

Off the Books

The Underground Economy
of the Urban Poor

Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh

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Chapter One

Living Underground

Marlene Matteson was the person least likely to mourn the death of Johnnie “Big Cat” Williams, leader of the Maquis Park Kings, the local neighborhood gang. Marlene knew firsthand the destruction that gang activity could bring upon families. A mother of three, she was also a widower as a result of the gangland slaying of her own husband. “My husband died like [Big Cat] did,” she said, noting the similarities of Billy Matteson’s murder in 1992 and Big Cat’s fall on a cold, blustery morning in 2003. “Big Cat never knew what hit him. Just like my Billy. Came up on his back, shot him when he wasn’t looking. Probably didn’t feel nothing.” Both Billy Matteson and Big Cat were slain late at night, in the presence of their bodyguards, who were also injured. The killers were never found.

Marlene Matteson accepted the news of Big Cat’s murder with a mixture of relief and apprehension. As the president of the 1700

South Maryland Avenue Block Club, she knew that gang activity created persistent safety problems in her area. She saw in Big Cat's death a sign of difficult times ahead. Life was going to change, sharply and perhaps for the worse, in Maquis Park. She could no longer call on Big Cat to keep rank-and-file members out of parks in the afternoon, when kids came back from school. She could no longer wake him and demand that he put an end to the late-night carousing of younger gang members on her block. With little help from law enforcement, she wondered who would help her police the gang members who overtook public spaces with abandon and whose rhythms and inner clocks did not match those of the residents, like Marlene, who woke each morning to go to work or take children to school.

On that December 2003 morning, a week after Big Cat's death, Marlene Matteson sat with her thoughts and with a dozen other residents of the community in the back room of the Maquis Park Prayer and Revival Center, a small storefront church on Indiana Avenue in Chicago's historic Southside black community. She was not the only person in the room struggling to make sense of Big Cat's death. The others in attendance were unlikely to express great sadness for a gang leader who peddled drugs and brought violence and instability to the neighborhood; but they, too, were touched by sadness, anger, and an uncertainty about what lay ahead.

"You know they're going to be after each other now," said Jeremiah Wilkins, a local pastor, referring to the inevitable internecine battles among local gang members to fill Big Cat's void. "No one knows yet who's taking [Big Cat's] place."

"Yeah, well, it ain't gonna be pretty, but we been there before," said Ola Sanders, the proprietor of Ola's Hair Salon on 16th Street.

"Someone's going to be the leader, but it don't matter who. We got to stay together. That's what's really important, okay?"

"Look, whatever these brothers do, we can't stop them," chimed in James Arleander, a local handyman who for twenty years had been repairing cars off the books for local residents in the parking lot behind the church. "Let's not pretend we're sad or nothing. I mean the man was a killer! You all are acting like he's your friend. Don't make any sense to sit here crying. Man was a killer." James's voice trailed off.

"I agree," said Dr. J. T. Watkins, director of Paths Ahead, a small social service center that ran programs for Maquis Park's youth.

"Look, we got to go ahead. We all know why we're here. I mean no offense, Pastor. We're mourning, but we got to make our money. Do you all agree? Well, am I right or not?"

There was silence. The room was still except for Pastor Wilkins's finger tapping the wooden table in time with the clock on the wall. For nearly five minutes, no one responded to Dr. Watkins's question, in part because no one could justifiably dispute his contention—money was the chief reason for the group's convening that morning. The livelihood of these community leaders was at stake. Yes, they were all concerned about the escalation in violence that was certain to result with Big Cat's passing; other local gangs would be battling to control the Kings' drug-trafficking territories in the neighborhood. They were all aware of the chaos that could come as a new hierarchy was chosen. But Big Cat's death placed in sharp relief their own reliance on dangerous and illegal ways of making ends meet. They were forced to confront their own deep involvement in an outlaw economy.

Although some found it difficult to admit, everyone in the room that morning had benefited materially from Big Cat's pres-

ence. Their motive could have been personal financial gain, political power, or a desire to do their own work more effectively, whether that be preaching or changing a tire. Big Cat not only helped Marlene to police younger gang members; he also gave money to her block club for kids' parties, and members of his gang patrolled the neighborhood late at night because police presence was a rarity. Dr. Watkins and Pastor Wilkins would need to find a new source of philanthropy, now that Big Cat's monthly donations to their respective organizations had ended. Big Cat's gang ensured James Arleander a near monopoly on local off-the-books car repair by intimidating other mechanics who tried to cut into James's business. Ola probably would not receive \$500 each weekend for letting the gang turn her salon into a thriving nightclub—the weekly “Maquis Park Dee-Jay” contest had been one of Big Cat's favorite social activities. And others in the room that morning were no different: some received money from Big Cat, others benefited from the customers he sent their way—for everything from homemade meals to fake social security cards—and still others were hoping to use Big Cat's influence over two thousand young men and women to win electoral office or organize downtown protests. All of them allowed Big Cat's gang to operate fluidly, whether that meant tolerating drug selling, presiding over funerals of deceased gang members, participating in citywide gang basketball tournaments, or “cleaning” the gang's profits through their own businesses.

Such is the bizarre reality of life in Maquis Park. The demands of the ghetto require an economy utterly different from what most of America can imagine. The barber may rent his back room to a prostitute; the mechanic works out of an alley; the preacher gets donations from a gang leader; and everyone has a hand in keeping the streets tolerable and keeping the goods and

services flowing. The economy brings together an assortment of actors who may otherwise have little reason or interest in exchanging—let alone communicating—with one another. This mix is dangerous, but it is part of living underground in Maquis Park.

Big Cat's prominent position was the visible tip of the iceberg that is Maquis Park's shadow economy. He represented a very small part of the innumerable financial exchanges that are not reported to the government. From off-the-books day care and domestic work to pimping and prostitution, unreported earnings wove together the social fabric in Maquis Park and surrounding poor neighborhoods. Big Cat was just one of many traders, brokers, hustlers, hawkers, and, of course, customers, who moved about in the streets, homes, and alleyways selling inexpensive labor and goods—or searching for them. He was certainly one of its most famous—and infamous—but he was just one of many who performed functions most Americans associate with the mainstream economy and the government agencies that regulate legitimate exchange. He was only one of many local stakeholders who resolved economic disputes because the state had no formal authority. Many other local people enforced contracts, or resolved disputes, or, for a fee, could find you a gun, a social security card, or even a job as a day laborer or a nanny for a wealthy family. Others may have claimed control over parks, alleyways, and street corners; these people would have to be paid if or wanted to fix a car, sell drugs, or panhandle at that spot. And there were many local loan sharks, besides Big Cat, who could loan you cash, or who could find you customers—for stolen stereos or drugs, for prostitutes or home-cooked lunches—in a matter of a few hours.

The individuals who offer these services and goods in Maquis

Park are not always notorious, like Big Cat, nor do they operate solely in the clandestine world. Some move with ease between underground and legitimate economies. And in Maquis Park they may be the pillars of the community. Some, like Ola Sanders, are well-known proprietors whose businesses have suffered in recent years. They cannot resist the opportunity for immediate cash to supplement their legitimate earnings. So they rent out their space to a gang or another underground trader. They develop creative hustling schemes and do not report their income. They might even exchange services with each other off the books, letting barter replace taxable income altogether. Others, like Pastor Wilkins, are religious leaders who do not boast a wealthy congregation that commutes from the suburbs, and who instead counsel and console those near to them: the poor, the delinquent, the marginal, the disadvantaged, and the criminal. They offer solace and consolation and favors to the forgotten while asking few questions about the source of donations. With only one local bank, anyone with access to cash is a potential lender and creditor, although the exorbitant interest rates they charge make these loan sharks less pillars of the community and more a necessary evil. And there are police officers and officials who themselves understand and accept that residents live outside of the formal economy. They let James Arleander fix cars without threat of arrest; they resolve disputes secretly between entrepreneurs rather than confiscating their goods; and at times they use a "scared straight" approach with a teenage drug dealer rather than dump the youngster into the criminal justice system. Whether as traders, dealers, customers, or mediators, it would be difficult to find anyone in Maquis Park not somehow involved in the underground economy.

With such overlap of people and goods and services, it is dif-

icult to say where the underground economy begins and ends in Maquis Park. Despite the moralizing of some, we cannot truly understand the "shady" economy if we see it as a dirty, lawless world of violence and disrepute, one that tarnishes an otherwise pristine sphere where everyone pays their taxes, obeys the laws, and turns to the government to solve disputes and maintain order.¹ Life underground is dangerous, and conventional morality is flouted there, to be sure. But its boundaries are not so clear. Not, for that matter, is the underground economy inhabited by a single, distinct class of citizens. Anyone could be entrepreneur, client, or broker in this world. With few well-paying full-time jobs available in the neighborhood and with access only to the most menial jobs elsewhere in the city, any Maquis Park resident may turn to hustling as a temporary means to keep food on the table, clothes on a child's back, and rent paid up. Anyone might parlay their meager savings into a clandestine source of loans for neighbors and friends, sometimes at severe interest rates. And even the most religious persons might make themselves available, for a few dollars under the table, as a third party who can settle a pricing dispute or enforce a shady contract. Some may just dip and dab in the shady world, while for a few others it becomes the sole means of survival. But even these distinctions oversimplify, because in Maquis Park nearly everyone lives underground.

Just as the shady world exists in many shades of gray, not all who participate are criminals and not all activities are heinous. If we look beyond the surface, we find an element of necessity, of pragmatic logic, even while laws are broken and even while the standards of a just life are constantly changing. How does one judge the police officer who mediates a violent contractual dispute with backroom diplomacy, where otherwise a formal attempted murder or assault charge might have been levied on one?

or both parties? Is the officer in question displaying care for the community by settling the incident and enabling the two individuals to keep their livelihoods intact? Or is he a rogue cop taking the law into his own hands and further depriving residents of the useful services of the criminal justice system? In this and every other case of shady behavior, residents must relentlessly define and redefine what is acceptable and what is destructive to family and community. Perhaps like any community with people working outside the legitimate economy, residents of Maquis Park will make moral and ethical distinctions—although for inner-city residents the choices may include not only relatively innocuous activities, like sales of homemade clothing, but also dangerous trades like narcotics sales. The Southside residents must differentiate between those who harm and those who annoy, between those who make a little money on the side and those who jeopardize the community, recognizing all the while that they may be the trader one day and the one passing judgment the next. The judgments are not easy, nor made lightly, for dollars are scarce, times are hard, and compromises must be made if life is to go on.

This book is about the underground economy. It explores how people work beneath the radar, earning a living and providing for themselves and their families. It examines how people cope with the attendant risks and consequences, and ultimately it tries to understand how a community lives and breathes—how it continues to function—within a very different set of rules. At its core, the underground economy is a widespread set of activities, usually scattered and not well integrated, through which people earn money that is not reported to the government and that, in some cases, may entail criminal behavior. In other words, the unreported income can derive from *licit* exchange, such as selling

homemade food or mowing a neighbor's lawn, and *illicit* practices, such as advertising sexual favors or selling secondhand guns without a permit.

Most underground exchanges are short-term efforts to make a buck, but they can nevertheless follow strict patterns. Individuals know where to meet one another to trade off the books; there are usually particular places where this trading occurs and particular people who are known to be involved. People will have a rough idea of prices or rates of barter and trade before initiating the exchange. And it is not difficult to predict when conflicts may arise; nor are people entirely unaware of the means for addressing disputes over quality, pricing, and service. In other words, while there are endless reasons to participate in the underground (or to stop doing so), there are always rules to be obeyed, codes to be followed, and likely consequences of actions.

Gangs and mafias anchor our popular imagination of underground trading, but the reality is far more complicated. In urban neighborhoods of all races and ethnicities one will find not only gangs, but networks of personal tailors and clothiers, burglary and gambling outfits, stolen car rings, livery services, and other organizations that develop clandestine entrepreneurial schemes. But these organized groups are more a notable exception than the norm. Fundamentally, underground exchange is a transaction between individuals. Other parties—not only the buyer and seller—may be involved if regulation is necessary, be it third-party arbitration, holding cash or goods in escrow, or to deal with unforeseen consequences, like a threat to household security or public safety that ensues because a conflict has gotten out of hand. Thus, the underground can provide ample opportunity to make money for individuals interested in offering a variety of services and playing many roles.²

Underground transactions are so varied and commonplace that they escape any attempt at systematic documentation. It would be nearly impossible to gather accurate information on, let alone uncover, every type of earning that is not reported to the government. Even for a particular activity, like home tailoring, informal tax preparation, or drug trafficking, it is doubtful that one could put together an exhaustive accounting on how many goods are being traded or how much money is being earned in a given neighborhood. These exchanges are hidden from the state and not necessarily publicly advertised, which is one kind of barrier. A second is that some activities, like snow shoveling or weekend poker games, are so ingrained that they are not really perceived as "underground economic activity" even though participants can make substantial earnings from them and they might produce some financial gain for a wider circle of families, friends, and neighbors. These kinds of taken-for-granted practices might never be recorded, even in the most systematic effort to document the shady side of economic life.

Perhaps most important, the interpenetration of outlawed and legitimate ways of making money makes it difficult to establish accurate information on underground economies. This is not a novel problem, and it affects how we can understand shady activities in Maquis Park. Since the early seventies, when the first studies emerged, there has been continuous and lively debate among social scientists over what constitutes an underground economy. In fact, the disagreements begin with the very terms that are used to reference unreported earnings. The terms *informal*, *parallel*, *alternative*, *illegal*, and *black market* appear as frequently in the scholarly writings as the term *underground*.³ At the heart of the debates, there is the question whether one should distinguish between licit and illicit behavior. Some researchers hold that activi-

ties, such as drug trafficking and prostitution, that are outlawed and whose earnings are unreported to government agencies, should be kept distinct from licit practices that are illegal only because there is no official government regulation of them. These scholars designate the former as "criminal" in order to isolate the latter realm of economic exchange, which they hold is quite similar to legitimate economic activity—and indeed, could be legitimate if the manager or proprietor followed workplace restrictions, paid a minimum wage, declared the income to the Internal Revenue Service, and otherwise adhered to the conventional forms of government oversight and monitoring.⁴

But attempts to separate so-called illicit goods and services from licit ones are not always successful. The distinctions are often fuzzy and the demarcations seem arbitrary. Peyote, for example, is legal for religious use by Native Americans, but federal law is unclear whether non-Native Americans can claim it as a medicinal substance if they claim adherence to Native American religious precepts. So too with prostitution and marijuana use, which are permissible in some states and not in others. Sodomy laws also vary. And all of these laws can vary over time; indeed, where referendums are in place, they can be overturned or put back into effect every few years by the electorate, thereby making substantive distinctions even more difficult. As a consequence, attempting *a priori* to remove criminal behavior in discussions of underground economies will necessarily appear somewhat arbitrary and *ad hoc*.⁵

One consequence of the lack of consensus is that one can find markedly different estimates of the size of America's underground economy.⁶ One study concluded that the federal government lost \$83 to \$93 billion annually in taxes by failing to monitor effectively underground economic activity. Another

agency report that focused only on drugs and gambling found that roughly \$26 billion was being traded from this realm alone, which would put the overall federal tax gap much higher. (The drug and gambling estimate is also disputed—a recent report claimed that \$50 billion is traded annually.⁷) One study focuses on individual participants, rather than sector of trade, and finds that each year four out of five Americans purchase something in the informal economy; this could lead to estimations of overall size that dwarf the IRS estimates. Another report indicated that 25 percent of the labor force (in 1983) was working underground, while yet another puts this number at around 17 percent of all workers. And when income is the focus, some report that \$70 to \$100 billion is being earned off the books annually. All of these studies employ different definitions of the underground and therefore differ in what kinds of activities they take into account. So, although one can conclude with some confidence that the underground economy is significant for Americans, one is hard-pressed to have confidence in exact estimations of its size or dollar flow, the number of businesses dealing off the books, and so on.

There are practical consequences to this indeterminacy. City, state, and federal governments are always struggling to ensure that tax coffers are filled and that there is enough money to provide public services. Even by the smallest estimates of underground revenue, effective taxation of that income could dramatically increase the resources at hand for law enforcement, sanitation, public transportation, and other municipal services. Thus every few years we see a flurry of public wrangling by federal legislators, taxing authorities, mayors, and other officials over how big America's underground economy has become and what remedial steps need to be taken to realign taxation and policing

to recover lost revenue.⁸ Politicians are also concerned with unregulated trading because they must respond to the social impact of underground economies on individuals and neighborhoods. Any economic exchange that is not under state auspices could be exposing people to unsafe working conditions or exploitation. Even if the work conditions are not the problem, underground trading can be dangerous to the public and thus commands the attention of politicians and police.⁹

Given all of these variations, it is futile to attempt to give an exhaustive accounting of the underground economy—whether for the country as a whole or for a small urban neighborhood. So, scholars find it is necessary to make adjustments in their work and settle on approximations. As a consequence, research on the underground tends to take a broad, national view, or it looks at earnings in one place, like an organization or neighborhood. Some studies end up focusing on the “criminal side,” while others prefer to follow the licit goods and services that are exchanged. A researcher will often find it more manageable not to look at the shady economy as whole, but instead focus on one constituent sphere such as drug trafficking or unreported domestic work. No strategy is foolproof and unsusceptible to challenge, just as no investigator can expect to have full knowledge of what takes place off the books in someone else's home, or on a street corner, or in a business. But scholarly priorities can also be a distraction or a hindrance when the objective is to look inside our neighborhoods at the real people negotiating real situations that are shaped by living underground.

Like most of the existing research on the underground, this book is also an approximation. It is about the underground activity in one urban community, Maquis Park. And it is set in a particular historical period, roughly from 1995 to 2003. I did not

witness all—or even most—hidden exchanges in Maquis Park during these years. I did not speak with every person toiling secretly to make a buck, nor did I document each and every place where exchanges occurred. Even though I spent many days and nights observing illegal economic activity in the area, I cannot offer an omniscient view. This neighborhood has been around for more than a hundred years, and its underground economy has likely existed for all those years. My work dissects just a small slice of this rich history, but what we unearth is revealing indeed.

Though you wouldn't know it by looking at the dilapidated streets and empty lots, Maquis Park has a storied history. From the neighborhood's beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century until the early 1900s, working-class Irish immigrants populated the community. The region as a whole changed in the mid-twentieth century. African Americans pushed southward from areas near the central business district in search of cheaper rents and better neighborhood conditions. They moved into communities like Maquis Park that had been largely closed off due to segregation, real estate discrimination, and redlining by banks. Migrants also came from the sharecropping American South, and their arrival by the thousands in Chicago meant that the ghetto was always on the verge of bursting at its seams. Maquis Park's white homeowners had used restrictive covenants to prevent the sale of homes to blacks, but such resistance was futile in the face of overwhelming population growth and the expansion of the black community.

As their numbers grew, black Chicagoans built a "Black Metropolis." Maquis Park became part of a broad area of black Southside settlement where migrants and native black Chicago-

ans could find comfort, opportunity, and a place of their own in the bustling city. But largely they were shunted off from much of that city due to the racism of their white neighbors and the ruling white machine. While they lobbied, protested, and struggled for their share, as a partial response they turned their energies inward. Maquis Park and its neighboring areas became a parallel urban world, integrated into Chicago yet set off because its inhabitants developed institutions that mirrored those of the larger metropolis but served mostly black Chicagoans. They forgot what at the time was called a city within a city.¹⁰

The Southside Black Metropolis would be alternatively celebrated and criticized. It held a thriving black press, prominent black businesses, healthy and active civic associations, and the kind of diversity and spontaneity one would expect to find in an urban milieu. It was known as "Bronzeville," a term that honored the unrelenting spirit and commitment of black Americans to forge the good life. On the other hand, its residents were cut off from many political and economic resources, and they were largely unable to acquire homes or run businesses in white neighborhoods. Thus the Southside suffered overcrowding and inadequate housing, limited commercial development, high unemployment, and severe blight. A mansion might adjoin a transient hotel, and a row of shacks might sit opposite a thriving entertainment district. The most prosperous black Americans were relegated daily of the ceiling on social mobility that kept them segregated and that forced them to fend for themselves when the city's institutions failed them. For this, they shouted at both the ruling political elites and their own black political representatives who worked in the city machine.

In their drive to provide for themselves, black Chicagoans developed an alternate, "underground" economy—one international-

to, but distinct from, the wider urban political economy. Even though black laborers were a significant part of the city's industrial and service sector labor force, there were not enough jobs available for black job seekers. So they worked for menial, off-the-books wages, often in their own community, as janitors and cleaners, waiters and entertainers, shoe shiners, tailors, housepainters, and general laborers. Whites would not hire black contractors for home repair, but they would turn to black women for domestic help, housecleaning, and child care, and they typically paid them under the table. Although black businesses flourished, there was inadequate financial assistance available from white-owned banks. So those starting businesses and those needing cash to survive a downturn went to unregulated creditors, loan sharks, and political bosses for a loan—for which they faced not only high interest rates but also physical harm if they were unable to repay. A significant share of this parallel economy involved criminal work, like numbers running and vice, in which not only were the earnings unreported but the activities themselves were illegal.

The outcome of all these practices was the emergence of a vibrant "shady" economy in Chicago's Southside. Well into the postwar era, the Black Metropolis boasted a vibrant alternate sphere of exchange and trading that supplanted the mainstream commercial sphere. It was not only a necessity, it was also a core part of the cultural life of the region. Politicians grew famous by dispensing patronage in the form of city contracts and off-the-books work—sometimes for a kickback and always for a vote on election day. In entertainment and gambling, unreported income was always available if one had connections to the ward boss, madam, or loan shark who controlled numbers, betting, local lotteries, brothels, and gambling parlors. Storied films like *Uptown Saturday Night* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* spoke to the

flattering view that many people, not just in black America but the country as a whole, held of the shady aspirant. For centuries, the outlaw, fighting both government and the entrenched powers to rise above the fray and accumulate wealth, has been an American hero, and in the mid-twentieth city this figure found an avatar in the black ghetto hustler.

After the civil rights era, Marquis Park suffered the fate of many American inner cities. Its wealthier classes left and moved into previously segregated areas, while its working and poor households remained. The area lost whatever mitigating effect on poverty the better-off households once contributed—to ensure that some streets were cleaned, that some parks were maintained, that some schools were kept in decent condition—and blight overwhelmed the physical landscape. Many of the beautiful brownstones reached a level of disrepair that required attention beyond the financial resources of their owners. Apartment buildings became abandoned due to neglectful landlords and the out-migration of the middle- and upper-class families. Sanitation services grew insufficient, and one saw litter and refuse everywhere. The homeless set up camp in the abandoned buildings but also in shanties alongside roads and in parks. People sat idle and out of work nearly everywhere.

But the alternate economy continued to thrive. Indeed, the underground economy was fast becoming a primary economy for black ghetto dwellers. Buying goods cheaply, whether on the street or in the alley, behind closed doors or outside of the neglectful state, was still part of their recipe for household survival. Off-the-books services, from tax preparation and general labor to security and entertainment, were plentiful."

Hustling was the word coined in popular discourse to refer to the indefatigable and creative attempts by the down-and-out to

find work, make a buck, and make ends meet. But importantly, hustling included not only the labor to find illicit earnings, but also the work entailed in dealing with the consequences of living by shady means.¹² Hustling meant insecurity, crime, and exploitative behavior, to which people had to respond. And in a time period when policing was inadequate and law enforcement relations with inner-city neighborhoods throughout black urban America were colored by neglect and distrust, it meant people sometimes had to take matters into their own hands. Thus, the hustle also involved a diverse set of strategies to make sure that the shady world did not completely ruin the social fabric. These strategies were often as creative as the illegal activities themselves. Whether they settled disputes or enforced underground contracts, people hustled not only to put food on the table, but also to maintain order in their streets and communities.

In time, the coexistence of despair and the outlaw lifestyle would draw the attention of those in the wider world. A well-spring of public scrutiny arrived at the doorstep of communities like Maquis Park in the eighties, after nearly two decades of poverty, unemployment, business failure, and high crime had swept through and ravaged the social and physical landscape. In academic and press reportage, critics and scholars tried to make sense of the apparently marked remove of the black ghetto from the mainstream. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, sociologist William Julius Wilson diagnosed the presence of a subclass of black Americans living not only in conditions of extreme impoverishment, but also in relative remoteness from their surrounding city. More than their inability to find work marked their "social isolation," Wilson argued. They suffered inadequate integration into many urban institutions, from the police and schools to philanthropy and the press. And, he pointed out, unlike the mid-twentieth cen-

tury there were no middle-class persons to serve as role models or provide social controls over unruly and delinquent behavior that was now growing out of control.¹³

Following Wilson's essay, a flurry of critical assessment arose over the black ghetto. Scholars focused on the household as the root cause of isolation, deploying all sorts of statistical data—such as the alarming rate of teenage pregnancy, high rates of welfare dependency, absentee fathers and mother-led families—in an effort to isolate the role of black family formation in the reproduction of poverty. Detailed press reports, like Ken Auletta's *The Underclass*, spoke of the cultural pathologies, such as a lack of work ethic and a predilection for unruly behavior, that had been spawned in areas seemingly forgotten by time and morality. Human interest reportage, like Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here*, pointed out the limited mental horizons of inner-city youth and young adults; few of these young people could envision a life for themselves beyond the ghetto, in marked contrast to the yuppies who were defining the renewed American spirit in the era of globalization. By the beginning of the eighties, when cities initiated revitalization programs to attract middle- and upper-class residents, the ghetto was pitied for what it lacked (normal families, good schools, working adults) and criticized for what it boasted (gangs, drugs, and crime).

In a way, this kind of attention to the urban underclass was nothing new. From the late nineteenth century onward, Chicago's black communities (and those in other major industrialized cities) were the repositories for public indignation and, eventually, some type of social reform. The clarion call of distress over a population living outside the social mainstream occurred every two or three decades. Depending on the political climate (conservative or progressive), policies like mass arrest and incarceration,

urban renewal and housing construction, philanthropic investment and community development, would follow to integrate the disenfranchised. America's concern in the nineties for the dispossessed black inner city, seeing in it a form of existence that must be razed and then restored, is really part of a long history of inveighing against and expressing moral outrage at how the minority poor live.

In the midst of this public clamor and sometimes self-righteous inspection, Maquis Park and many other alienated and poor black communities endure. Though not always in full measure and in comfort and security, households manage. Parents feed and clothe children, chaos does not rule, and people experience joy and see beauty. Residents deal with problems, like crime and delinquency, even if their ways of coping and maintaining social order do not receive much attention. And, as this book contends, an important dimension of their daily struggle to create a habitable place to live and work has occurred behind the scenes. Their labor takes place with resources amassed in the underground economy. Their work to restore order and keep Maquis Park safe and secure takes place often outside government agencies that can be, at varying times, neglectful and begrudging in allocating resources, yet spiteful in the drive to police and punish. Their collective labors have coalesced largely outside the watchful eye of media and scholars, for whom the tragedies of poverty have perhaps justifiably attracted more attention than the simple and remarkable ways in which people actually tend to their affairs in such environs. This book is about making visible these everyday "shady" efforts by Maquis Park residents to maintain their community.

Chapter Two Home at Work

Marlene Matteson, "Bird" Harris are Maquis Park's "soccer" players. On the 1700 block of South Maryland Avenue, a three-bedroom house that requires rent that they cannot afford and that their landlord is evicting them from, on a cold, clammy April morning, they are working to clear debris. In a few hours, their children will be playing games and climbing trees. As they are cleaning crack cocaine receptacles, newspaper clippings about their children, the week that has just been is dawning.

The three women often remark on the weather. For example, Eunice, who earns her living as a hairdresser along Maquis Park's main thoroughfare, works in the town streets. Eunice works in the f