a reporter-friend. "Conditioned reflexes, maybe?"

Sentenced to five years in federal prison, Bunker was paroled again in December 1976. Since then, he has worked on the movie version of his first novel, starring Dustin Hoffman, and has published a second novel; a third novel is in the works.

4

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"I really think there's a lot of similarity between the people who live out in the middle-class neighborhoods and the people I know. . . . Everybody wants to have their own joint, own their own home, and have two cars. It's just that we are going about it in a different way. I think keeping up with the Joneses is important everywhere."

—JOHN ALLEN, ARMED ROBBER

". . . vice and crime constitute a 'normal' response to a situation where the cultural emphasis upon pecuniary success has been absorbed, but where there is little access to conventional and legitimate means for becoming successful. . . . In this setting, a cardinal American virtue, 'ambition,' produces a cardinal American vice, 'deviant behavior.'"

—ROBERT K. MERTON, SOCIOLOGIST

"Sounds like you've got to have a master's degree in math to understand all that."

"Nope. You just gotta be poor to understand."

—CONVERSATION BETWEEN A WASHINGTON POST REPORTER AND A "NUMBERS" OPERATOR

I

Why are violent criminals drawn so heavily from the ranks of the poor? The answer lies not in the genes, but in the nature of the lives poor people lead and of the
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badly enough get it,” the boy’s fourth-grade teacher wrote on the blackboard, “provided they are willing to wait and work.”

To the “children of poverty,” those who want something badly enough usually do not get it, no matter how hard they work or how long they wait. Nothing about their own lives or the lives of their parents (or relatives or friends) suggests that “If you really work for the rewards, you’ll get them.” Quite the contrary: poor children grow up in a world in which people work hard and long, for painfully meager rewards. It is a world, too, in which parents and relatives are at the mercy of forces they cannot control—a world in which illness, an accident, a recession, an employer’s business reverses, or a foreman’s whim can mean the loss of a job and a long period of unemployment, and in which a bureaucrat’s arbitrary ruling can mean denial or loss of welfare benefits and, thereby, of food, clothing, fuel, or shelter.

Understandably, poor children come to see themselves as the servants, not the masters, of their fate. When I was doing research on secondary education in the late 1960s, I attended a number of high school graduations. In schools with a predominantly middle-class population, the valedictorians typically spoke of how they and their classmates would affect and change American society. In schools with a lower-class student body, the student speakers sounded a different theme. In one such school, the valedictorian read a long Edgar Guest–type poem that began, “Sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose; here’s luck.” The poem continued in the same vein, with the refrain “Here’s luck” repeated at the end of each stanza. For lower-class adolescents, this is an all too accurate assessment of the world they inhabit.

It is hard to be poor; it is harder to be poor in the communities in which they reside. The close association of violent crime with urban lower-class life is a direct result of the opportunities that are not available. Psychological factors may help explain why some individuals turn to street crime and others do not. But the question posed in this chapter is not why particular individuals choose a life of crime and violence; it is why the people who make that choice are concentrated more heavily in the lower class than in the middle or working class.

Children growing up in urban slums and ghettos face a different set of choices than do youngsters growing up in middle-class neighborhoods, and they have a radically different sense of what life offers. By the time children are six or eight years old, their view of the world has been shaped by their surroundings and by their parents’ as well as their own experiences. Children of the upper class and upper-middle class develop what the psychiatrist Robert Coles calls a sense of “entitlement.” “Wealth does not corrupt nor does it ennoble,” Coles writes. “But wealth does govern the minds of privileged children, gives them a peculiar kind of identity which they never lose, whether they grow up to be stockbrokers or commissars.” That identity grows out of the wide range of choices with which privileged children live—choices about toys and games, food and clothing, vacations and careers. Their identity grows out of their sense of competence as well, for they (and, to a lesser degree, ordinary middle-class children) live in a world in which their parents and, by reflection, they themselves exercise authority, in which they influence and often control their environment. They are, in a phrase, the masters of their fate; their world, as an eleven-year-old boy told Coles, is one in which “If you really work for the rewards, you’ll get them.” This view is confirmed in school. “Those who want something
United States than in most other countries, for American culture has always placed a heavy premium on "success." ("Winning is not the main thing; it is the only thing.") It is not the success ethic alone that causes problems, the sociologist Robert K. Merton observes, but the fact that the emphasis on success is coupled with an equally heavy emphasis on ambition, on maintaining lofty goals whatever one's station in life. "Americans are admonished 'not to be a quitter,'" Merton writes, "for in the dictionary of American culture, as in the lexicon of youth, there is no such word as "fail.""

Crime and violence are more frequent among the poor than among members of the middle class, Merton argues, because American culture imbues everyone with the importance of ambition and success without providing everyone with the opportunity to achieve success through conventional means. And the cultural emphasis on success is greater now than it used to be: Every day of the week, in the films they see, the television programs they watch, and the public schools they attend, poor people are bombarded with messages about success—vivid images of the life style of the middle class. Television, in particular, drives home the idea that one is not a full-fledged American unless one can afford the goods and services portrayed in the commercials and in the programs themselves. To poor people, the TV screen provides a daily reminder, if any is needed, of the contrast between their own poverty and the affluence enjoyed by the rest of society.

It should not be surprising that many poor people choose the routes to success that seem open to them. To youngsters growing up in lower-class neighborhoods, crime is available as an occupational choice, much as law, medicine, or business management is for adolescents raised in Palo Alto or Scarsdale—except that lower-class youngsters often know a good deal more about the criminal occupations available to them than middle-class youngsters do about their options. In my conversations with young offenders, I was struck by the depth of their knowledge about robbery, burglary, "fencing," the sale and use of hard and soft drugs, prostitution and pimping, the "numbers" business, loan-sharking, and other crimes and racketeering. In a great many cities, I was impressed, too, by their detailed knowledge of which fences, numbers operators, and other criminals were paying off which police officers, as well as by their cynicism about governmental corruption in general.

Thus the fabric and texture of life in urban slums and ghettos provide an environment in which opportunities for criminal activity are manifold, and in which the rewards for engaging in crime appear to be high—higher than the penalties for crime, and higher than the rewards for avoiding it. "It seems to me that the kind of neighborhood you come up in may make all the difference in which way you go and where you end up," John Allen suggests. In his neighborhood, most people earned their living from illegitimate activity. "Hustling was their thing: number running, bootlegging, selling narcotics, selling stolen goods, prostitution," he continues. "There's so many things that go on—it's a whole system that operates inside itself."

"Say I was to take you by it. You want some junk, then I would take you to the dude that handles drugs. You want some clothes, I could take you somewhere that handles that. You want some liquor, I could take you someplace other than a liquor store. Of course, it's all outside the law."

It is not simply a matter of opportunity; role models are important as well. "When I think about who's got
the power in my neighborhood,” John Allen says, “I mostly think about people who’ve got to the top in strictly illegal ways.” As a child, his hero was a successful numbers operator: “he was about the biggest because everybody respected him, he always had plenty of money, he always dressed nice, and everybody always done what he wanted them to do. I dug the respect that he gave and that he got. . . .” “The ones you see are the ones who interest you,” an ex-offender says, recalling his childhood. “If it had been doctors and lawyers who drove up and parked in front of the bars in their catylacks, I’d be a doctor today. But it wasn’t; it was the men who were into things, the pimps, the hustlers and the numbers guys.”

In some lower-class neighborhoods, youngsters learn to become criminals almost as a matter of course. “Education for crime must be looked upon as habituation to a way of life,” the late Frank Tannenbaum wrote in 1938, in his neglected classic, Crime and the Community. “As such, it partakes of the nature of all education. It is a gradual adaptation to, and a gradual absorption of, certain elements in the environment.” Since it would be hard to improve upon Tannenbaum’s description, I shall quote from it at length.

The development of a criminal career has “elements of curiosity, wonder, knowledge, adventure,” Tannenbaum wrote. “Like all true education, it has its beginnings in play, it starts in more or less random movements, and builds up toward techniques, insights, judgments, attitudes.” Like all true education, it also uses whatever is available in the environment, including “such humble things as junk heaps, alley ways, abandoned houses, pushcarts, railroad tracks, coal cars.” Children begin with things that can be easily picked up and carried away, and easily used or sold.

Education for crime is a social process as well—

“part of the adventure of living in a certain way in a certain environment,” Tannenbaum continued. “But both the environment and the way of using it must already be there.” If his career is to develop, the young criminal must have encouragement, support, and instruction from his friends and elders, particularly from what Tannenbaum calls “the intermediary,” i.e., the fence. Even if he is nothing more than a junk dealer or peddler, the fence will “purchase bottles, copper wire, lead pipes, bicycles, and trinkets. He will not only pay cash which can be used to continue the play life of the growing children, for movies, candies, sweets, harmonicas, baseball bats, gloves, and other paraphernalia, but if he is a friendly and enterprising fence he will throw out suggestions, indicate where things can be found, will even supply the tools with which to rip and tear down lead pipes or other marketable materials. And the young gang will accept the suggestions and carry out the enterprise as a part of a game, each act providing a new experience, new knowledge, new ways of seeing the world, new interests.”

Other factors are needed, too. There must be a cynical attitude toward the police and toward property belonging to business firms and government agencies. There must be older criminals who use adolescents as messengers or lookouts, and to whom the youngsters look for approval. And there must be a conflict between delinquent youngsters and older, more settled people who are their victims, and who call for police protection. “All these elements are part of the atmosphere, of the environment” within which education for crime proceeds.

The “slow, persistent habituation of an individual to a criminal way of life” occurs frequently and naturally in lower-class neighborhoods because so many criminal opportunities are available: numbers operations, book-
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Experience as a fence, selling to judges, prosecutors, policemen (high officials as well as patrolmen), independent businessmen, and buyers for department stores and retailing chains, in addition to ordinary consumers. He did a booming retail business in merchandise acquired through manufacturers’ close-outs and other legitimate channels; his reputation as a fence cast an aura of “bargain” over his entire inventory. “See, most people figure all of the stuff in my store is hot, which you know it ain’t,” Swaggi told Klockars. “But if they figure it’s hot you can’t keep ’em away from it. . . . People figurin’ they’re gonna get something for nothing. You think I’m gonna tell ’em it ain’t hot? Not on your life.”

For lower-class people, buying stolen merchandise is more than just a matter of picking up a bargain or accommodating the larceny that confidence men, as well as fences, tell us is in almost everyone’s heart. Buying from a “peddler” at the back door may be the only way impoverished parents can afford to serve meat to their families, and patronizing a “bargain store” the only way they can afford shoes for their children’s growing feet or name-brand sneakers so that teenagers do not lose face among their friends. For many poor people, too, buying stolen property is a way of buying into the American Dream, of being able to afford those consumption items—Stacy Adams shoes, Johnny Walker Black Label Scotch, a stereo or color television set, a motorcycle or ten-speed bike, a sporty-looking car—that the mass media tell them are the mark of a “successful” American. Because they lack the job titles and other devices that shore up middle-class people’s sense of self, members of the lower class feel an even greater need than members of the middle class to define themselves through consumption.

Buying stolen property also provides a way of get-
ting back at “them.”* Many people on Clay Street had had problems resulting in what they called “getting screwed,”” Joseph T. Howell writes about the lower-class, mainly Southern white neighborhood in Washington, D.C., in which he lived for a year as a participant-observer. “For this reason, few people thought twice about ‘getting back.’”

For instance, hot merchandise was plentiful on Clay Street. At Christmas, June and Sam gave Sammy a five-speed chopper bike, listing at seventy-five dollars but for which they paid a “friend” thirty dollars. Les gave Phyllis a twenty-one inch color TV in exchange for a new high-powered automatic rifle, both of which were hot. Les said about half of everything in their house was stolen. ... Although few disclosed how they came upon the hot merchandise, they would usually take pride in getting an especially good deal. Having this merchandise was in no way considered dishonest.8

Far from being considered dishonest, patronizing the stolen property system is a way of evening the score, of getting one’s fair share in an unfair world. From a lower-class perspective, buying a name-brand item at 50 percent or more below list price is a means of correcting a social imbalance, of redressing the maldistribution of income from which they suffer. Their sense of the rightness of the enterprise is enhanced by their conviction—often right, sometimes wrong—that local merchants and local outlets of national chains sell shoddy merchandise at premium prices. Since “hot” merchandise often is stolen from “downtown” retailers as well as from factories, warehouses, trucking firms, and middle-class residences, the stolen property system

* Frequent use of the pronoun “them” reflects both the way poor people see the rest of society and their conception of how the rest of society sees them.
local fences, as well as from numbers runners and bankers, bootleggers, after-hours clubs, gambling joints, prostitutes, pimps, and heroin dealers.

Corruption aside, lower-class people's readiness to support the stolen property system is upheld by the benign view the rest of society takes toward fencing. Judges, prosecutors, police, and the public at large share a myopic legal tradition that focuses on individual acts of theft rather than on the stolen property system as a whole. One consequence is that judges rarely give prison sentences to fences, preferring to reserve the harsh penalty of incarceration for people they deem dangerous. Prosecutors and police administrators, in turn, are reluctant to proceed against fences. Building a strong case against a fence requires the investment of a great deal of prosecutorial and/or police time and effort, and the investment appears to be a poor allocation of resources when the end result is likely to be no more than probation or a fine for the convicted fence. From a police perspective, therefore, it often makes more sense to offer a fence protection in exchange for information. But from the perspective of people living in lower-class neighborhoods, the fact that fences go free, while burglars go to prison, serves to reinforce their cynicism about the law and law enforcement.

Be that as it may, fencing is a relatively low-risk criminal "industry" with great ease of entry. Some thieves act as their own fences, peddling their stolen wares themselves; most prefer to sell to a professional fence, who may retail the merchandise himself or sell to other "retailers." Although thieves receive less money from a fence than they might earn if they sold direct to the consumer, they are relieved of the burden of carrying a retail "inventory" which constitutes incriminating evidence that can be used to tie them to their crime. The sooner a thief disposes of his loot, the better he likes it—a fact that fences take into account in deciding what price to offer.

For residents of lower-class neighborhoods, stolen merchandise is likely to be available wherever they turn: in beauty parlors, barbershops, restaurants and bars, newsstands, after-hours clubs, gambling joints, appliance stores and repair shops, jewelry stores, pawnshops, liquor stores, junkyards, dry-cleaning stores, auto-repair and body shops, auto accessory stores, used-car lots, lumberyards, and retail clothing stores, as well as from cabdrivers, truckdrivers, delivery and "route" men, and so on.

Some of these outlets are primarily sellers of stolen merchandise, with the legitimate business serving only or mainly as a front. Most are more or less legitimate businesses whose owners supplement their incomes by selling stolen merchandise on the side. Such firms may be quite prosperous; or they may be small, often marginal, enterprises for whom the trade in stolen merchandise means the difference between losing money and making a small profit. Moonlighting as a fence may also mean the difference between earning a decent living and just scraping by for bartenders, waiters, beauticians, and other employees.*

For safety's sake, professional thieves prefer to deal with the same fence or fences on a regular basis; a fence is far more likely to "finger" an unknown or occasional thief than one on whom he depends for his inventory. When thieves know beforehand what their take will be, they may negotiate a price in advance; or they may simply know what the market price is for

* Marilyn Walsh has analyzed the occupations of a group of 110 fences in a northeastern city. Seventy owned their own business; 11 worked for others; and 14 ran a fencing operation as an adjunct to some other illegal enterprise, such as loan-sharking or the numbers. Most of the remainder were burglars who did their own fencing.11
stolen merchandise of a particular sort and plan their scores accordingly. For their part, professional fences may have their own thieves whom they employ on a regular basis, or to whom they turn when they need merchandise of a particular variety.

II

Theft is only one of a great many criminal occupations available to residents of lower-class communities. For those eager to "make it" in American society, organized crime often seems to offer a faster and more effective route to success than either street crime or a legitimate job. The most visibly successful people in poor neighborhoods are members of organized crime. Organized crime does not merely provide success models for lower-class youngsters to emulate; it is a major employer as well, and it is the principal—for many lower-class and minority-group people, the only—source of credit.

Organized crime also plays a central role in creating and maintaining an environment in which street crime flourishes. To understand why, we need to know something about how organized crime operates. That knowledge has been hindered in recent years by a heated, at times acrimonious, and often downright silly debate about the Mafia: whether or not the Mafia really exists; whether it is called the Mafia or La Cosa Nostra; whether it is limited to Italian-Americans or includes members of other ethnic groups; whether or not there is a national syndicate, or "crime confederation," that controls organized crime throughout the United States; and whether or not that syndicate is controlled, in turn, by the Mafia. The argument is too complex to unravel here; in any case, it is tangential to the problem that concerns us: the relationship between organized crime and street crime.12

Neither side in the debate questions the existence of organized crime or the seriousness of the problems it poses. Indeed, scholars on the anti-Mafia side of the debate argue that preoccupation with the Mafia obscures the degree to which organized crime is indigenous to American society. Whether or not there is a Mafia, in other words, and whether or not the syndicate (if it exists) is directed by the Mafia (if it exists), there can be no question but that organized crime exists. Organized crime is deeply embedded in state and local politics; it flourishes with the sufferance, and at times the cooperation, of large numbers of respectable people; and it exerts a corrosive impact on the quality of American life in general and life in lower-class communities in particular.13

Organized crime differs from street crime in a number of important respects. The most obvious is the scale and complexity of organization. Members of organized crime are organization men, in contrast to the loners who commit conventional robberies or burglaries. Even the most successful professional thieves lack anything resembling an organization; although they usually work in groups, the groups come together for a specific score or group of scores and then disband. Organized crime networks, on the other hand, are corporate enterprises designed to last indefinitely. As with corporations, there are occasional (in some periods, frequent) battles for control, but the organization usually survives several changes in top management. (In some of its manifestations, organized crime

* The discussion of organized crime relies in part on research by Richard D. Van Wagenen. I am indebted, too, to Dr. Jonathan Rubinstein and Professor Mark Haller for frequent advice and counsel, as well as for access to unpublished papers.
also resembles business cartels and trade associations, and, at times, governmental regulatory agencies.) The complexity and duration of its organization, in turn, enables organized crime to operate—as it does, for example, in the international traffic in heroin and weapons—on an economic and geographic scale far beyond that of professional crime.

These differences in organization and scale grow out of a fundamental difference in function. Even at its most professional, ordinary crime is predatory and parasitic; robbers, burglars, shoplifters, check forgers, and other thieves do their best to avoid further contact with their victims once their crime has been consummated. Organized crime, to the contrary, has customers rather than victims; it is in the business of supplying goods and services—narcotics, gambling, credit, prostitution, protection against business competitors or trade unions—that people willingly (often eagerly) buy despite their illegality. Indeed, organized crime is organized precisely because of its need to develop congenial, long-term relationships with customers and suppliers, both of whom are co-conspirators, so to speak, in breaking the law.

This distinction between organized and professional crime is not absolute. Professional criminals sometimes supply goods and services, as in the domestic traffic in guns and the retail sale of narcotics, and organized crime networks engage in parasitic crimes such as hijacking and extortion. The line between providing services, such as loan-sharking or “protection,” and pure extortion can be very thin; organized crime uses violence freely to persuade potential “customers” to purchase the services being offered or to pay for those already consumed, as well as to get rid of unwanted competitors. In short, the term “organized crime” covers a broad spectrum of activities. At one end, organized crime is almost indistinguishable from “heavy” professional crime. At the other end, it may be indistinguishable from ordinary business—for example, liquor wholesaling and distribution, the operation of hotels and gambling casinos in Nevada and the Caribbean, the distribution of meat, the “fixing” of labor disputes, ownership and operation of “singles” and homosexual bars, and speculation in land.

Many middle-class people live out their lives oblivious to the existence of organized crime; others feign ignorance. Business and professional people who patronize gambling casinos do not think of themselves as doing business with organized crime.* Neither do the millions of respectable people who use bookmakers to gamble on horse races or on football, baseball, or basketball games. (With big bettors, transactions usually are handled over the phone, so that the bookmaker remains a shadowy, even invisible presence.) Meatpackers who pay racketeers to ensure that their meat will be sold in large supermarket chains think of themselves as smart or aggressive businessmen; so do corporate executives who use organized crime to avoid strikes or arrange a “sweetheart contract” with a crooked trade union. And people who snort cocaine think of themselves as part of the avant-garde, not as customers of organized crime.

Members of the lower class cannot feign this kind of ignorance or innocence; they come into contact with organized crime and the subeconomy it operates almost everywhere they turn. For one thing, the popularity of

* They may be disabused of their pretense if they roll up gambling losses they cannot cover, or if they need to borrow to keep their business afloat after legal sources of credit have been closed to them.
gambling on the numbers (or policy, as it is also called) makes it a highly visible presence, as well as a major economic and financial force, in the old cities of the East and Midwest, and, to a lesser degree, of the South. Although playing the numbers is not limited to the black and Hispanic poor (in New York City, more than half the numbers players are non-Hispanic whites), the proportion of people who place bets is considerably higher in poor black and Hispanic neighborhoods than in white middle-class areas. In their study of organized crime in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a Brooklyn neighborhood of about 280,000 people, 95 percent black, Harold Lasswell and Jeremiah McKenna found that the numbers business was the largest single private employer in the area. (Although Bedford-Stuyvesant has a large and thriving black, predominantly West Indian, middle class and a stable working-class population, the bulk of its residents are lower-class; with 3.4 percent of New York City’s population, Bedford-Stuyvesant receives only 1.2 percent of total city income.) In 1970, there were five identifiable policy banks with a “handle” (total amount bet) of some $37 million.14

Contrary to popular impression, most of the money bet in Bedford-Stuyvesant stays there. Of the $37 million handle, Lasswell and McKenna estimate, $18.5 million was returned to winning bettors. The five banks laid out another $14.8 million in salaries and commissions for the 1,345 “runners” or “collectors” they employed, all of whom lived in the neighborhood, and the 76 “controllers,” most of whom lived either in Bedford-Stuyvesant or in contiguous neighborhoods. That left the “bankers” a net profit of about 10 percent of the total handle.*

Poor people generally see nothing wrong with playing the numbers, and nothing invidious about working for a numbers operation.† Few jobs—certainly few jobs available to residents of impoverished neighborhoods—pay as well, and numbers runners are viewed with fondness and respect. In Bedford-Stuyvesant, the numbers runner usually is “a person of obvious affluence who is visible in the community throughout the day,” Lasswell and McKenna report. “To the community residents he is a symbol of ‘upward mobility’. . . .”

* Some runners are merely local residents who collect the bets from others in their house, in return for a free “dollar play” each day; other runners cover an entire city block, collecting several thousand bets a day. Controllers also vary in the scale of their business, employing anywhere from four or five runners to as many as twenty-five or thirty. Controllers have a franchise, so to speak, to operate the numbers business in a particular neighborhood; in most cities, they are expected to pay off the police to avoid arrests of their runners, whose activities are blatantly visible, and to cover legal fees and bail whenever a runner does have to “take a fall.” Bankers handle the bookkeeping for the controllers in their employ, both as a service and as a means of assuring honesty on the part of runners and controllers; they also provide a hedging operation, “laying off” bets for a controller who has a dangerously heavy play on a particular number.

† The fact that the numbers are illegal merely encourages cynicism about the double standard the larger society employs. Poor people know that churches and synagogues finance themselves by running bingo games and “Las Vegas nights,” that states add to their revenues by running lotteries, and that rich people fly to Las Vegas or follow the horses to Florida. Legislation outlawing the numbers is seen—correctly—as evidence of class discrimination as well as of middle-class hypocrisy. (Creation of New York City’s Off-Track Betting Corporation made class bias even more blatant: betting on horses, the form of gambling preferred by the middle and working class, was legalized, while the numbers—the type of gambling preferred by the lower class—remained illegal.)
He is a good deal more than that. "Numbers in Harlem has built churches, fed preachers, poor people have put a dime on a number and fed their kids," a resident told a member of a survey team headed by the anthropologist Francis A. J. Ianni. "... most of the numbers runners in Harlem are people that send the kids to camp, do a lot of good things in the community. They are respectable people. ..." Or, as the young protagonist of a novel about growing up in Harlem puts it, "A number runner is something like Santa Claus, and any day you hit the number is Christmas." 15

Santa Claus or not, numbers runners are important community resources, for the numbers is not just a game of chance. Since there are rarely receipts, people deal with a numbers runner whom they like and trust — either someone who makes the rounds of the neighborhood each day, imparting information as he collects the bets, or a collector who operates out of a small grocery store, barbershop, beauty parlor, newsstand, pool hall, or bowling alley that serves as a neighborhood hangout. (Runners, in turn, accept bets mainly from people they know; someone who moves to a new neighborhood must be introduced to the runner by a friend.) When placing a bet in an established numbers station, the bettor has a chance to chat with the proprietor and whoever else may be hanging around. These relationships are solidified every time someone wins, for it is customary to give the runner a 10 percent tip and, in some neighborhoods, to hold an open house so that friends and neighbors can join in the celebration.

This friendly social atmosphere contributes, in turn, to the important economic and financial functions that the numbers fulfill. Betting on the numbers is a form of savings; lower-class blacks often refer to their bets as "investments," as do working-class football pool bet-

tors in Great Britain. As the sociologist Ivan Light points out, the numbers plays much the same role for lower-class people that savings and commercial bank Christmas Club accounts do for members of the lower middle class: converting small change into lump sums of a substantial amount. The dimes, quarters, and half-dollars bet on the numbers aren't really missed, and in any case would be frittered away on inconsequentials, the argument goes, whereas when one does ultimately win, the payoff is large enough to be really useful. And it is small amounts that are usually bet; the average bet in Bedford-Stuyvesant in 1970 was 37.5 cents.16

Middle-class people often look askance at poor people's penchant for gambling, but it makes more sense for poor people to play the numbers than for middle-class people to bet on the horses. With the numbers, luck really does have the power to change one's life; a winning number pays 550 or 600 to 1—a far higher payoff than one can get from any other form of gambling. By way of contrast, the average winning bet on a horse race pays about 7 to 1, and the daily double pays about 50 to 1; a winning number on a roulette wheel returns only 64 to 1. Although the odds of winning are only 1 in 1,000, a $1 "hit" on the numbers brings in $550 to $600—enough to pay off a lot of bills, or buy a new color television set or a second-hand car. And a $10 hit means $5,500 or $6,000—enough to send a child to college or to make a down payment on a house outside the ghetto. The fact that luck is random, unlikely, and fickle in no way alters its appeal, Bruce Jackson writes, for "there is nothing else on the horizon of a comparable power. What difference — what real difference—will a ten percent weekly wage increase make, or a ten percent drop in the rent?"17

In any event, the cash flow generated by numbers betting provides the basis for most of the credit ex-
tended in lower-class neighborhoods. Many grocery stores and other small retail shops use the profit from collecting numbers bets to extend credit to their impoverished customers. This makes it possible for small businessmen to compete with supermarkets and chain-store outlets; the credit that small stores extend also makes it possible for parents to feed and clothe their children when, as is often the case, they are short of cash.

While they are making their rounds, moreover, numbers runners often pass the hat for people who are down on their luck; through the intervention of the runner, the people who regularly deal with him are pulled together into a loose mutual assistance society. Equally important, controllers and the more successful runners customarily lend money, either without interest or at a nominal rate, to good customers who are temporarily short of funds because their pocketbook has been snatched, their home broken into, their welfare check stolen, or any of the other financial disasters to which poor people are prone. The loss of a $20 bill, which some readers of this book might simply shrug off (if they notice it at all), may mean no food for a week for a family that lives from day to day, with no savings to fall back upon.

In minority-group communities, too, numbers bankers and other members of the middle and upper echelons of organized crime traditionally have been the major source of venture capital and long-term loans for aspiring businessmen and professionals. William Foote Whyte points out, in his classic study of an Italian-American neighborhood in Boston in the 1930s, that since Yankee bankers had no interest in lending to young Italian-American entrepreneurs, especially if they planned to compete with established businesses, ambitious young men routinely turned to racketeers for help. “The support of racket capital has helped a number of able men to rise to positions otherwise unattainable.”

The same has been true in black communities, although on a considerably smaller scale. “It would be interesting to find out how many businesses in Harlem survived because some numbers man loaned the money knowing the fellow who borrowed was reliable and that he would pay it back,” New York City Deputy Mayor Basil Paterson speculates. Indeed, one reason blacks are so badly underrepresented in business is that organized crime funding has not been available to black businessmen in anything like the amounts that Irish, Italian, and Jewish-American entrepreneurs have been able to tap.*

In minority-group communities, numbers operators and other racketeers have been major philanthropists as well, contributing to churches, hospitals, ethnic defense groups, and other community institutions. “I feel as though I am sending Santa Claus to jail,” a federal judge said as he sentenced a Reading, Pennsylvania, slot-machine distributor. “Although this man dealt in gambling devices, it appears that he is a religious man having no bad habits and is an unmeasurably charitable man.” And when the leading numbers operator in Reading came into federal court in the early 1960s, to

* Historically, blacks have been pushed out of one occupation after another when it became attractive to whites; organized crime is no exception. In the 1930s and ’40s, Jewish and Italian organized-crime syndicates, looking for new “investment” opportunities to replace bootlegging, took over control of the numbers business in black and Hispanic neighborhoods. Until the last few years, when blacks began trying to gain control of the numbers and the even more profitable heroin trade, blacks who prospered in organized crime—for example, “Bumpy” Johnson, the folk hero who was the model for the “Shaft” movies—generally did so by serving as middlemen for white syndicates.
be sentenced for income-tax evasion, he brought character references from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergymen, in addition to those from officials of two hospitals and a home for the aged.

Racketeer-philanthropists do not always limit themselves to status-enhancing public causes. "These gangsters are the finest fellows you want to meet," one of William Foote Whyte's Boston informants told him. "They'll do a lot for you, Bill. You go up to them and say, 'I haven't eaten for four days, and I haven't got a place to sleep,' and they'll give you something. Now you go up to a businessman, one of the respected members of the community, and ask him. He throws you right out of the office." 20

Small wonder that many members of lower-class communities identify with organized crime rather (or more) than with the police or other agencies of law enforcement. "Those who participate in organized crime are rewarded with power, wealth, well-being, skill, loyalty and respect," Lasswell and McKenna write. "Legitimate society can't match such rewards," and indeed offers very little to those who avoid criminal activity. There are risks in crime, to be sure, as well as rewards. But as a street-wise Los Angeles youngster observes, "Any kind of way a cat's gonna make it, be a risk, always a risk."

One of the risks that appears to be justified by the potential rewards is to try to get a foothold in the drug business. Although use of heroin is much more widely diffused throughout the United States than is generally realized, the heroin trade is most visible in lower-class neighborhoods of big cities, where bags of heroin are sold, by brand name, on certain well-known street corners. According to Mark Moore of Harvard, who has made the most careful study of the "heroin indus-

try" in New York City, retail sales came to $470 million a year in the early 1970s.* 21

The size of the heroin market makes for easy entry at the bottom rung. In New York in the early 1970s, Moore estimates, there were 18,000 "jugglers" (heroin users who act as small retailers in order to finance their own habits) and 6,000 "street dealers" (larger-scale retailers who may or may not be users themselves). Jugglers average about $1,000 a year in cash earnings, over and above the heroin they consumed; street dealers earned $15,000 a year—more than most unskilled youths can earn from legitimate employment. The big money is made at the importing and distributing end, which is controlled by organized crime. According to Moore, the twenty-five importers, who rarely see the drug, averaged net profits of $200,000 a year each; the twenty-five "kilo connections" (the major distributors) netted $500,000 a year each. Street dealers are not likely to become kilo connections, but they may aspire to positions in the two levels of distribution between them and the kilo connections. Moore estimates that there were some 125 "connections" (large whole-

* As Moore points out, his estimates are subject to a wide margin of error. No one really knows how many heroin users there are, how much heroin they consume, or the prices they pay; each figure is at best an educated guess, over which experts often disagree sharply. Moore's estimates of retail sales are based on the assumption that there were 100,000 heroin users in New York in the early 1970s; most informed estimates put the figure at somewhere between 70,000 and 150,000, implying a lower limit of $329 million and an upper limit of $705 million in retail sales. Different estimates of the amount of heroin each user consumes would change these figures, as would different estimates of retail price. Since methadone has replaced heroin as the drug of choice for some users in the last few years, both the size and organization of the market probably are different now than they were in the early 1970s. 22
sellers) who netted $160,000 and about 750 “weight dealers” (the jobbers from whom street dealers acquire their heroin) who netted $75,000 a year, on average.

For a youngster growing up in a lower-class neighborhood, therefore, organized crime may seem the likeliest route to success. To get started on that road, he needs to bring himself to the attention of those in charge; but as is the case with elite clubs, etiquette requires that one wait for an invitation to join. “You know who is connected and who is involved but you can’t go to them and say ‘Hey, man, I want to be one of you!’” one of Ianni’s informants in Paterson, N.J., explained. “This is the way it happens. If he has been watching me and likes what he sees and he wants to give me a little play, he might tell me one day to go see Joe. He won’t ever turn around and commit himself the first time. You just take it for granted that you don’t approach these guys at that level. . . .”

One way to be invited is to make the right friends while you are growing up, just as ambitious members of the middle class do. “For every friend you have, you have that much more chance to get in on deals, to make it in crime,” a Harlem informant says. “Otherwise you are outside looking in—you are nobody. . . . You got to prove yourself or have somebody vouch for you.” [emphasis added]

The desire to “prove yourself” is an important stimulus to street crime of all sorts. In neighborhoods where organized crime is active, its members study teenagers’ street “reps” and behavior as carefully as a professional baseball scout analyzes a sandlot player’s ability to hit curve balls or hold a base runner close to the bag. “These kids in the neighborhood all want to do things and after a while you learn what they can do and what they can’t do,” the controller of a Brooklyn numbers operation explains. “They are all different. Some of them would do anything you asked them because they are tough kids but smart and they are looking for a way to get ahead. Some of the others you can trust with little things, but as soon as they get a couple of hundred bucks in their hands they go crazy and they start stealing from you. The worst ones though are the kids who are on dope and will rob you blind if they get a chance. I watch all these kids and I know their families. I know their fathers, their uncles, and their cousins and I can tell you who has good blood and whose has got bad blood, and who you can trust and who you can’t.”

The youngsters know they are being watched, and that they will be carefully graded on the skill, courage, trustworthiness, and judgment they display as robbers, burglars, boosters, hustlers, fighters, messengers, lookouts, coffee-fetchers, or what have you. In some neighborhoods, even murder can be a way of proving one’s *bona fides* (and perhaps earning a little money on the side) for a youngster hopeful of becoming a hijacker, bodyguard, or “hit man” for the mob.


“A Manhattan gang, whose members worked just a decade ago as teen-age errand boys for major narcotics traffickers, has now emerged as a new and violent force of its own in organized crime in New York, according to confidential police and Federal agency intelligence reports.

“The group, which calls itself the Purple Gang, after the band of criminals that terrorized Detroit during the Prohibition era, has been identified by law enforcement agencies as being involved in the following criminal activities:
Italian-American organized-crime families and the black groups who now control the street sale of heroin and other drugs.

It is unusual for adolescent gangs to stay together when their members grow up, if only because so many of their members end up in prison; it is even rarer for them to challenge existing organized-crime networks. But youth gangs do make a significant contribution to street crime, and not just as the means by which young criminals prove themselves to their elders. For one thing, youngsters learn criminal techniques from older or more experienced friends. More important, there is a synergistic quality to juvenile gangs and informal groupings that enables youngsters to do things in groups that they would not (or could not) do on their own. “Countless mothers have protested that their ‘Johnny’ was a good boy until he fell in with a certain bunch,” the sociologist Albert Cohen points out—but the mothers of each of Johnny’s companions say the same thing about their sons. Although some of the mothers may be naïve and others self-serving, there are times when they are all correct; none of the boys would have turned to crime if it had not been for the chemistry of the group.

Organized crime’s biggest impact is indirect. Its omnipresence and prosperity undermine the credibility of those who preach compliance with the law; to be “a poor working slob,” in the old Chicago argot, hardly compares with the glamour that surrounds successful racketeers. The fact that the rest of society looks down on organized-crime figures as criminals serves to solidify the community’s sense of ethnic solidarity and intensify its sense of being victimized by a hypocritical, as well as corrupt, society. Why pick on a numbers runner, bootlegger, or fence, the reasoning goes, when the real criminals—bribe-taking police, corrupt govern-
ment officials, slumlords who fail to maintain their buildings, merchants who “rip off” the poor, congressmen who keep their mistresses on their Congressional payroll, corporate executives who offer bribes, a vice president of the United States who takes bribes, and a president who cheats on his income tax—all seem to go scot free.

The double standard that lower-class people see applied produces a deep-rooted cynicism about government, business, and, indeed, American society as a whole. “They talk about me being on the legitimate,” Al Capone once remarked to a woman reporter. “Why, lady, nobody’s on the legit. You know that and so do they. . . . Nobody’s really on the legit, when it comes down to cases.” Capone’s comment reflects a world view that permeates the lower class; as Frank Tannenbaum wrote, “The sense that the world about one is all crooked must be taken as the root of the problem.”

III

Most criminals do not succeed; they earn a poor living through crime, and they spend much of their career locked up in jail or prison. Moreover, much of the violence of lower-class life has little or nothing to do with earning money or impressing potential employers in organized crime. Assaults, murders, rapes, and even some robberies and burglaries, frequently are a by-product of disputes between spouses or lovers, arguments that develop during a barroom discussion or street-corner crap game, gang warfare over “turf” or gang members’ “rep,” or any number of other more or less routine happenings.

Like theft, violence is part of the fabric and texture of life in lower-class neighborhoods—so much so that some scholars argue that poor people belong to a separate and fairly autonomous “culture of poverty,” with norms and values different from those of the larger society. In this view, criminal violence is part of a distinctive lower-class lifestyle, and that lifestyle, in turn, is the product of a distinctive lower-class culture that is passed along from generation to generation. The real deviants in lower-class communities are not criminals, the sociologist Walter B. Miller argues, but the people who seek success through legal means; criminals are simply conforming to the norms of their own culture. “The cultural system which exerts the most direct influence on behavior is that of the lower class community itself,” Miller writes, “a long-established, distinctively patterned tradition with an integrity of its own. . . .” Crime represents “a positive effort to achieve what is valued within that tradition, and to conform to its explicit and implicit norms.”

Those who hold this view argue that poverty and criminal violence reinforce one another, and that members of the lower class are unable to penetrate the cultural barrier separating them from the rest of American society. The culture of poverty “tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on children,” according to the late Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist who helped popularize the concept. “By the time children are six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture. . . .”

The political scientist Edward Banfield takes a harsher, more disparaging view, implying that lower-class culture is less a matter of enculturation than of individual or group choice. According to Banfield, the lower class “consists of people who would live in squalor even if their incomes were doubled or tripled.” In his view, “the lower-class individual lives in the slum and sees no reason to complain. He does not care
how dirty or dilapidated his housing is either inside or out, nor does he mind the inadequacy of such public facilities as schools, parks, and libraries; indeed, where such things exist he destroys them by acts of vandalism. Factors that make the slum repellent to others actually please him. . . ."

In the slum one can beat one's children, lie drunk in the gutter, or go to jail without attracting any special notice; these are the things that most of the neighbors themselves have done and that they consider quite normal.28

These are one-dimensional views—in Banfield's instance, a caricature—of a complex and multidimensional reality. Poor people's behavior is influenced by lower-class norms, to be sure; but they are also profoundly affected by norms and values stemming from their ethnic background, religion, and race, as well as from their region and from their membership in American society as a whole. This is equally true of members of the middle and working classes; we all live in several cultures at once. Which set of values is most influential depends on the circumstances in which we find ourselves.*

* When Americans are abroad, others see them as Americans, not as Southerners or Northerners, blacks or whites, or "ethnics" or "natives." Equally important, Americans' sense of their own identity changes when they are abroad. American Jews who settle in Israel are confounded when they hear themselves described as "Anglo-Saxons," and black Americans who spend time in Africa often gain a dramatically new sense of themselves as Americans rather than as blacks. "It's ridiculous," one black American in Africa told Harold Isaacs of M.I.T., "but I had never before realized how much of my life had nothing to do with the race problem at all. I mean just the way you do everything you do, what you mean when you say something, and how you understand what the other fellow means."

One need not postulate an autonomous "culture of poverty" to understand why the incidence of violence is higher among the lower than among the middle class. Poor people accept the norms and values of American society. If they do not always act in accordance with those norms, if they follow a life style that includes a good deal of criminal violence, it is mainly because the circumstances of their lives make it difficult or impossible for them to do otherwise. As the sociologist Hylan Lewis puts it, the poor are "frustrated victims of middle class values,"29

Every human being needs a sense of being a person of value and worth, of being "a somebody" who is recognized as a full and valid member of society. But in a society that rewards success and penalizes failure—a society in which we determine other people's identity by asking what they "do" rather than what they are—to be poor is to live with continual self-doubt. The poor may be invisible to the rest of us, but we are not invisible to them; their television sets thrust them inside our homes every day of the week. For members of the lower class, consequently, life is a desperate struggle to maintain a sense of self in a world that offers little to nourish, and much to destroy, it. As the sociologist Lee Rainwater writes, "The identity problems of lower-class persons make the soul-searching of middle-class adolescents and adults seem like a kind of conspicuous consumption of psychic riches."

Poor people's struggle for identity is desperate because of the degree to which our sense of self depends on the "success" we enjoy. "I had never realized how

But back in the United States, where what one does and what others mean by what they say tend to be taken for granted, the part of life that does revolve around the race question again comes to the fore.
much of my identity was built on academic achievement until I ran into trouble that first semester,” a third-year law school student told me. “I was shattered—almost disoriented—until I discovered I wasn’t the only one—that everybody was having trouble.” But poor people lack the consolation that comes from being part of the majority; to be poor in an affluent society is to feel alone and inadequate.

The sense of self is shaped, too, by the way other people act toward us, and by the attitudes about us that they convey through words and, even more, through tone of voice, posture, and facial expression. No matter what psychic armor we wear, none of us is immune to the messages we receive from others about our own worth. And the primary message lower-class people receive about themselves is that they have no worth—and they are irrelevant or expendable, if indeed they exist at all. The message is exacerbated if the lower-class person belongs to a despised minority group. Hence the poignancy of this poem by an eighteen-year-old black boy I know:

Who am I, and why am I hear
And why does my heart hold so much fear ... 
Who am I, and where do I stand,
Will I ever have a chance to become a man.
Will I ever have a chance to see the day,
When my children can run and play.
Please, tell me who do you think I am,
Or dose it matter, you just don’t give a goddam.

Because their sense of self is so precarious, poor people invest considerable energy in a search for excitement, or “kicks,” which is to say, for activities that can tell them they do exist and they do matter. This search for “action,” to use a more inclusive term, may involve individual or gang fighting; sexual conquests; ritualized exchanges of insults; competitive recitations of poems, songs, and jokes, and other forms of verbal repartee; vandalism; gambling for heavy stakes; use of alcohol and drugs; or one or another variety of criminal activity.

The search for action is not unique to the lower class; it runs through every segment of American society. Americans who can afford to travel may look for action in the casinos of Las Vegas, the Caribbean, or the Riviera. If they have a different temperament, they may scale the smooth and perpendicular cliffs of Yosemite, climb the mountains of Maine or the High Sierras, ride the rapids downstream in Colorado or Idaho, hunt big game in Africa, practice the “sport” of parachute jumping from a chartered plane, or take an LSD “trip.” With still a different temperament, the search for action may take vicarious forms: attending the Indianapolis Speedway or other auto races, or watching Evel Knievel in one of his daredevil feats. The purpose is the same: the heightened awareness and sense of self and the testing or demonstration of character that people gain from confrontation with danger, whether physical (as in rock climbing, mountain climbing, parachute jumping, or riding the rapids), psychic (as in using hallucinogens), or financial (as in casino gambling).

What is distinctive about the lower-class preoccupation with action is simply the arena in which the search takes place. Poor people have fewer resources than do members of the middle or upper class and a far greater need to heighten their sense of self. Hence they look for action wherever it can be found—and, as we have seen, opportunities for crime are plentiful. “Burglary is an elemental act and the emotions it generates are profound,” Malcolm Braly has written, describing his own career. “It’s a treasure hunt as well as The Lady and the Tiger, a complete and separate experience outside
whatever ordinary life you may be pretending to live. It's another way to reach the now." When he stood on the rooftops of his hometown, preparing to break into a store, Braly recalls, "the town lost its capacity to change or diminish me. Here I came to power. This I, here on this dangerous height, hugging himself with excitement, was not the same adolescent who walked these streets in the daylight." 

John Allen felt much the same way about robbery. He tried pimping for a while, but it did not provide the same satisfaction. "What I really missed was the excitement of sticking up and the planning and the getting away with it—whether it come out to a car chase or just a plain old-fashioned foot race outrunning the police—knowing all the little alleys and shortcuts to go through," he says. Even now, paralyzed in his wheelchair, he sometimes dreams of resuming his career: "I still like the notoriety, the excitement, the danger—that's cool." 

Being "cool" is important to lower-class males, for it is synonymous with courage. Action, in whatever form, provides a chance to demonstrate their ability to face a challenge and overcome it, and hence to offset the impotence they normally feel. At the very least, the excitement that action generates provides evidence to the individual that he is alive, and that significant others know that he exists.

Action of an illegal or riotous sort also allows a lower-class adolescent or adult to defy the rules "they" make and the morality "they" try to impose on him—another way of gaining some sense of being in control, rather than of being controlled. ("They may make the rules, but they can't force me to abide by them.") Consequently, it is its very pointlessness, from a middle-class perspective, that is the real purpose of much juvenile and young-adult vandalism and crime.

It has long been thus. "We liked anything that had a thrill in it and it didn't make any difference what it was," a Chicago delinquent of the 1920s told the criminologists Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay. "Shooting 'craps,' playing coppers and robbers, making raids on news stands, bumming from school, junking, snatching pocketbooks and playing games in the prairie. I always liked anything that gave me a kick and was always looking for thrills... I always wanted to be in the midst of any excitement, whether it was stealing, breaking windows, breaking in school houses and tearing up the furniture, or playing a ball game." 

As this account suggests, the lower-class pursuit of action and toughness also involves a seeming indifference to the future consequences of one's behavior—at times, it would appear, an indifference to the future itself. Edward Banfield sees this apparent indifference as an inability to defer gratification and regards it as the critical characteristic of lower-class life: "The lower-class forms of all problems are at bottom a single problem," he writes, "the existence of an outlook and style of life which is radically present-oriented and which therefore attaches no value to work, sacrifice, self-improvement, or service to family, friends, or community."

But orientation to the present is a realistic adjustment to a world that seems to have no future, a world in which it takes all the strength one can muster to get through each day. "Well, I made it through today," a beleaguered and, in some ways, heroic black mother once told me. "Now I'll wait and see if I can make it through tomorrow."

For such people, the choice is not between immediate and deferred gratification; it is between immediate gratification and no gratification at all. To defer is to risk—in some situations, almost to guarantee—for-
going the gratification altogether. What appears to the outside observer as an orientation to the present, the anthropologist Elliot Liebow writes, “is, to the man experiencing it, as much a future orientation as that of his middle-class counterpart.” The difference lies not in the orientations, but in the futures to which they are oriented. For the lower-class man, in particular, Liebow adds, “It is a future in which everything is uncertain except the ultimate destruction of his hopes and the eventual realization of his fears. The most he can look forward to is that these things do not come too soon.” Thus, when a lower-class man “squanders a week’s pay in two days, it is not because, like an animal or a child, he is ‘present-time oriented,’ unaware or unconcerned with his future. He does so precisely because he is aware of the future and the hopelessness of it all.”

Members of the lower class live for the moment, too, because they have no emotional surplus to sustain them beyond the moment. It is hard enough to defer gratification of hunger or other physical needs; it is even harder to postpone support for an already fragile sense of self. Lower-class males must constantly reaffirm and prove the credentials on which their identities are based. “You got to maintain who you are at all times. You do it for the people watching,” John Allen remarks. “I remember one time in Lorton [a prison outside Washington] the psychiatrist asked me, ‘Do you sometimes grow weary portraying the image of a tough guy?’ And I say, ‘Yeah, I really do.’ Because you can’t ever let your guard down.”

Men like Allen cannot let their guard down for an instant, because “the people watching”—their peers—will reassess their status on the spot. Since status is in such hopelessly short supply, life appears to be a zero-sum game, in which one man’s loss is another’s gain. Hence lower-class adolescents and men lack the devices that middle-class people rely on to sustain their status. Bruce Jackson points out that a member of the middle class can call himself a filmmaker even though he hasn’t made a film in five years, or a scholar even though he has done no research since his doctoral dissertation.* “But the pimp who drove a shiny pimp-mobile yesterday is nobody if he turns up in a VW today.”

To understand almost any aspect of lower-class life, in fact, it is useful to keep in mind Everett Hughes’ dictum that “concealment and ego-protection are of the essence of social intercourse.” In the case of lower-class males, concealment is necessary in order to protect the ego; men have to conceal their weaknesses from themselves, as well as from others. Hence the importance of street-corner society, with its male camaraderie and the expressive life style it fosters. It is on the street corner, as Elliott Liebow writes, that men can be men—“provided they do not look too closely at one another’s credentials . . .”

The street corner is, among other things, a sanctuary for those who can no longer endure the experience or prospect of failure. There . . . failures are rationalized into phantom successes and weaknesses magically transformed into strengths.

* Members of the middle class have other sustaining devices as well. A large part of what is called “personnel management” is devoted to inventing tangible and intangible tokens of status: a key to the executive toilet; a coffee cup with the corporate seal; a title (calling clerks “executives” or “managers,” salespeople “sales executives” or “account executives,” and janitors “custodial engineers”); or an expense account, so that employees can live beyond their means at lunch and thus identify with their employers.
What all this means is that the distinctive features of lower-class life have their origins in the fact that American culture goals transcend class lines, while the means of achieving them do not. Members of the lower class are profoundly influenced by the universal values of American society; parents, in particular, want the same things for their children that middle-class parents want for theirs. "When I was a kid, before I really got into the stickup thing, my family kind of had other hopes for me and sometimes so did I," John Allen recalls. His grandmother "wanted me to be a doctor, because I was good with my hands. And my mother, she wanted me to be a lawyer." But none of them had any real conception of what becoming a lawyer or a doctor entailed; and, in any case, school, from the beginning, was an alien place that served only to reinforce Allen's sense that legitimate opportunities were closed to him. As Hylan Lewis warns, "it is important not to confuse basic life chances and actual behavior with basic cultural values and preferences."

Instead of abandoning middle-class values altogether, the sociologist Hyman Rodman suggests, members of the lower class "stretch" those values to accommodate deviations that their life circumstances seem to require. I know one impoverished mother who struggled with all her might to instill middle-class norms in her children. But she also felt it necessary to teach them how to forge a weapon by breaking the bottom off a bottle, so that they could defend themselves against the violence that was, in the literal sense, a fact of daily life in their neighborhood.

Thus lower-class life involves an almost unbearable tension between the ideal and the reality—between the desired adherence to the norms of the larger society and the insistent demands of life on the streets. The behavior of the lower-class male is "his way of trying to achieve many of the goals and values of the larger society, or failing to do this, of concealing his failure from others and from himself as best he can," Elliot Liebow writes. "If in the course of concealing his failure, or of concealing his fear of even trying, he pretends . . . that he did not want these things in the first place and claims that he had all along been responding to a different set of rules and prizes, we do not do him or ourselves any good by accepting this claim at face value."

But neither do we do anyone any good by discounting the claim altogether. Lower-class life is a response to the strains imposed by the American emphasis on success, but it is not only that. As Lee Rainwater observes, members of the lower class "are not simply passive targets of the destructive forces which act upon them." Lack of opportunity profoundly affects and limits the choices that individuals and groups can make, but it does not prevent them from making choices, from creating a way of life that is more than just a reaction against middle-class values. In his foreword to John Allen's memoir, Hylan Lewis points out that Allen's "choices, his style, his fate appear to have been not so much imposed upon him by the world around him as chosen by him as a central reaction to that world." Indeed, Allen has a clear sense of who and what he is: "I always thought of myself as a hustler. I come from a hustling family." In deciding to be-

* "Value stretch" is not a uniquely lower-class phenomenon. There is virtually no societal norm or value that is always followed by every person; for every value there is a fall-back position—a secondary set of rules to govern behavior after the first rule has been violated. When people retreat to this secondary set of rules or values, they do not necessarily abandon or reject the primary set but stretch them instead. A familiar example of middle-class value stretch is the motto "That's business" to explain unethical or illegal conduct.
come a hustler, Allen was not merely choosing a different route to success from those of his contemporaries who became policemen, businessmen, and dentists; in the last analysis, he was selecting a different end, as well as a different set of means.