowest \$8,128 in Alabama (U.S. Department of Justice Statistics 2004); yet, it costs approximately \$8,000–\$10,000 to educate a child each year in our public schools.

Considering that schooling experiences is one of the strongest predictors of delinquency and the current economic costs of dropouts exceed \$50 billion annually (Darling-Hammond 2006), why not put more money into education as a measure of prevention rather than wait until the problem becomes "more expensive"? Furthermore, the more years of schooling the person had completed when beginning their prison term, the less likely they were to recidivate. (U.S. Department of Education 1995). This suggests that putting more money into education and prevention, could also greatly reduce the costs associated with recidivism. The ways money is being allocated at federal and state levels is nonsensical unless it is purposeful with profit-making as the goal, regardless of who gets harmed in the process.

In examining the stories of schools, prisons, and incarcerated youth, the metaphor of a net comes to mind. The net consists of the intermeshed stories that weigh on the youth, constrain their movement, and pull them toward particular paths. The net starts to take hold at a very young age and in some cases as early as kindergarten. The few that escape are held up as “examples” to claim that the net does not exist (Alexander 2010). Those who do not escape are relegated to second class citizenry and will most likely never be able to have a say by voting in who represents their interests and rights, guaranteeing that the net will remain in place.

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