

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHN PITTS, *Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime*. Mill Street, Devon, UK: Willan Publishing, 2008, xvi + 162 p., index.

Youth crime should be perceived as a social problem rather than a personal problem, declares John Pitts, whose invocation of C.W. Mills takes center stage in his analysis of gang violence in both the UK and global arenas. Since youth crime is often committed by groups, the gang is an appropriate focus, although Pitts is quick to suggest that young people may not define themselves as “gang” members and may vary in their degree of involvement (from wannabes to organized criminal violence). Moreover, their membership may not be driven exclusively by the need for money/sex/power but by the respect that such external prizes reflect.

The author of *Reluctant Gangsters* interviewed over 300 respondents, including gang members and youth justice personnel in three high-crime London boroughs. He also assessed available statistical data and evaluated two gang desistance/diversion programs in the localities he studied. He reinforces his point that youth crime is affected by globalization and neo-liberal modes of governance by drawing upon research and program evaluations from the U.K., the United States, as well as continental Europe.

The final product is a book that, while giving a nod to the contingencies of local youth crime, points to the need for broader visions involving the commitment of communities and a rejection of atomistically detrimental, “not in my backyard” mentalities which only further reify young offenders as “them” and the privileged as “us.” The title of the book stems from Pitts’ argument that the vast majority of deviance and criminological theories about youth gangs omit a crucial observation: involvement in youth gangs is often not a rationally-calculated choice but a consequence of situations whereby youth are “constrained by fear or coercion to act in ways they would not [otherwise] have chosen” (108). Many feel that there is no way back from criminal involvement.

Pitts makes the argument that despite evidence since 1992 of a drop in crime in the U.K., there has been a significant increase in the severity of crime in impoverished areas. Being careful to acknowledge the arguments of academics who declare concern/fear over youth crime a product of moral panics (cf. Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 1972) and to address the impact of how youth crime is counted, he concludes that such concern is justified. Some young people in London’s boroughs, for instance, have begun to use bullet-proof vests to protect themselves from potential assailants. In addition, some “crews” of young females have emerged who perceive themselves as “soldiers” engaging in increasingly violent crimes, despite being only loosely associated with the

(mostly male) gangs. They are qualitatively different from females who “hang out” with male gang members and who traditionally played an ancillary role, sometimes hiding weapons and/or drugs. The newer female crew members “do not perform the same sexual role as the ‘girlfriends’ of gang members” (72); nevertheless, they are still at high risk for victimization given their involvement with gangs. In addition, gangs are increasingly attracting members as young as seven or eight years old, who are being exploited by older members.

John Pitts criticizes theories which overemphasize the micro aspects of youth gang involvement. For instance, he criticizes the concept of risk theory (cf. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, 1992) for blaming individuals while obfuscating broader social forces and historical conditions that undergird the risks associated with criminogenic environments. This is likely why Pitts reacts more positively to the Chicago School, which paid attention to how gang members define their situation as well as the ecological constraints placed upon gang and community members. An ecologically-based framework fits the youth gangs that Pitts observed because “geography” tends to associate the amount of gang involvement with school districts. He describes the spatial isolation germane to ghettoized segments of London, suggesting that “the story of violent youth gangs in England is to a large extent the story of these [ghettos or subsidized] housing estates, the ones that residents would leave tomorrow if they could” (110-111).

In fact, housing estates are so intricately linked to gang culture that young people who otherwise are not affiliated with gangs have become locked in their immediate locality due to threats from gangs outside their neighbourhood. The situation is also becoming worse, Pitts claims. Previously, territory in the U.K. could be more easily traced specifically to drug markets or gang turf. Now territory is increasingly defined by postal code. Certain housing estates have been deemed “no go” zones for non-residents, coming to resemble, he argues, the “garrison communities” of Kingston, Jamaica. Schools are also becoming coded as gang territory, wherein non-gang affiliated teens are subject to dangers through their very presence. Pitts describes the situation of one boy “with no gang involvement who had inadvertently witnessed a gang shooting involving a gang-affiliated schoolmate,” and thus “had to be transferred to another school because even a slight suspicion that he would ‘talk’ would have put him and his family in danger” (118). He writes that in this toxic environment young people who would prefer to stay away from gang involvement are coming under intense pressures to engage in criminal activity. Pitts points to structural forces to explain these pressures, which he links to the spatial/ecological dynamics of the urban environment. “Many are mortified by what they have done and what they feel they have had to do to survive” (104).

I had expected to read a book about the local, which is the author’s focus according to the jacket of the book. But it is clear that Pitts’ central concern is linking the private troubles of individual gang members to the public issue of youth crime. He does this effectively by discussing broad changes due to the neo-liberal climate in the U.K., as well as gang research and diversionary program findings in the U.S. and Europe. However this spotlight on the macro level of analysis puts the micro contingencies of the youth Pitts has studied in the

shadows. There is also no discussion of how the author gained access to the subcultural social world of London-area gangs. I remain curious about how he entered and left this world. There are only passing references to his sample and no in-depth statement about methodology. The first quotation from a youth gang member, for instance, is not found until 80 pages into the book, and the title theme of youth reluctance – the basis of Pitts' originality – is given only one focused chapter which is 13 pages long. This chapter begins with an extended verbatim transcript from an interview with a former gang member. Pitts claims that this individual was "like many young people we met" (99), although I was left to question how representative he was given that he got out of gang life (at least to a large degree), stating that he wanted "to start my own business doing computer graphics and design" (99). One officer is also quoted as saying that youth gang members "put messages on MySpace [warning others that] 'we are coming to get you'" (115). Additionally, gang members in two of the boroughs Pitts studied were known to video record their offences and upload them to the Internet. Perhaps youth gang members are simply more cyber-literate in London than elsewhere.

When Pitts does make statements about the micro aspects of gang life, my impression is that he is telling more than he is showing. There is no real explanation why youth are "mortified" by their gang involvement, for instance. The author suggests that a large proportion of gang members are obsessed with status and respect, and that this is "institutionalised into gang culture in the form of an elaborate non-verbal and clothing-based etiquette, the breach of which 'can get you killed.' And this preoccupation is spreading" (92). However, readers must take his word for it: despite a handful of quotes linked to the theme of respect, the ethnography of the subcultural etiquette is missing. There is likewise no way to gauge the extent to which this "preoccupation" is spreading. This is especially ironic considering his admiration for Chicago School studies such as Thrasher's *The Gang* (1929) and Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), whose ethnographic findings highlighted the micro level of analysis.

A number of theories including risk, enchantment, thwarted consumerism, seduction, social strain, routine activities, status frustration and the masculinity thesis suggest that individuals get involved in gangs "as a product of an involuntary 'gravitation' and/or 'contagion'" (108). According to John Pitts, these theories are united in the assumption that "however 'wrong-headed' subjects may be, they believe, or act as if, gang affiliation is a positive 'choice'" (108). But he suggests that these accounts fail to capture the constraints placed upon young people; and the fear they experience, which push them, reluctantly, into gangs. Pitts' use of quotation marks around "choice" alludes to the impact social forces have on gang involvement. But he also seems to suggest that what prior theories exaggerate is the positive nature of that choice. Thus it appears that what best distinguishes Pitts' account of "involuntary" drift into delinquency is a presumption of motive. This presumption is, however, not a mark clearly distinguishing Pitts' research from previous theoretical orientations which already emphasized, as Pitts himself admits, the "involuntary" strain into delinquent channels. If the point of distinction is that young people today feel more and more "mortified" by their criminal involvement, I ask if this mortification is novel or if it is simply not highlighted in prior accounts. Moreover, it is ironic

that C.W. Mills himself warned, in his article “Situating Actions and Vocabularies of Motives” (1940), about “mongering” over the truth of such motives.

Reluctant Gangsters is most effective when it is applying Mills’ (1959) other famous statement regarding the connection of micro to macro vis-à-vis our “sociological imagination.” Pitts argues that “ineffective but quantifiable” (134) solutions which concentrate too much on the micro level despite often being more straightforward to formulate, implement, and track, do little to address the broader structural conditions which perpetuate the problem. If law enforcement, for instance, aims to behead the hydra by arresting the leadership of a particular gang, it is likely that the ensuing void will lead formerly middle-ranking gang members to violently vie for this power; new heads will grow. Pitts criticizes policy initiatives which focus solely on the short-term, and which are merely “‘perverse incentives’ within the system to steer policing away from long-term strategic thinking about local problems” (123).

He repeatedly calls for long-term strategies which act to prevent youth from entering gang subcultures in the first place. He advocates a “comprehensive gang model” involving community mobilisation, social intervention, the provision of social opportunities, organisational change and the development of local agencies and groups, and suppression (where necessary). Nonetheless, he is quick to suggest that strategies which are currently being implemented for the short- and medium-term “must be augmented by a longer-term strateg[y] that reconnects beleaguered gang-affected neighbourhoods, families and children to the social, economic, vocational and cultural mainstream” (133). He is careful to note in his final chapter that potential solutions should not be treated as a static recipe book by “the small army of shameless, entrepreneurial, academic and private sector claim-makers” who are prone to rest culpability for the problem on the individual and often “abstract the cheapest, most readily do-able elements” (161). When they do so, he claims, “public issues are translated back into private troubles,” relieving the public of their responsibility in addressing the social problem.

John Pitts may have neglected a more comprehensive explication of the micro interactional dynamics of the youth he studied, but whether or not this is a major or minor fault must be assessed in terms of his overall goals in writing this book. He addresses international trends and broad demographic and neo-liberal transformations in order to underscore how these changes draw youth – reluctantly – within criminogenic social networks. Solutions to this social problem, he writes, should not be relegated to the local. Youth gang involvement is best resolved by addressing how individual troubles are tethered to the rapid currents of social forces.

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