Introduction

A Personal Journey from Inner to Outer City

I was raised in the South Bronx, several blocks from Yankee Stadium. My parents settled there in August of 1951, impoverished after spending their post-war years in Germany’s displaced persons camps. They survived the war, concentration camps, and the death of nearly all their close family members. The trauma of their war-time lives, the inability to properly speak the English language, and a lack of marketable skills made their early years in America terribly difficult. Like so many struggling parents in my neighborhood, they spent much of their time, days and evenings, trying to find work or at work. They seemed too busy to know about the details of my daily activities or the kind of friends with whom I was “hanging out.”

Fortunately, the kids I spent time with were generally well behaved. We avoided the street-corner gangs along Ogden and Woodycrest avenues, although we participated in occasional fights and petty acts of theft and property damage. We thought nothing of our bruises and broken noses and viewed our minor acts of delinquency as just acts of mischief rather than serious acts of crime. A few times we were questioned or warned by the police, but never arrested. In retrospect, several of those police warnings made considerable sense since we could have drowned teaching ourselves how to swim in the Harlem River. A police officer’s stern threat of arrest for reselling tickets at Yankee Stadium was enough to cause me to desist from this rather lucrative neighborhood activity.

As is the case today, children raised in impoverished inner-city neighborhoods face all sorts of risks. Many youth face not only the risk of assault but also the risk of being humiliated to the point where they withdraw or seek the protection of others who are all too willing to
fight. They face the risk of parents who are abusive or too troubled to care for them, and thus the risk of being too often on their own, disconnected from a world of secure, confident, and capable adults. Just as important is the risk of not liking school because of their inability to follow the words of those in positions of authority.

Through no fault of their own, a few of my friends had a difficult time following the rules at Public School 73, and, in turn, they had a lot of trouble finding their way. They found it hard to sit still in our classrooms, where teachers struggled to maintain order. Several of my friends had to make numerous trips to the principal’s office and spent time in school detention. My close friend since early childhood, Chester Solinsky, had an especially difficult time. It seemed that the teachers did not like him, and he certainly did not like them. His school-related difficulties continued until he was no longer required to attend. He not only resisted the rules of our school but also the many other rules of society, such as those that would lead to stable employment.

Chester wandered far to find his place. For a while, he found it in Taiwan, where he married and started a business of his own. But the business was not totally legitimate, and he had to leave Taiwan for reasons that he was not yet ready to tell me when we last met. He returned to New York City where his parents lived and where he could renew his license to drive a cab. But with a wife who spoke little English, two young children to support, and considerable debts to repay, he worked long, late-night shifts, and he was all too willing to pick up just about anyone who might pay his fare.

It was not long after his return to New York that Chester’s hope of starting his adult life over again ended abruptly. During the summer of 1983, the violence of New York City’s impoverished population finally caught up with him. He was shot and killed by four young passengers who demanded his night’s earnings. The ages of the passengers were between sixteen and twenty-one. The oldest in the group wielded the gun that ended Chester’s life at the young age of thirty-two. Chester’s wife became widowed, his children fatherless, and I lost a dear friend.

The newspapers reported that the youth who shot Chester lived in a section of Queens not unlike the South Bronx neighborhood where Chester and I were raised. They speculated that he may have resisted his young robbers. Nobody could know for sure, but I knew Chester
was not one to give in easily. He was tougher than I when it came to holding on to our stickball bats, basketballs, or what little money we had in our pockets. Although I never knew him to start a fight, he was quick to defend himself even if it meant holding his ground when threatened. I could picture Chester when confronting his robbers’ demands saying, “This is my night’s earnings, and I worked much too hard for these precious bucks to give them to you young punks even with that gun.” Chester would have surely included an obscenity or two in his declaration to reinforce the point that he could not easily be intimidated.

Chester had learned to resist more than just the threat or authority of a young man holding a gun; he had learned to resist modern-day society’s many places of authority. He had trouble conforming to their stated rules in our public school, and then later in his various occupational pursuits. The reasons for Chester’s resistance cannot be easily summarized in an introduction to a book about delinquency and control—but perhaps it can be told through the struggles that many youth face in finding their place in a complex modern-day world.

So I begin by wondering in this introduction how different life might have been for Chester if he had been raised in one of society’s safer, more affluent places. Would he still be alive if he had been brought up in a wealthy suburb by upper-middle-class parents? Would he have led a more cautious life because caution would have been all around him? There would have been gated suburban subdivisions, burglar alarms, private mall security guards, school resource officers, and the safety of all those large sports utility vehicles. He would have been exposed to adult-supervised after-school activities instead of the school-yard fights that PS 73 was known for. His daily activities would have been supervised as car pools ferried him and his friends from one suburban activity after another. He might even have been more engaged with his parents, and have led a more secure life.

Yet my image of this good suburban life for Chester could be overly idealized. Chester might have been just as rebellious, and he might have had just as many difficulties in his good suburban school as he did at PS 73. Perhaps he had a learning disability that would have placed him among similarly learning-disabled youth, thereby disengaging him even further from the mainstream. Chester might have even become resentful and angry because he could hardly meet the high expectations
of his affluent parents. In a more competitive suburban place, he might have felt terribly envious of the kid next door, who was heading off to a prestigious university. Who knows whether his jealousy would have led him to become even more rebellious, and to find comfort in a drug culture of similarly troubled suburban youth?

I was more fortunate than Chester, first in adolescence and then later in adulthood. One broken nose was more than enough for me. Perhaps I was lucky to have been able to leave the South Bronx at the beginning of my high-school years. My parents decided to move right after an elderly woman was robbed and murdered in the lobby of our apartment building. Our neighborhood, they realized, was becoming even more impoverished and less safe. They joined others who were fleeing the South Bronx for New York City’s less crime-ridden neighborhoods.

My parents eventually found an apartment in a lower- to middle-income neighborhood in Queens. They openly worried about how they could afford to pay rent three times higher than our rent-controlled Bronx apartment. But the move to a less crime-ridden neighborhood was a good one. With a safer neighborhood came a more competitive high school and friends who valued their education. Not only did these newly discovered friends care about school; their parents cared as well. Together, they seemed less troubled than the families I had known in the Bronx. A few teachers at Forest Hills High School also seemed to make a difference in my life, encouraging my educational pursuits and enabling me to graduate and subsequently to attend college. One academic degree led to another, and I was on my way to leading a more secure life—one that was far removed from my high-crime, impoverished, inner-city neighborhood in the Bronx.

Discovering the Safe City

The idea of a safe place to live always seemed to make sense to me. But it was not until I interviewed for my first academic position that I realized that more than just families were in search of safer places to reside. Businesses and educational institutions were also leaving the inner cities for the outer suburbs. Many of the universities where I interviewed were located in places far removed from the inner-city areas with which their university names were associated.
One of my first job interviews was at the State University of New York at Buffalo, which I learned was not in the city of Buffalo. It had moved, like many of Buffalo’s residents, to a suburb that bordered the northeastern part of the city. University officials had decided to expand their campus by relocating to a bordering suburb that had plenty of land to offer. They claimed that they needed a larger geographical area to expand the university into the largest campus of the State University of New York system.

But a less often stated reason for the move is the fact that the older campus bordered an impoverished section of Buffalo. When I started my tenure-track job as an assistant professor in the Sociology Department, I soon learned that several of my colleagues had bitterly protested the university administrators’ decision to relocate its main campus and had spent a considerable amount of time campaigning for the university to stay within the city of Buffalo. These colleagues lived in the city and believed—for good sociological reasons—that the future of a good society resided in the diversity of the city. They felt that the university, businesses, and developers were eroding Buffalo’s economic base and its racial diversity. They saw the university’s move as creating an even more isolated and segregated society.

Despite their protests, the University of Buffalo continued to develop its suburban campus. As millions of Americans fled the inner cities for affluent, less densely populated, and more homogenous suburbs, so too did the University of Buffalo’s main campus, along with many other universities and high-tech industries throughout the country. The reasons for this movement cannot be summarized merely by the term “white flight.” Other reasons should be considered, such as those that relate to the fact that the centrally located city would be less relevant to the way many Americans needed or wished to live and work. And in the process the inner city was becoming more impoverished and its outer suburbs more affluent.

Of course, I, like many others, prefer to live on the side of the affluent. My late wife and I wanted our young children to attend good, well-funded public schools, close to lots of well-organized recreational activities, in a community with quality housing and friendly neighbors. We preferred the open, less congested, safer residential spaces of suburbia, and we bought into the “American Dream” of a newly built house where
each of our kids could have his or her own room. This suburb was not only safe, but also had good shopping, lots of recreational places, youth programs, and roadways that made for an easy commute to just about anywhere. Basically, I liked living in suburbia, especially with the conveniences of an attached garage with its remote opener and my first in-sink garbage disposal.

Why This Book?

My motivation for writing this book is not just personal. I was trained as a sociologically oriented criminologist and have long been curious about how delinquency is related to the kinds of places where people live. My previous writings focused on serious acts of juvenile violence and the geography of juvenile justice. One aspect of my research led me into a maximum security prison for juveniles where I became acquainted with youth who had committed serious acts of violence. The vast majority of these incarcerated juveniles were minority youth raised in impoverished, inner-city neighborhoods; a few came from my South Bronx neighborhood. But there was also a smaller group of adolescents who were raised in middle-class suburbs. The reasons for their frequent and serious offending seemed to relate to more than just one singular cause, such as bad parenting or bad neighborhood. They seemed to have missed out not only on how parents are supposed to parent, but also how schools are supposed to teach, recreational programs engage, and juvenile justice rehabilitate at the first sign of serious trouble.

Still, the fact that is obvious to anyone who has visited a maximum security prison for juveniles is that the vast majority of its inmates were raised in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. The small proportion of middle-class youth remains small because of the support and opportunities that they have received when faced with personal difficulties. In contrast, impoverished youth lack opportunities for prevention, treatment, or diversion from the punishing hard end of criminal justice. The impoverished not only face a harsher life, but also more arrests, most recently prompted by policing that advocates for strictly enforcing civility. But this kind of zero-tolerance policing is less likely to be present among middle-class youth in affluent communities. Rather, there appears to be not only more tolerance for the minor offending of youth
in affluent communities, but also more programs to prevent their adolescents from becoming high offending delinquents.

But not all is well in these middle-class families and communities. Otherwise the middle-class, white suburban youth whom I met would not have been incarcerated. Some parents, no matter what their social class, are too deeply troubled themselves to care for their children. Treatment programs and providers are not always that good. Sometimes the good schools are not the right schools for a particular youth’s unique learning style or disabilities. Suburban safety nets may not work for a proportion of youth who require more intense treatment and more care than parents are able or willing to provide.

The idea that some cities are safer and better places than others for youth to transition into adulthood is reinforced in the published list of a popular consumer magazine. *Money Magazine* happened to name the suburb where I had lived as “America’s safest city”; hence, one part of the title of this book.

**Modernity Defined**

The other part of the title includes the words “modernity” and “delinquency.” These terms are not mutually exclusive. The concept of delinquency as an age-specific category did not exist prior to the social and legal extension of childhood dependency into the teenage years. For example, in pre-modern times, my childhood friends who had trouble in school would not have had to continue to attend, especially during their early high-school years. They would most likely have been working alongside their parents and extended family members. Obviously, this kind of pre-modern world was a lot narrower; there was less of a gap between childhood and adulthood.

The delinquent as legally distinct from the criminal emerged in the nineteenth century along with industrialization and urbanization. Industrialization required vast numbers of people to leave their rural villages for centrally located cities. Although many found work in factories that were close to their inner-city homes, their lives became more divided as they adapted to more than one division of labor. The industrial shape of modernity not only produced a wealth of products, but also an unprecedented level of societal dependency. Parents were
required to work farther away from their homes, often long hours on an assembly line. They needed assistance most often in the shape of public schools, community centers, recreational programs, and if all was not going well, a system of juvenile justice. In other words, adolescence had to be better regulated, and one method for doing so was through child welfare and juvenile justice legislation, including such laws as those that required adolescents to attend school even if they did not wish to. By the end of the nineteenth century, juvenile justice officials, probation officers, teachers, guidance counselors, and social workers were all playing a role in the life of adolescents. For many adolescents, the juvenile court became a first- as well as a last-resort response to many of their problems of adjusting to society’s demands, like attending school.

Modernity not only impacted how my friends were raised; it also defined their troubling behaviors from truancy to serious acts of delinquency. For instance, in pre-modern times, several of the teenagers who participated in the killing of my friend Chester would not have been subject to youthful offender status. Their adolescence would not have been recognized, and they most likely would have been punished as adult criminals, since there was no system of juvenile justice to define a sixteen-year-old as a youthful offender. That changed with the onset of modernity and its system of distinguishing juveniles from adults.

But in more recent times the definition of delinquent has become less encompassing. The status of delinquent began to split into diverse sets of legal categories at a time when more than one system of juvenile justice was emerging. In New York, youthful offender status could be granted by an adult criminal court. It became another legal label within an increasingly complex system—one that created a range of legal avenues from status offender to juvenile offender and from juvenile delinquent to youthful offender. All these legal labels are produced by a society on the move—one in which the juvenile court and its definition of delinquent no longer served as the sole determinant of who is a delinquent.

Today, there are more definitions of delinquent to consider, including those that have emerged from social science. There are more opportunities for parents and their adolescents to learn about and to reflect on the reasons for delinquency. This is a more recent kind of modernity—one that I refer to as not only self-reflexive, but also “post-industrial.”
The beginnings of a post-industrial form of modernity emerged soon after World War II. It not only decentered juvenile justice, but it also decentered the city. It transformed the urbanized and industrialized city into a suburbanized, deindustrialized city. The difficulties my South Bronx friends had in finding work cannot be separated from the fact that the factories where their parents had once worked were gone, moved overseas into less developed countries where labor was considerably cheaper. Meanwhile, job opportunities in the service and information-generating sectors of the economy grew, and while residents of the inner city were becoming even more impoverished, those who could afford to move into safer neighborhoods did so, often into newly developed suburbs.

So the relevance of a book on delinquency and modernity relates to the simple fact that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the majority of Americans resided in areas defined as suburban. They had moved from their city neighborhoods to suburban subdivisions, and their centrally located downtown department stores and offices relocated to dispersed shopping malls and suburban office parks. As mentioned, universities moved as well to the greener pastures of suburbia. And thanks to an expanding network of highways and suburban roadways, the outskirts of cities became more accessible, especially for those who could afford to purchase a house in a newly built suburban development. This post-industrial form of modernity not only created the places where most Americans lived, but also dictated how they would live. It enabled the expert advice that advocated certain techniques of parenting, as well as specific reasons for the sort of education, recreation, and counseling believed to be important to “normal” adolescent development.

In the chapters that follow, I will highlight how specific features of the post-industrial, safe suburban city have enabled its adolescents to avoid becoming high-offending delinquents. I argue that the residents of a safe city are able to do so through parenting techniques that are distinctly modern and through a whole host of adults in positions of assisting youth and their parents. This is the relational part of living in a post-industrial society, and why there are fewer middle-class and upper-class youth among today’s high number of incarcerated juvenile offenders.
It is the thesis of this book that affluent youth have more opportunities to be relationally modern, and therefore are better able to avoid the potentially devastating consequences of frequent and serious delinquencies. Of course, this is not the case for all youth. Some adolescents struggle more than others and have a more difficult time finding their place in the modern-day world, as noted in the chapters that follow.

A Roadmap to Delinquency and Modernity

The journey begins in chapter 1 where I draw on the concept of safety to formulate a modern-day society’s definition of crime and delinquency. I initially ground the concept of safety in *Money Magazine*’s list of safest cities, and then expand its definition of safety to include more than the risk of officially recorded crime. A variety of safety indicators should be considered, such as the quality of a community’s school and recreational programs for its youth. In the second part of the chapter, I illustrate how a newly built suburban city is different from the older centrally located city. Among the demographics that I cite is the fact that most Americans today live in areas classified as suburban. Suburbia has become a popular place to reside for good reason: It is perceived as a better place to raise children into healthy, law abiding adults. Another way to frame this point is by stating that the affluent suburban city affords opportunities to its youth that are less available to those in the inner city, such as good public schools and recreational facilities in a largely middle-class community.

The deeper reasons for identifying the suburban city as one kind of city within a larger metropolitan area is further related to *Money Magazine*’s definition of a city, based exclusively on population size. The city has become decentered; common definitions of “urban” and “suburban” no longer matter. A larger metropolitan area contains affluent suburban cities and impoverished inner cities. I show that a large suburban city has its proportion of poverty-stricken residents, and that today the centrally located city still has its middle-class. The proportion varies from one metropolitan area to the next. The important point is that in a post-industrial era, urban and suburban can no longer clearly be defined. Although both the urbanized and suburbanized city have become decentered, I show that it is more so the case in suburbia where...
residential subdivisions, shopping malls, office parks, and light industrial zones are dispersed along non-hierarchically arranged roadways. In the post-industrial mix of high-tech, information-age economies, there is no easily identifiable structure demarcating inner and outer city zones. A kind of complexity, isolation, and rationality reproduces the way that adolescents are expected to find their place in the modern world—first in their smaller suburban setting, and then in their larger society.

The latter part of chapter one describes how the resources of the affluent safe city can support adolescents. Another way to make this point is to state that money, good schools, and good recreational programs make a difference not only in adolescents’ educational and occupational pursuits, but also in how they are able to avoid the official designation of delinquent.

Chapter 2, which extends my initial discussion of suburban cities, begins with several stories of famous and not-so-famous individuals. Most of the stories have good outcomes, but a few are terribly tragic. I then proceed to provide a definition of modernity that is closely linked to the concept of adolescence. Both modernity and adolescence are complex and transitional periods of time. Modernity provides the familial, educational, and legal settings that allow adolescents to transition into adulthood. There is a structure to this kind of modernity and its many divisions. The school is one division; the family and the juvenile justice system another. In each of these settings, I argue, adolescents are expected to think on their own, reflecting rationally about the rules of their many complex social settings. The good stories that I tell are stories of youth who, thanks to the adults in their lives, ultimately had the capacity to grasp societal demands for complexity, autonomy, and rationality.

While chapter 2 focuses on the structure of a post-industrial society and its safe cities, chapter 3 considers the social and psychological mechanisms that lead adolescents to find their place in the modern-day world. The term “relational modernity” is offered to describe expectations for modern-day relationships. Stories of adolescents who were seriously discontented and who committed serious crimes are told to illustrate the difficulties that they had in becoming relationally modern. They were not able to attain that required level of trust, empathy, and
identification that might have enabled them to avoid serious troubles. They lacked the adult support that could have prevented them from committing serious acts of crime. I highlight the adolescent development literature to show the importance of adult shared understandings, and how those understandings are not merely the exclusive product of one singular setting. Although parents and extended family members are considered critically important, the enabling features of modernity are encountered in a range of educational, recreational, and occupational pursuits.

Chapter 4 draws on several classic ethnographic accounts of street-corner delinquency and crime. They are still relevant because they illustrate the problems that a small segment of youth has in conforming to the demands of the larger, law-abiding society. I describe street-corner youth as being too attached to their local street corners and unable to move into the larger world. Street corners are their only source of status and identity in a world that has essentially passed them by. The several historically significant ethnographies that I review all emphasize the corner in a neighborhood street—one that is largely absent in affluent suburbs. Then, in moving beyond a street-corner view of delinquency, I emphasize the importance of relational modernity in allowing for more than one enabling source of control.

My detailed analysis of delinquency in America’s safest city begins in chapter 5 and concludes in chapter 7. In chapters 5 and 6, I draw on personal interviews conducted with twenty-six young adults who were initially surveyed during their high-school years. I match their personal interviews as adults with those earlier surveys, as well as with surveys of their parents. Their stories as gathered in a personal interview situation allow me to identify sources of trouble that I further relate to a general list of discontents. In discussing the means by which these young adults have been able to transition successfully from adolescence, I address their need for trust and empathetic identification. In chapter 5, I contrast low- and high-offending youth with one another. In chapter 6, I then consider a middle category of adolescents and their several sources of discontent.

In chapter 7, I analyze several years of survey data. I present statistical models of delinquencies based on familial, educational, peer-group, and neighborhood settings. I draw on multivariate techniques
of analysis to present a picture of the reasons relationships matter in their familial, educational, and peer-group settings. I present the incidence of delinquency, the range and types of offenses, and how these offenses can be categorized on a scale of offending. Most importantly, I show the range of diversionary programs and how parents and their youth evaluate various recreational activities. The relational reasons for frequent offending are related to the results of structural equation modeling techniques.

My concluding chapter states why modernity matters. It restates a relational theory that takes into account the struggles of a large segment of adolescents. I repeat the point that these struggles are different from those of impoverished inner-city youth. Any theory of delinquency must take into account both the upside and the downside of modernity, and the reasons why a safe city can never be entirely safe. I hope the pages that follow can be viewed as relevant to those interested in the reasons for delinquency and its control in all the world’s inner and outer cities.