



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 42
Issue 3 September

Article 16

2015

Review of *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America*. Jill Leovy. Reviewed by John DeCarlo.

John DeCarlo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

DeCarlo, John (2015) "Review of *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America*. Jill Leovy. Reviewed by John DeCarlo.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 3 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol42/iss3/16>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



compelling. However, the authors drew conclusions from these anecdotes and personal observations. Additionally, in Chapter 5, "It's All in My Head: Suffering, PTSD, and the Triumph of the Therapeutic," the authors make unsubstantiated claims regarding therapeutic treatments. In this chapter, psychological treatments are characterized as contributing to the structural system that oppresses women. The authors state, "We suspect therapy is more likely to be effective for securely housed, middle-class Americans" (p. 103). They then go on to discuss a culturally irrelevant example from Sri Lanka that suggests that psychotherapy for trauma "makes things worse," as one of their participants reported. While their points are logical from the sociological lens through which they are examining this situation, they choose to ignore a wide body of research of evidence-based trauma treatment. Additionally, their repeated linking of actual professional psychological treatment to pop psychologists from "Oprah" and "Jerry Springer" suggests a lack of understanding of the field of which they are so critical.

In conclusion, *Can't Catch a Break* is an engaging read and serves as a good primer for those interested in how policies and institutions maintain gender inequality. However, it appears to succumb to internal biases resulting from a reliance on the ethnographic interviews that made the book so approachable.

*Brandy Henry, Heller School for Social Policy & Management,
Brandeis University*

Jill Leovy, *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America*. Spiegel & Grau (2015), 386 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover).

Jill Leovy has been a crime reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* since 2000. Her book, *Ghettoside*, follows the police investigation of the 2007 murder of an 18-year-old African-American man, Bryant Tennale, the son of a Los Angeles detective, who was shot and killed in an area of Los Angeles called "Ghettoside" by locals and police officers who work nearby. Leovy chronicles the police investigation from the ground in an amalgam of case-study/narrative/journalistic fashions. Much of the book focuses on L.A. Police Detective John Skaggs' perspective and interactions during his probe of the murder (which he subsequently solved).

The book's narrative documents an underlying trend is that is already well known to those who study the criminal justice system: the majority of homicides in the United States involve young black men killing other young black men. Leovy tells us that, "Just 6 percent of the country's population [comprise] 40 percent of those murdered." Indeed, in 2003 the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics special report revealed that firearms violence rates for blacks ages 12 or older were 40% higher than those for Hispanics and 200% higher than those for Caucasians.

Leovy looks at the problem of Black violence mostly from the perspective of reactive police response and investigation and largely from an investigative outlook rather than a preventive policy standpoint. She calls into question the fundamental concept of police legitimacy, described so well in the President's Task Force on 21st Century policing's final report. She writes, "[T]he reluctance of witnesses to testify was the primary reason so many murder cases went unsolved." Without trust and legitimacy, communities don't talk to the police and, more importantly, don't police themselves through collective efficacy. *Ghettoside* is not the first book to describe this condition. Elijah Anderson's classic, *Code of the Street*, foresaw in Philadelphia many of the social conditions that Leovy opines as the causes of Black violence in Los Angeles. Poverty, drugs, and the differential association that causes young Black men to seek acceptance in gangs were and to this day remain important factors in the criminogenic crime facilitators that exist in many Black, inner city communities contemporarily.

Leovy's analysis reflects the "Broken Windows" theory popularized by Kelling and Wilson (1982): "[T]his is a book about a very simple idea: where the criminal justice system fails to respond vigorously to violent injury and death, homicide becomes endemic." And "it's like a default setting. Wherever human beings are forced to deal with each other under conditions of weak legal authority, the Monster lurks."

Leovy pays a lot of attention to her concern that only a small percentage of homicides are solved, but her attention is misplaced because, in fact, homicides are more frequently resolved than any other crime (FBI, 2010). Leovy, unfortunately, romanticizes police work, clearly writing as a journalist and not as a serious researcher. To become familiar with actual

research in policing, read for instance, Skogan, 2004, or Sherman, Farrington, et al., 2006.

All in all, however, this is an important book. It brings to light for a general audience something that police and academics already know: the homicide and crime rates in Black neighborhoods and Black representation in penal institutions are unacceptably skewed. The author takes us on a journey of occurrences that most individuals do not consider every day. Unfortunately, an increase of police presence and even an increase in police legitimacy within communities will not be enough to break the cycle of violent Black crime. Sociologist Orlando Patterson has recently written that changes other than those in policing are necessary. A reduction in youth incarcerations, chemical detoxification of ghetto neighborhoods, increases in child care programs such as Head Start and the Nurse Family Partnership program are all needed, along with social experiments like the president's My Brother's Keeper program.

As the author of *Ghettoside* observes, there are no simple answers. Complex problems like violence mandate complex solutions. The book may be frustrating for academics looking to tie in theories and solutions; however, the book is a sojourn into a world not often seen and which can no longer be ignored.

John DeCarlo, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

Teresa Platz Robinson, *Café Culture in Pune: Being Young and Middle Class in Urban India*. Oxford University Press (2014), 320 pages, \$55.00 (hardcover).

Teresa Platz Robinson's ethnography of café culture in post-millennial Pune offers an engaging exploration of modernity, identity and intergenerational politics among India's middle-class urban youth. Robinson, a social anthropologist by training, shares insights from a year-long immersion in a city that has been economically and culturally transformed by the information technology revolution, focusing on cafés as emergent "third places" where young professionals explore their relationships to tradition and modernity while creating new norms for autonomy and integrity among their peers.