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Jason Goodman   April 12, 2021

Fear the "Kids in America":

How Youth Gang Films Constructed a Criminal Class, 1973-1994

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Abstract

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Throughout the twentieth century and prior, popular cultural assumed an integral role in perpetuating the myth of black criminals that was inscribed in the American legal system. There is much scholarship on the political, demographic, and economic trends that cemented the myth of black criminality into the popular consciousness, however, historians have not attempted to parse late twentieth century popular culture for its role in constructing the cultural landscape which the era of mass incarceration rests upon. Utilizing films that center youth gangs from 1973-1994, this thesis attempts to understand the role that film and its characterizations of black youth criminals played in justifying urban crime policies and police tactics that became harsher and more expansive near the end of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 explores the myth of black youth criminals and blighted cities and the policies and trends through which the myth was developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Chapter 2, this thesis turns to films produced at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s arguing their representations blamed the physical spaces of the city for their criminogenic potential. Chapter 3 explores films produced at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, attempting to uncover the changes in representations these films pursued and the ideologies they ultimately served. Contextualizing these films with other news reports, policy memos, and additional primary sources, this project attempts to explore the historical contexts these films existed within and how their distinct representations of black youth criminals and the cities they lived in were undergirded by ideologies that ultimately justified the era of mass incarceration in the American popular consciousness.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In Spring of 1982, a song from an unknown British pop-rock artist crossed the Atlantic

Ocean and rippled through American soundwaves. Kim Wilde's "Kids in America" was a pop

rock sensation peaking at #25 on US Billboard's Hot 100 in 1982.[1] The pulsating synth

undergirds a track that oscillates between disillusionment and optimism, stagnation and

rebellion. Written by a young British woman entering her twenties, "Kids in America" captures

outside perceptions of the rebellion, danger, and optimism that characterized America's youth

throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. "All the kids in America are having a better, more

interesting, more *dangerous* time than we are here," Wilde claimed in a profile on the song years

later.[2] Wilde identified with and admired the "rebellious quality" of America's youth. The song

not only expresses disillusionment with the monotony of suburban life but sends a warning

signal out to the older generation that "a new wave is coming."[3] The wave was a generation of

youngsters who wanted to rebel against the old systems and chart a new path forward. They were

"the kids in America" and they would change the nation forever.

While twenty-year old Kim Wilde might have aspired to be a kid in America, not

everyone did. The older generations of Americans did not identify with the same rebellious

qualities that Wilde so embraced. They feared those qualities, and the youths that were

challenging America's morals, culture, and systems. And while many white American youths

rebelled without much consequence, black youths were not awarded the same leniency.[4] The

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[1] "Kim Wilde," Billboard (Billboard Media, LLC), accessed March 30, 2021,
https://www.billboard.com/music/Kim-Wilde/chart-history/HSI.
[2] Briony Edwards, "The Story behind the Song: Kids In America by Kim Wilde," Loudersound, Future Publishing
Limited Quay House, February 20, 2018, https://www.loudersound.com/features/the-story-behind-the-song-kids-in-
america-by-kim-wilde.
[3] Kim Wilde, "Kids in America," by Ricky Wilde and Marty Wilde, recorded 1980, track 5 on *Kim Wilde*, 1981,
RAK, vinyl LP.
[4] Throughout this project, when using "black," I intend for it include a more expansive category of people including,
but not limited to folks of African descent. While these films largely represented black youth gangs, in some

same actions that Wilde admired in America's white youth were criminalized amongst America's black youth. The new wave of youth delinquency that "Kids in America" comments on reflected the widespread fear of a younger generation that infected the popular consciousness. Nightly news reports of crime and riots, films about violent gangs, and statistics showing increased juvenile delinquency flooded television screens and newspapers throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The fear and fascination that popular culture and media fostered not only held social implications but political ones too. The fear of America's black youth in particular fueled harsher policing of black communities, and the criminalization and incarceration of those thought to be potential delinquents, a status that was based solely on the race of an individual and the space they resided in. By the last decades of the twentieth century, the films and television shows that centered on youth criminality and reproduced the delinquency that was imagined to define cities and their populations led America to succumb to its worst fears and become "a nation at war with its future."[5]

Fear the Kids in America: How Youth Gang Films Constructed a Criminal Class, 1973-1994 is the story of a culture consumed by crime. This project examines the fascination and fear of criminal subjects that occupied the popular consciousness throughout the late twentieth century and explains cinema's role in producing, reflecting, and subverting those fears. While the second half of the twentieth century saw many political efforts to combat crime, drugs, violence, and unrest, rarely does historical scholarship attempt to understand the role that popular representations had in perpetuating certain criminological theories or justifying certain political

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instances, Latino/a and other youths of color are included. For the sake of clarity, when I use "black" in this project, I intend for it to include people of African and Latin American descent, in order to expansively describe that mythologies and policies that affected other youths of color in addition to African American youths.

[5] Thomas A. Johnson, "Cost of Black Joblessness Measured in Crime, Fear and Urban Decay," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Mar. 12, 1979.; Vernon A. Jordan, President of the National Urban League stated that America "must not become a nation at war with its future" when addressing the issue of mass black juvenile unemployment.

acts. *Fear the Kids in America* uses six films centering youth gangs and their perspectives to argue for their distinctive role in the changing and contested punitive atmosphere that engulfed the nation in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Films from 1973-1994 that depicted youth gangs reinforced fears of a changing physical and cultural landscape and offered distinct explanations for America's resurgent culture of crime. Through character motivations, narrative choices, and visual imagery of the gang experience, filmmakers captured the anxieties of the moment that swept through the nation's popular consciousness through stories of groups of criminal youths and how they interacted with and were shaped by the environments they lived in. This project is a story about both people and place and the way these two subjects interacted with each other to produce a vivid and brutal mythology where certain spaces and populations were presumed criminal. While the films analyzed throughout the period continuously criminalized inner cities and their black populations, they offered disparate explanations for both the causes and cures of the burgeoning criminality. The morphing perspectives that these films offered reflected the shifting debates surrounding the causes of crime which dominated American political discourse at the end of the twentieth century. Through the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, films about youth gangs constructed the city itself as a criminogenic environment, blaming its physical and social conditions, and the creators of those conditions for the existence of a criminal class that occupied and terrorized the streets. However, accompanying increasingly popular conservative explanations for crime, films of the 1980s and early 1990s portrayed youth criminals as inherently immoral products of black cultural pathology while sympathizing with inner city communities caught in the middle of gang and police violence. By offering a more individualistic and inherently moralistic explanation for youth crime, these films simultaneously

constructed cities as warzones controlled by urban drug cartels while holding black youth accountable for their contributions to cycles of black violence and crime. While each of these films reinforces popular perceptions of black youth criminality and its role within decaying and blighted urban centers, they offered disparate conclusions on its roots and how to combat it. In doing so, youth gang films between 1973 and 1994 were illustrative of the continued degradation of black youths and cities while simultaneously reshaping the contours of the mythology through patterned narrative choices that reflected changes in the popular consciousness

The conversation on crime in the popular consciousness is expansive and can often include a variety of narrative lenses due to the large number of activities that fall within the definition of "crime." While a study on mob films, or serial killer movies, or films focusing on sex crimes or white collar crime would surely be fruitful, this particular project focuses on youth gangs in the popular consciousness, for their distinctive role within American twentieth century history makes them fraught for analysis.

For one, in the popular imagination, youth gangs are almost inherently located in the streets. Youth gangs are often synonymous with street gangs which implies the criminal groups' inherent association with the spaces they exist in. "The asphalt, pavement, and bricks that make up urban neighborhoods" implicitly locates youth gangs in cities, which places these criminal groups at a fascinating intersection between people and place.[6] The city as a place has a long history of being demeaned and chastised as productive of immorality. In cultural productions including literature and film, the city became synonymous with the "lower depths," a space that historian Dominique Kalifa describes as "the hell down into which hordes of vagabonds,

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[6] Lorine A. Hughes and Andrew V. Papachristos, "Neighborhoods and Street Gangs" in *The Handbook of Gangs*, ed. Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 98.

wretches, mendicants, 'lost' girls, criminals, and convicts seemed to be constantly dragged."[7] This space, "partly real and partly fantasized," describes the underworld."[8] The underworld is the aggregate cultural construction of urban spaces and the social deviants that live within them. The underworld, which has become intrinsically linked to the urban social imaginary, later located the underclass, which referred to the people who lived in poor neighborhoods and were placed outside of the "social mainstream."[9] The underclass categorically lumped together those who were poor and engaged in vice, crime, or deviance. In the second half of the twentieth century, "this constellation of behaviors or conditions" was located in the inner city and used almost exclusively to refer to the black populations who lived there.[10]

In the twentieth century, youth gangs culturally represented both the underworld and the underclass. In popular mythology, gangs were located in urban slums and engaged in "collective behavior that frighten[ed] members of society."[11] In reality, gangs too were defined specifically by place, often identifying with certain neighborhoods and transforming the spaces within those neighborhoods into ground zero for gang identity. Sociologists of neighborhoods and street gangs claim that "the gang and the neighborhood are practically synonymous," implicitly linking this deviant population with the locations that form and define their collective criminal identity.[12] Because of their natural linkage between people and space, representations of youth gangs provide ample opportunity to explore how criminality and community interacted with each other

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[7] Dominique Kalifa, *Vice, Crime and Poverty: How the Western Imagination Invented the Underworld* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 1.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Annika M. Hinze, and Dennis R. Judd, *City Politics: The Political Economy of Urban America, Tenth Edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).
[10] Ibid.
[11] Martin Sanchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs in American Urban Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 313-314.
[12] Hughes, Papachristos, *The Handbook of Gangs*, 109.

to form the mythologies that sparked fear and fascination within the popular imagination in the second half of the twentieth century.

The temporal bounds of this project are also relevant through the questions they raise about crime and violence in the United States and its relationship to fear during the end of the twentieth century. While crime rates have fluctuated throughout the twentieth century, in the 1970s, the fear of youth crime manifested into political action that resulted in the policing, surveillance, and incarceration of many black juveniles in American cities. For instance, in 1973, the Los Angeles Police Department developed a new unit to curb gang violence on the streets by arresting youths for minor infractions.[13] The new unit originally called T.R.A.S.H. (Total Resources Against Street Hoodlums) became known as C.R.A.S.H. (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) and they waged a war in the Los Angeles inner city against the black youths who they automatically assumed were criminal gang members. The creation of C.R.A.S.H. and other resources to fight gangs was representative of the heightened fear of youth gangs and juvenile delinquents, particularly those who were black, within the popular consciousness. While in 1973, 7 percent of Americans cited crime and violence as the most important problem facing the country and 1 percent cited "teenage problems," that number rapidly increased over the next two decades.[14] By 1994, 64 percent of Americans believed "Crime and drugs" was one of the top two problems facing the nation.[15] The fear of crime remained, even though the violent crime rate increased and decreased several times from 1973 to

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[13] Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 219.

[14] Gallup Organization, Gallup Poll # 862, Question 2, USGALLUP.862.Q002, Gallup Organization, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1973), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

[15] Cambridge Reports/Research International, Cambridge Reports/Research International Poll: January 1994, Question 1, USCAMREP.94JAN.R01, Cambridge Reports/Research International, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1994), Dataset, DOI: {doi}.

1994 and has been on a continuous decline since 1991.[16] And according to historian Elaine Tyler

May, the rate of most violent crimes begin to decline in 1973.[17] Regardless of such trends, the

fear of crime was at an all-time high in 1994. Crime was more prevalent in American minds than

on the streets. This contradiction fuels this project's primary inquiry into representations of youth

gangs and how their cinematic portrayals ultimately justified the punitive policies and harsh

policing that reached a climax in 1994. By connecting these representations to the historical

contexts of the moment, this project will explore what cinematic representations of youth gangs

and cities said about the causes, symptoms, and solutions to youth crime in America's urban

cores.

Despite the temporal bounds of this project existing within the last three decades of the

twentieth century, the histories and mythologies that criminalized black youths and urban spaces

span far back into American history. Chapter 1 foregrounds the cinematic representations of

youth gangs through an exploration of the myth these films reproduced and its historical roots.

By illustrating both the myth of black youth criminality in urban slums and the policies,

attitudes, and trends that produced the myth, Chapter 1 historically roots these representations in

a political, cultural, and demographic environment that criminalized black youths, destroyed

their cities, and distanced their populations from middle-class, white Americans.

Throughout the 1970s, a rising youth delinquency rate, coupled with the recent memory

of urban riots produced an image of the destroyed American city which permeated throughout

the popular consciousness. Liberal explanations for rising crime rooted youth delinquency in the

perverse conditions of the city, blaming its blighted spaces, physical conditions, and failed urban

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[16] Historical Data, Uniform Crime Reports 1938-1998, 37.

[17] Elaine Tyler May, *Fortress America: How We Embraced Fear and Abandoned Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 80.

renewal projects for the production of a criminal class of youth gangsters. As Chapter 2 shows, cinematic representations of youth gangs at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s intrinsically linked the gangs to the neighborhoods they claimed. By constructing a territorialized understanding of the city and rooting its burgeoning criminality in physically degenerative spaces, these films offered a politically ambivalent explanation to the causes of crime. While these films characterized the crime problem as an environmental issue rooted distinctly in the city, their imaginings of the spaces themselves as criminal stoked fears of a generation of black youth gangs terrorizing the streets. In depictions of cities as criminogenic environments, these films were undergirded in liberal ideologies which shifted the blame from the criminal black youths to the blighted cities they populated. While these films might have been liberally oriented in their causes of crime, their solutions were inherently fatalistic, positing crime as the only option for black youths to survive in the city and death as the only option to escape it.

However, in the 1980s, the political environment was changing quickly. The War on Gangs and the War on Drugs defined the 1980s and early 1990s resulting in a massive expansion and militarization of law enforcement to match the perceived power of youth gangs. Not only did gangs become more violent, but they were more insidious, posited as peddlers of an illegal drug economy that destroyed the lives of folks inside and outside the neighborhood. As Chapter 3 reveals, films centering youth gangs in the 1980s and early 1990s viewed their activities from a distance, separating the gangs from the communities they were shown to occupy. By characterizing black communities as separate from the hyper-violent gangs, while simultaneously illustrating a militarized police force, films about youth gangs depicted a war between gangs and cops that left innocent black communities enmeshed within cycles of unprovoked violence. Despite these adverse conditions, by characterizing gangs as hyper-violent

and distancing their actors from the main characters, these films invited audiences to understand gang members as inherently immoral and gang involvement as a personal choice that was not predestined by space, like early films argued. The sympathy these later films invited for black communities subject to police brutality ultimately cloaked the conservative ideologies that undergirded their narratives. In totality, films produced at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s dismissed structuralist theories for the causes of gang criminality in lieu of conservative theories rooted in anti-structuralist narratives. Individual choices created criminals, offering inherent capacity to black youths that early films did not.

Ultimately, youth gang films from 1973 to 1994 reinforced the notion that black youths and cities were criminal while simultaneously providing a space to explore contested explanations and remedies for the violence of increasingly criminal youths. While often presenting ideologically disparate conclusions regarding the causes of crime, these films largely depicted youth gang inclusion as either an environmental problem or an individual problem. While filmmakers acknowledged structural shackles like joblessness, economic inequality, and urban disinvestment, these films ultimately subverted those claims and argued for the inherent criminality of space or the individual immorality and pathologies of the youth gang. The environmental and individual explanations for crime led to the policing of space which morphed into the harsh policing of people, foregrounding and ultimately justifying the mass incarceration of black youths which reached a climax in 1994. While the politically diverse explanations and solutions for the rise in youth gangs differed throughout the period, they ultimately served conservative ends, reinforcing stereotypes about cities and the populations that occupied those spaces, and producing fears and anxieties of their imagined, criminal power.

Chapter 1- Two Americas

Throughout the twentieth century, trends and shifts in America's economic, urban, and crime policy coalesced to create the popular attitudes towards black youth gangs and cities expressed on screen during the 1970s and beyond. Oscillating economies, in and out migration, and policies that tore down and rebuilt one neighborhood at a time defined a century of massive growth and change in urban America. For black Americans, the twentieth century offered both expanded freedom and massive resistance. While segregation and racial violence defined the first half of the century, the second half began a slow and ongoing fight for equality. As the fight for freedom was slowly realized, white Americans retreated to newly built and accessible suburbs. These neighborhoods sanitized the white middle-class experience, shielding nuclear families from the ills of the city and the perverse populations that lived there. The distance between two worlds, suburban and urban, reflected an increasing fear that white, middle class Americans harbored towards social deviants in urban spaces. While the distance between the two physical worlds was real, their cultural distance was reproduced in the popular imagination. As such, anti-urban sentiment and crime policies that targeted black youth males contextualized the emergence of the black youth gang as the embodiment of all that was imagined to be wrong in America, and thus the target for policies that attempted to rehabilitate urban America by incarcerating its occupants. By the 1970s, demographic shifts along with political and social conditions that increasingly distanced the city from emerging suburbs helped contain the criminal imaginary within the city, blaming urban spaces as a breeding ground for a black youth culture defined by criminality, poverty, abandonment, and vice.

However, these broad characterizations of populations and places that films reinforced were often rooted in a myth that was distinct from reality. This chapter will explore both the

myth that criminalized black, urban America and its origins in an attempt to explore the political and demographic changes that rendered cities and their black populations outside the normative, white American experience. The myth of criminogenic cities and violent black youths that permeated the popular consciousness throughout the twentieth century helps contextualize the cinematic representations of black youth gangs and cities that center this project.

The Myth

In the winter of 1969, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence painted a bleak picture for the future of urban America. In their final report, the Commission predicted that without action, "ghetto slum neighborhoods will be places of terror with widespread crime, perhaps entirely out of control, during night-time hours."[18] The Commission imagined high-rise apartment buildings looking more like "fortified cells," protecting upper-class urban residents from the criminals that lurked on the streets below. They saw a divided and fearful America, where suburban neighborhoods that were geographically removed from the central city would be separated and protected by expressways connecting safe neighborhoods, while private and commercial vehicles would be decorated with "unbreakable glass, light armor, and other security features." And lacking any federal support or adequate law enforcement, the Commission imagined a future where "homes will be fortified by an array of devices from window grills to electronic surveillance equipment" and "armed citizen volunteers" would ride shotgun in cars to protect and defend their suburbs from urban criminals. "Between the unsafe, deteriorating central city on the one hand and the network of safe, prosperous areas

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[18] "Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence" (December 10, 1969), 45.

and sanitized corridors on the other," the Commission imagined an America where violence born from the city would dictate everyday lives.[19]

This fearful image of future America was a prediction. To the Commission, it was a prediction born out of research, where thirteen politicians and academics theorized the causes and solutions to the upsurge in violence that had defined the 1960s. But to be sure, it was just a prediction. It was an America that experts imagined would exist in the near future if nothing was done about the violence that plagued the nation's cities at the current moment. The prediction, however, was not just derived from facts and figures from the present, but conjecture about how violent trends would reshape the physical landscape of the nation if left unfettered. And the verbiage that littered their violent vision of the future was derived from fear. It was fear of physically decaying cities and the immoral and violent populations that infected its streets. And it was fear about what would happen might those populations exit the city and terrorize white, middle-class, suburban America.

While the 1960s was a decade characterized by violence, the future America that the Commission theorized was fueled by myths of certain people and places that festered in the white, popular imagination. The place was urban America and the fear was of a dying city. Americans saw cities in flames from massive uprisings during the long, hot summers of the 1960s and feared for the physical and moral decay of the nation. Along with images of urban unrest, the city was primarily characterized by its most indigent spaces. As the Urban Initiatives Anti-Crime Program reported, "physical deterioration of residential neighborhoods, disinvestment, [and] housing abandonment" were emblematic of a physically, economically and socially decaying city whose conditions invited criminality.[20] But alongside the clearly perverse

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[19] Ibid.
[20] "Urban Initiatives Anti-Crime Program First Annual Report to Congress" (March 31, 1980), 8.

conditions that defined urban America, cities were mythologized as inherently violent and contested spaces where the nation's criminals fought each other, law enforcement, and innocent citizens for power. In this American myth, cities were criminogenic environments of rot, fire, and decay. The entire city was imagined to be the underworld, occupied by populations that Americans also feared and characterized as "other."

White, middle-class Americans not only fixated on cities as degenerative spaces, but feared the people who occupied cities as representative of a, albeit exaggerated, burgeoning criminal class. The National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence believed violent criminals were predominantly poor males between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four who lived in "the ghetto slum where most negroes live."[21] While the report acknowledged the existence of violent crime across all races and spaces, they decided to focus specifically on the causes of inner-city youth crime because crime was "heavily concentrated in large cities and especially among poor black young men in the ghettos."[22] The fascination with black, urban juveniles in the report was emblematic of the larger public's fear of their power, violence, and potential to turn into a new generation of criminal adults.[23] The myth of the underworld and the underclass that occupied the American imagination in the last quarter of the twentieth century was fully formed. White, suburban Americans believed in a criminal class of black young men and a decaying, contested, and immoral city that those criminals called home.

To be sure, the existence of a myth does not mean black youth criminals did not exist. The Commission justified their characterization of the dangerous American criminal as black, young, and urban through statistics and data. However, these statistics were derived from

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[21] "Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence" xvii.
[22] Ibid., 27.
[23] Emma Pullen, "Youth Violence, Crime Increasing Sharply," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Mar. 20, 1977.

criminal records that were unreliable at best. And in many cases, the strong statements about the predominant identity of criminals were followed by contradictions. After justifying their report with evidence of increasing violent crime in America's cities, the authors suggested that the increases in "major crimes involving violence" were not as "dramatic as FBI data suggest[ed]."[24] And despite frequent cases of contradictory data, American anxiety from crime was often totally unrelated to actual incidence of crime. The Urban Initiatives Anti-Crime Program Report claimed that even when "the actual incidence of crime is not high, an intense fear of crime disturbs residents" and "fear of crime ranks with inflation as among the top concerns of Americans."[25] So while crime surely did, and always will exist, the myth of a violent, black, criminal, youth class was often times propagated more by fear than fact.

And fear was powerful. In a national survey taken in 1969, "half of the women and one-fifth of the men said they were afraid to walk outdoors at night, even near their homes."[26] And even though, as *Time Magazine* acutely pointed out, "Americans are several times more likely to be hurt in an auto accident or household mishaps than to be raped, robbed or murdered," a majority of Americans still viewed crime control as their top domestic priority.[27] They feared neighborhoods that newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* portrayed as sites of constant and random violence, claiming that families slept in basements or watched television on the floor "to escape the often random bullets fired during the day or at night from cruising vehicles filled with gang members."[28] The myths of decaying cities and their violent populations occupied the popular imagination and informed policy decisions that had massive ramifications. The

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[24] "Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence" 39.
[25] "Urban Initiatives Anti-Crime Program First Annual Report to Congress" 3.
[26] "Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence" 19.
[27] "What the Police Can- and Cannot- Do," *Time Magazine*, July 13, 1970, 34.
[28] Tendayi Kumbula, "Pitchess Opens War on Youth Violence," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Dec 19, 1975

following section will explore the origins of the myth of urban, black, male criminality and how demographic shifts, policy decisions, and racist assumptions created two Americas, distinct in both location and population.

Cities, Suburbs and a Nation Divided

In order to understand why cities in the American mind became spaces of blackness, defined by criminality and poverty, and imagined through blighted and deteriorating spaces, it is necessary to travel to the beginning of the nation's founding. Anti-urban sentiments have always found a prominent place in the American consciousness. Thomas Jefferson expressed his fear of the city as a physical manifestation of mob rule, implicitly rooting American tradition and identity in the nation's rural and natural spaces. Jefferson's ideals fostered a general fear of the city as a physical space, but also fear of what the physical space could breed. However, the cities Jefferson feared and scrutinized slowly moved from the periphery to the center of American life. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution and post-civil war economy had transformed America into a nation fueled by its urban centers. While the frontier was still at the forefront of the popular consciousness, Americans had to begin to reckon with cities as the new center of the nation's civic life and economy.[29]

A prominent American historian reckoned with these demographic, economic, and spatial changes at the end of the nineteenth century through his Frontier Thesis. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote "On the Significance of the Frontier in American Life," an essay that pondered the end of the American frontier and the future of American cities. Through this formative work of historical and popular scholarship, Turner placed American tradition, identity,

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[29] Steve Conn, *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

and community in the rural, western frontier.[30] Part of his project was to reconcile with the

nation's decisively urban future by cementing the past in an "anti-urban romance" that placed

city spaces outside American norms and traditions.[31] He posited that a true American community

could not exist in growing cities that were characterized as immoral spaces of vice and deviance.

In doing so, Turner explicitly linked the end of the American frontier with a nation in moral

decline, blaming cities and their populations for the country's unraveling. Urban spaces had none

of the individualism, nature, or expansive, clean spaces that defined the frontier in the popular

imagination. Instead, cities were ethnically diverse, packed with people living in deteriorating

physical spaces, partaking in immoral acts of violence, vice and corruption. The geographies of

cities, which required people to live literally on top of each other, were imagined as antithetical

to the American tradition of individualism. And the dense spaces and diverse populations

associated with the city became sources of anxiety for Americans who believed that the

traditional American community of small Northeastern towns and rural economies was totally

incompatible with massive urban spaces. Thus, the myth of the city in the late twentieth century

projected through film and popular media as a site of violence, and crime outside American

norms, found its historical roots in a discourse that was as old as the nation itself. The physical

city and its occupants were part of an immoral space and class of otherness.

While culturally, cities had been mythologized as spaces of vice and deviance since

America's founding, political and demographic trends in the beginning of the twentieth century

further characterized cities in immoral terms. Beginning in the early 1900s, African Americans

migrated from the South to northern cities in rapid numbers.[32] As the American economy

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[30] Uktu Mogultay, "The Urban Frontier in Thomas Pychon's Against the Day," in *Urban Transformations in the U.S.A.: Spaces, Communities, Representations*, ed. Julia Sattler (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), 299.
[31] Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 20
[32] Hinze, Judd, *City Politics*

became increasingly industrial, cities sprung up quickly across the northern landscape and the demand for cheap labor increased dramatically. When America became involved in World War I, black migration out of the South only sped up as the war simultaneously "increased the demand for U.S. industrial production and cut off the flow of European immigrants, northern factories' traditional sources of labor."[33] To match the huge increase in demand for workers and lack of supply, employers began recruiting black laborers from the south to work in factories for low wages. As a result, over 1.4 million African Americans moved to industrialized northern cities from 1910 to 1930.[34]

While blacks often moved in the hopes of escaping the racial animus they experienced in the South, the conditions they moved into were destitute and their presence in the city marked them as targets for racialized violence. As blacks began to populate the city and gain jobs, white northerners responded by amplifying incidents of black vice and crime in newspapers.[35] Increasing numbers of African Americans in the work force along with newspaper headlines that depicted black urbanites as violent and depraved fostered racialized fears. White anxiety over both personal and economic security inspired large swaths of white urbanites to seek as much distance between themselves and black Americans as possible. The most contested space during this battle for racial separation was the neighborhood. Black city-goers often lived in racially homogenized areas not only to protect themselves from targeted racial violence, but because they were explicitly banned from white neighborhoods. However, black areas were often marked by squalor and destitute conditions due to the population's low, industrial wages. As some black folks slowly improved their economic conditions and attempted to move out of majority-black

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[33] Nancy A. Denton and Douglas S. Massey, *American Apartheid: Segregation and The Making of The Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 28.
[34] Ibid., 29.
[35] Ibid., 29.

ghettos and into whiter neighborhoods on the periphery of the city, they became targets for white violence and massive resistance. Violent protest became less prevalent over the twentieth century but not because white neighbors became more accepting. White communities began to segregate with the support of newly racist institutionalized practices developed through a half-century-long, public-private partnership that cemented residential segregation into the physical and social fabric of the city. This marked the beginning of the distance that separated middle-class whites from black Americans, creating the conditions for a racialized understanding of cities and a growing fear of its occupants.

In the 1930s, urban America became the site of a national battle waged against forces that some believed threatened the unraveling of the nation's moral identity. Vice and poverty were features of an urban landscape deeply affected by the Great Depression, rendering the city as an embodiment of America's social and moral ills. In addition, the Depression was felt most acutely by black, urban Americans who were already systemically blocked from jobs because of discriminatory hiring practices. These conditions, compounded by general economic downturn, created the social and economic conditions that rooted Progressive explanations for the rising tide of black youth delinquency.[36] To be sure, youth delinquency was not an explicitly black phenomenon however, connections between indigent urban conditions and crime reinforced the notion that youth crime was an especially black occurrence. This was further reinforced through the Federal Juvenile Delinquency Act of 1938, the first national attempt to standardize juvenile law.[37] Although the implications of the new law were minor due to state jurisdiction over most juvenile cases, the existence of such a law itself signaled the importance of the issue within the

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[36] Carl Suddler, *Presumed Criminal: Black Youth and the Justice System in Postwar New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 17.
[37] Ibid, 28.

popular consciousness and a willingness to remedy the root causes of youth crime.[38] And while

the perceived link between economic conditions and crime was often advocated with good

intentions, the results ensnared black youths in a carceral state that increasingly surveilled inner

city spaces for potential criminals.

Believing in a connection between poverty and crime, politicians wished to address

degenerative urban conditions through public housing initiatives while simultaneously bolstering

opportunities for homeownership outside the city. One of Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives was

the National Housing Act of 1934, the nation's first institutionalized effort to simultaneously

improve conditions of the city while creating opportunities for homeownership outside of it.

While urban public housing became a political goal, the Housing Act's most influential initiative

was the Federal Housing Administration.[39] Even though the FHA's goal was to improve and

construct both public and private housing projects, it more heavily subsidized the construction of

new, single-family, middle-class homes located on the periphery of the city.[40] Their policy

incentives were racially inspired as the FHA further neglected housing projects in the city's most

impoverished, minority enclaves while simultaneously enabling middle-class white Americans to

move into suburbs. For the first time, subsidized mortgages were made available to potential

homeowners, making homeownership more attainable for middle class families. However, these

mortgage funds were granted exclusively to white families since the FHA rejected funds "for

'high risk' neighborhoods, integrated communities, or female-headed households."[41] In addition

to subsidizing single-family suburban developments and the white exodus which followed, the

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[38] Ibid, 30.
[39] Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 97
[40] Ibid*.,* 97-100.
[41] Donald Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 25.

FHA located their rehabilitated public housing projects in densely packed city centers, further

confining America's poorest populations to inner cities.

In addition to the Federal Housing Administration's efforts to rehabilitate American

housing, the federal government launched the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC), a

program aimed to reduce the barriers towards private housing in America. Beyond their efforts to

make homeownership accessible to more middle-class whites, HOLC institutionalized a rating

system intended to evaluate the risk of loans in certain neighborhoods.[42] The process became

known as redlining, for black urban areas were automatically coded "red," thus systemically

barring those areas from federal subsidies and institutionalizing racial segregation into America's

landscape. Later, banks began to use HOLC maps to make their own decisions regarding which

neighborhoods to offer homeownership loans. From there, a public-private partnership emerged

to bar black Americans from suburbs and strengthen residential segregation.

Federal initiatives that relocated wealth into the suburban peripheries were often

bolstered by private actors who leveraged their political influence to maintain the racialized

divide that was already beginning to define American geography. Once white Americans were

able to build exclusive, racially homogenous communities, they sought to maintain and entrench

a racial geography into their city through Homeowner's Associations. These neighborhood

groups became sanitized tools of segregation maintenance as neighbors used their collective

power to lobby city councils for zoning restrictions, boycott real estate agents that sold to Black

families, and buy property from Black homeowners in the area. Their most effective tool of

racial segregation and containment was the enforcement of restrictive covenants, "contractual

agreements among property owners stating that they would not permit a black to own, occupy or

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[42] Denton and Massey, *American Apartheid,* 52.

lease their property."[43] Restrictive covenants were widely adopted tools of racial exclusion from

1910 until 1948 and helped white Americans maintain a residential color line that further

distanced America's middle class from an urban core they institutionally confined black

Americans within. As a result of the onslaught of housing policies that entrenched black

Americans in cities and offered white Americans increased access to suburban life,

homeownership of single-family homes increased twenty percent between 1934 and 1969.[44]

With the help of the FHA's racially restrictive loan policies and a public-private partnership that

incentivized racial segregation and white suburban homeownership, America's physical

landscape began to permanently reflect the racial animus and anxiety that white, middle-class

Americans felt towards black, urban populations.

World War II brought more economic and demographic changes to the United States.

What was once a stagnant industrial economy now boomed with high demand for low-wage

factory workers to support the full military buildup that the war effort required. Once again,

black southerners rushed to cities to fill the demand for low wage workers however, continued

discriminatory practices made it difficult for blacks to reap the rewards of a wartime economy.

Disillusioned by their lack of employment access, African Americans mobilized across the

country prompting an executive order that "prohibited racial discrimination in the defense

industry."[45] While other, less institutionalized practices made it difficult for black Americans to

take full advantage of the booming economy, they still migrated into industrial centers with

factory work. However, this time they entered an environment of stagnated home construction

and communities already entrenched within decades of poverty. As a result, the three million

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[43] Denton and Massey, *American Apartheid,* 36.
[44] Ibid, 53.
[45] Suddler, *Presumed Criminal*, 42

African Americans that migrated north from 1940 to 1960 were forced to reside in poor, densely packed, urban neighborhoods.[46] This new migration of blacks into already indigent areas helped further associate blackness with blight in the American mind.

During World War II, urban unrest coalesced with a rising tide of juvenile crime fostering a racialized connection between the two distinct trends that were both rooted within urban conditions. Competition over wartime employment opportunities and housing fostered riots across the country during the summer of 1943. The riots were manifestations of the "built-up frustration that blacks experienced," historian Carl Suddler describes, and were largely composed of youths who were rebelling against systems that confined them into cycles of physical, economic, and social deprivation.[47] Separate from the unrest that struck multiple cities during wartime was an increase in youth crime "by more than 40 percent according to an FBI survey," which was largely cast in racial terms.[48] Because many protestors were black teenagers, the concurrent rise in urban youth crime was given a similar face, age, and gender. The linkages between urban unrest and street crimes and their root economic and social causes began a tradition that criminalized black youths in the popular imagination for decades moving forward.

Demographically, the in-migration of African Americans during World War II was followed by a mass exodus of white Americans far away from cities and into suburbia. A suburban "paradise" offered the middle-class sufficient distance from the city and safety from the perils that festered within their imagination. The massive demographic shifts spurred by white anxieties occurred in a moment of political and cultural peril. Almost immediately after World War II, Americans begin fighting a new war with a much more elusive enemy. The Cold

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[46] Conn, *Americans Against the City,* 158.
[47] Suddler, *Presumed Criminal*, 52.
[48] Michael Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 14.

War was different because it was not so much a battle over territory, but a battle over ideals. Americans feared nuclear fallout over a fermenting war that pitted individualism against collectivism. Fearing nuclear war, Americans fortified themselves in suburban homes away from urban centers, the most obvious target for a nuclear attack.[49] And by limiting access to distant, suburban neighborhoods, the federal government implicitly delineated which citizens were worthy of protection. White middle class suburban families had become the American ideal and in turn, enjoyed protection from the foreign and domestic threats within America's cities.

The concurrent black in-migration and white exodus from cities directly after World War II led to a period of urban crisis. Rapid demographic shifts, assisted by racialized housing policies and practices, were accompanied by a period of economic decentralization that left cities depleted of their industry, and increasingly poor and black. As such, the image of the "ghetto slum" became associated with the physical and economic conditions of the entire city in the American imagination. And the language of the "inner city" located blackness, poverty, and vice in the physical space of the city. In order to rehabilitate America's cities after the war, the federal government began a project of urban renewal. Beginning with the Housing Act of 1949, the federal government began to "acquire buildings, blocks or whole neighborhoods deemed 'blighted' through eminent domain."[50] After acquiring the land, the government cleared its spaces in order to create a sanitized city with housing projects and commercial developments.

However, ostensibly noble goals resulted in sinister effects. During the 1950s and 1960s, urban renewal was used as a tool of "slum clearance" as the federal government was able to determine which neighborhoods were crowded enough, destitute enough, poor enough, black

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[49] May, *Fortress America,* 41.
[50] Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 151.

enough, and criminal enough to seize, remove, raze and replace.[51] While urban renewal effectively cleared and cleansed the physical eyesores of some parts of the city, the process often was not permanent, geographically shifting blight to adjacent neighborhoods. As a result, black folks often moved into physically unstable and economically deprived neighborhoods that the federal government could deem 'blighted' and destroy at any moment. As the decade went on, urban renewal began to physically reshape cities in the American imagination as places of black poverty by leading urban spaces into further deprivation and decline.

A bipartisan consensus deemed urban renewal a failure. For black residents and leaders alike, urban renewal really meant "negro removal."[52] Even though one of the goals of federal renewal projects was to create more public housing, the government ended up destroying more houses than it built, confining black folks into physically deteriorating spaces. However, it was not just black Americans who expressed serious discontent with federally funded urban projects. Conservative politicians used the failures of urban renewal to castigate liberalism. As Steve Conn claims in *Americans Against the City*, "the perceived failure of the federal urban renewal program turned cities into physical manifestations of a failure of government liberalism."[53] Urban renewal became the example for why welfare and government intervention did not and could not work. Therefore, the physical deprivation of the cities allowed for the development of an emerging consensus that characterized the federal government as not only incapable of solving the economic problems that infected cities, but as largely responsible for them.

Accompanying federal renewal projects and black migration to cities in the post-war moment was the suburbanization of white America. While federal urban planners worked to

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[51] Denton and Massey, *American Apartheid,* 55-56.
[52] Ibid*,* 56.
[53] Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 9.

rebuild America's cities, they were simultaneously incentivized, to make the city's ripe, consumer economy accessible from afar. The federal highway program was one of the few popular urban renewal projects that helped foster the massive suburban sprawl that defined the second half of the twentieth century, connecting white suburban Americans to city life at a distance they believed was safe. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act into law which allocated $26 billion towards constructing 41,000 miles of road by the end of the 1960s.[54] New highways allowed the commercialized urban economy to remain accessible for suburban middle class whites as they moved even further away from cities.[55] While this was convenient for suburban America, highway construction often destroyed poor urban communities, contributing to the blight that already made middle class Americans adverse to its conditions. By 1971, highway construction had destroyed around 33,000 buildings every year for the previous ten years and displaced over 50,000 people per year.[56] Highway construction overwhelmingly displaced communities of color who wielded little political power compared to the interest groups who lobbied for highway development. A changing economy also accompanied the changing landscape as the substitution of steam power for electrical power decentralized America's economy incentivizing factory owners to build within and around a developing suburban landscape. Newly decentralized economies stripped tax revenues away from cities further contributing to their disinvestment. These combined economic and geographic trends left cities in crisis as industry exited and blight remained. By 1970, more Americans lived in the suburbs than in rural areas or urban centers for the first time in history.[57] The findings in

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[54] Conn, *Americans Against the City,* 179

[55] Denton and Massey, *American Apartheid,* 44.

[56] Conn, *Americans Against the City,* 176.

[57] Hinze and Judd, *City Politics.*

the 1970 census were the conclusion to decades of demographic, political, and cultural shifts that permanently suburbanized white America and pathologized black city centers.

While postwar policies attempted to rehabilitate destitute urban spaces, the black youths who often lived there were increasingly imagined as dangerous criminals. While in the beginning of the 1950s, youth delinquency was understood more broadly, and less racially, Americans began to view violent and criminal youths in the late 1950s as inherently black.[58] In an attempt to curb youth delinquency that was popularly understood through a racialized and aged lens, Kennedy introduced the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act of 1961, which focused on environmental and structural causes of youth crime.[59] In addition, this legislation laid the groundwork for the upcoming War on Poverty and War on Crime, which rooted a racialized imagining of crime in the deleterious conditions and cultural pathologies of the inner city.[60] The criminogenic beliefs about cities that justified the War on Poverty also justified the increased police presence in black neighborhoods. During the 1960s, harsh policing tactics like "stop-and-frisk" and "no-knock" warrants were legalized and practiced in black communities that were believed to be ground-zero of the emerging criminal class.[61] While in reality, harsh policing ensnared black youths into the carceral system during the 1960s, the Democratic administrations that were crafting policy to address crime and poverty linked the two together to construct a liberal response that attempted to address and attack their "root causes."[62]

Just as the populations living within cities were characterized uniformly as potentially criminal, so too were urban spaces themselves imagined in often racist terms that distanced those

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[58] Flamm, *Law and Order*, 16-19.
[59] Suddler, *Presumed Criminal*, 95.
[60] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 99.
[61] Suddler, *Presumed Criminal*, 125.
[62] Flamm, *Law and Order*, 49.

spaces from the normative, suburban American experience. Throughout the 1960s, the media focused its attention on violent crimes committed by black criminals contributing to the increasing belief that "the streets of America's cities were unsafe" because of the black youths that lived there.[63] Conservatives of the era, like Barry Goldwater, denounced Democrats for letting violence in the streets flourish and often characterized the city as a "jungle" to stoke fears about the lawlessness that supposedly defined its spaces.[64] The conservative characterization of cities as jungles held racist undertones that characterized black urban populations as uncivilized and inherently criminal. This rhetoric stoked racialized fears of the city that conservatives continued to foster and exploit as mass unrest and rioting swept through America's urban centers in the second half of the 1960s.

Beginning on an August evening in 1965, the neighborhood of Watts in the city of Los Angeles exploded in mass unrest that resulted in 34 dead, 4,000 arrested and around $35 million in damage. Sparked from an act of police brutality, the riot was so widespread it prompted a militarized response from the National Guard, turning Watts into a site of "guerilla war."[65] The riot shook America's public and political elite as the Johnson Administration hurried to identify its causes in order to prevent other cities from erupting into mass unrest. The McCone Commission identified a typical rioter as a juvenile male, coming from a single-parent home with an annual income slightly above the poverty level, a description similar to that of the typical juvenile delinquent. These liberal explanations that the blamed social and economic ills of the city linked youth crime and urban unrest to black youths through their similar root causes and environments. And while conservatives refuted the notion that societal conditions were root

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[63] Ibid, 29.
[64] Ibid, 31.
[65] Ibid, 59.

causes, they too lumped rioters, civil rights demonstrators, and criminals into one category of radical black youths consumed in a culture of moral decay. Despite competing explanations for the causes of crime and unrest, both lead to the "militaristic approach to ghetto policing," a phenomenon that historian Michael Flamm identified as a way to surveil, confine and criminalize black urban populations deemed criminal and radical.[66] Occurring simultaneously to bouts of urban unrest was a rise in youth crime that was understood through a racialized lens which located youth criminals most acutely in America's cities. To address rising delinquency rates, Johnson declared a "War on Crime" targeting black folks in poor urban areas whom they characterized as potential criminals.[67] Despite the Democratic presidential administrations that shaped crime policy off of liberal criminological theories throughout the decade, conservative law-and-order messaging was slowly seeping into the political mainstream. And by 1968, the Safe Streets Legislation that President Johnson signed into law expanded the federal government's role in policing and was a harbinger of the increasingly punitive and conservative law-and-order politics to come.[68]

In March 1965, in an attempt to address the growing problem of black poverty and crime, Daniel Patrick Moynihan released a paper titled, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." In a treatise that became known as The Moynihan Report, the future Senator outlined the problem of black crime and poverty located most acutely in urban centers and rooted the problem in "the breaking of the family structure on the urban frontier."[69] Moynihan argued that black youths were more susceptible to poverty and delinquency because of a self-perpetuating "tangle of pathology," characterized by high divorce rates, "illegitimate," absent black fathers,

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[66] Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s*, 66.
[67] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 97-99.
[68] May, *Fortress America*, 69.
[69] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965), 14.

and welfare dependency.[70] While he connected the breakdown of the black family to slavery and segregation, Moynihan nonetheless argued that youth crime and poverty were rooted in "family pathology." And he located these inherently perverse socializing conditions in America's "negro slum," where "drunkenness, crime, corruption, discrimination, family disorganization, juvenile delinquency were the routine of that era."[71] The Moynihan Report popularized theories that propagated cultural explanations for the root causes of crime. In turn, politicians rooted urban and crime policy in their belief that black cultural pathology in cities explained rising youth crime rates.[72] However prominent this belief was, black cultural pathology was just one of the many purported explanations for the imagined flood of black youth delinquency in the 1960s.

Throughout the 1960s, conservative backlash to liberal theories of crime and unrest became more prominent, focusing on a "breakdown in civic order" as the main cause of crime, which they ultimately blamed on the liberal welfare state.[73] The "Long Hot Summers" of racial unrest proved to be a visual example of the failures of Great Society legislation. As such, conservatives were able to successfully characterize their law and order philosophy as a more punitive and harsh solution to the increasingly present problem of crime and unrest. Both the Safe Streets Act of 1968 and the Juvenile Delinquency Act of 1974 reinforced the racialized geographies of America by providing disparate, geographically dictated solutions to the problems of youth crime. While the approach to juvenile delinquency in rural and suburban areas was more rehabilitative, the approach to youth crime in urban areas was inspired by the notion that the locations themselves inspired crime, thus all who lived there should be policed as potentially criminal subjects. The legislation lowered the age for youths to be tried for violent

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[70] Ibid, 31.
[71] Ibid, 13.
[72] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 99.
[73] Flamm, *Law and Order*, 33.

crimes to sixteen, reflecting a racialized and violent imagination of crime in America and the belief that incarceration was the best technique to stop it.[74]

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, the popular discourses surrounding the root causes of crime and unrest oscillated between both conservative and liberal explanations. Some characterized youth crime as a response to moral decay in America's cities and prompted by cultural pathologies that afflicted poor communities of color. Others believed youth crime was a symptom of segregation, economic discrimination and other social ills that targeted black communities throughout the 20th century. Regardless of which narrative was most popular, they both shared in the belief and mythology that youth crime was distinctively urban, black, young, male, and poor. Both explanations fashioned an understanding of the city and its populations as part of the underworld, a distinction that confined the spaces and people of American cities in an imagination of otherness. As a result, the myth of pervasive black crime and criminal inner cities that undergirded urban crime policies throughout the twentieth century slowly reinforced a racialized understanding of youth crime and justified practices that policed communities of color, and ensnared much of their youth into an expanding criminal-justice system.

Conclusion

By the 1970s, the myth was successfully constructed. Economic changes, demographic shifts, urban policies, and punitive practices coalesced throughout the twentieth century to create the conditions which effectively mythologized black youths and the urban spaces they lived in as distinctly criminal. Culturally, the myth of black urban criminality produced throughout the twentieth century and prior provided the context for youth gang films to permeate popular

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[74] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 223

culture in the 1970s and beyond. Through cinematic representations, gangs and urban neighborhoods became intertwined within an underworld imaginary that located vice, crime, and blight all within the city. Criminal representations of gangs on screen were inspired by both the fear and fascination that the geographic distance between white suburbs and black cities created.

With new transportation technologies and decentralized economies, middle-class Americans could drive above the vast urban expanse and get dropped off right at their destination. Whether it was shopping, or work, or a trip to the courthouse, Americans could access the city for its economic resources and retreat back home to their tranquil suburbia by the time the sun set. White suburban Americans could drive past housing projects, or underserved neighborhoods in seconds, ignoring the experiences of those who lived in the communities that to them, characterized the urban condition. Their cars and their homes shielded them from the city streets, a world perceived as too dangerous to navigate alone. As a result, middle-class Americans often did not experience urban conditions for themselves. They saw it represented on screen. They watched news reports of cities on fire and increasing violent crime. They saw films depicting the brutality of the urban experience. Residential segregation, racialized violence, deindustrialization, suburbanization and black migration into cities were just a few of the many trends that characterized the urban experience in the twentieth century. And while these trends had massive political and social effects, they had cultural effects too.

These trends created two distinct Americas- a white suburban middle-class America, associated with traditional family values and single-family homes, and a black urban America, culturally and economically pathologized and imagined as both a creator of and product of degenerative urban conditions. While profound racialized differences have existed throughout American history, the geography that emerged in the late twentieth century uniquely separated

and structured the lives of black and white Americans through two distinct environments. Urban America and those who lived there were practically foreign to suburbanites. And suburban Americans only wished to experience the city and its occupants through the screen. Thus, the political and geographic conditions that defined the twentieth century helped distance American audiences from the subjects of youth gang films. Middle-class audiences were able to view the city through the lens of the screen and better understand its characters and their motivations through the narratives being told. But understanding is often tainted by fear and fascination. And as filmmakers and audiences explored narratives of youth criminality, they often reflected and reproduced their own fears of an America that was changing. Through films about youth gangs, American audiences were invited to view the future of America through a generation raised and formed during moments of colliding crises. And it was a future they were profoundly afraid of.

While the physical separation between black and white, and urban and suburban America laid the groundwork for representations of a criminal "otherness" to flourish, these cinematic characterizations were not hegemonic. Films centering youth gangs between 1973 and 1994 represented criminal discourses that oscillated between various explanations for the root causes of urban crime and blight. And while each film legitimized a fear of black youth criminals and urban spaces in the popular imagination, they disparately represented its causes. As Americans questioned who to blame for the crime and blight they believed infected cities, each film offered their own answers through the narrative patterns, characterizations, and choices they made. Each choice though was rooted in a larger historical context representing the contested nature of crime and urban policy debates during the late twentieth century. The youth gang films explored in the chapters to come not only represented the continued myth of black youth criminals and urban America, but the changing and diverse debates regarding the causes of their criminality.

Chapter 2: The Criminal City

On the summer evening of June 28th 1978, ABC News nationally broadcasted a special report "Youth Terror: The View from Behind the Gun." The report was part of the "Close-Up" series and consumed a full night of television, beginning with an hour-long documentary followed by a ninety-minute Question and Answer session with "experts and authorities" on youth crime. The broadcast attempted to open American's eyes to the subject of "juvenile crime in the city of the '70s."[75] "Youth Terror: The View from Behind the Gun" followed juvenile delinquents throughout New York City in an attempt to answer why the burgeoning criminal class was young, urban, and poor. "The street is the place where you become a man. The streets will make you a man if anything," exclaimed a subject whose voice narrated the opening scenes of the report which depicted a blighted city overrun by garbage, graffiti and grime.[76] The streets themselves made him a man, speaking to the power spaces themselves were imagined to hold over the people who populated them. The first subject of the film is a Brooklyn teen who is interviewed on the roof of his apartment building. "Up here you have the pigeons, and you're in control of them and you feel like a general. You feel like somebody. Out on the streets you feel like nothing." After describing a plethora of his ruthless and frequent crimes, the teenager proudly proclaimed that "I alone have cost this city tens of thousands of dollars."[77] This interview is just the beginning of a report that displayed the depravity of life in America's urban cores. The project's stated goal was to determine "why youth crime has risen 293 percent in 15 years," and the journalists communicated their answer through the brutal visions of the city they

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[75] Tom Shales, "Straight from the Streets- ABC Takes a Hard Look at Youth Crime," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), June 28, 1978.
[76] *ABC Close-Up Report*, "Youth Terror: The View from Behind the Gun," written and directed by Helen Whitney, produced by Pamela Hill, aired June 28, 1978, in broadcast syndication, ABC.
[77] Ibid.

portrayed.[78] While attempting to understand the youths they were documenting, it seems the

producers of the special were more struck by the places themselves. After spending days filming

the lives of the children, Pamela Hill, executive producer of the report, would drive through

"Brooklyn's fire-scarred and crime-ridden Brownsville section" crying at the hopelessness of

what she found there.[79] She felt sorrow within the physical environment of the city and how its

spaces structured the behaviors of the youths who lived there. In an interview, Hill identified the

magnitude of her project claiming that "all who are knowledgeable about the city and its

problems know the situation is a great problem of American life."[80]

The report did incredibly well, garnering viewership far beyond what was typical for

documentaries, along with wide critical acclaim.[81] Its mere existence along with the images and

messages it depicted, spoke to the anxieties that flooded the popular consciousness at the end of

the twentieth century. "Youth Terror" portrayed the image of a dying city and located morally

corrupted youth identity within the rubble of the streets. In its first few minutes, the reporters

show streets littered with garbage, fires burning in empty trash cans, and abandoned lots with the

carcasses of partially demolished buildings, all of which were violently dominated by youths. As

such, Americans not only feared the younger generations, but they feared the spaces they were

raised within. The face of crime was young, poor, urban, and largely black and this special report

was just one of many examples of popular culture and media that further criminalized such

populations and the spaces they lived in.

This ABC special report along with other sensationalized news stories heightened

anxieties about urban youth criminals and placed the problem at the center of the national

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[78] Ibid.
[79] "Youth Terror: View from Behind the Gun," *Argus-Press* (Owosso, MI), June 22, 1978.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Tom Shales, "Fantasyland Reality," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 3, 1979.

discourse. While the report focused on the criminal, the images and interviews propagated the notion that blighted and perverted cities were creators of a criminalized youth. By simultaneously characterizing the physical city as harsh and unforgiving, and sympathizing with youths subjected to those conditions, "Youth Terror: The View from Behind the Gun" closely aligned with fictionalized productions of youth gangs and popular beliefs that blamed the violent, physical conditions of the city for the youth gang criminality that occurred within its spaces.

Using the films *Youngblood* (1978), *The Warriors* (1979), *Boulevard Nights* (1979), and *Suburbia* (1984), this chapter will show how popular culture produced during this moment criminalized the city and imagined its spaces to be productive of a new class of youth criminals. After summers of urban unrest that seared a burning city into the American consciousness, many films capitalized on the contested and territorialized image of the city, inviting audiences to understand urban space as a battleground devoid of traditional power structures. In addition, bipartisan consensus about the failures of urban renewal provided the context for audiences to believe that these spaces invited criminality. As a result, these films often blamed the physical conditions of the city for an increase in youth criminality. Filmmakers invited sympathy on the youths joining gangs by constructing the blighted and perverse city as a determinative and confining space. These films purported a fatalistic notion that the urban youths of color were born criminal, pre-destined to a life of youth gang violence. As such, these films were politically promiscuous, championing liberal explanations of crime that shifted the blame away from the youths, while simultaneously stoking fears of criminogenic and perverse cities that rendered black youths criminal at birth. By blaming rising juvenile crime on the city more so than the people who lived there, these films casted cities as spaces of "otherness" and reflexively justified militarized policing of urban geography under those same terms.

Before exploring the patterns within each film that both buttress and subvert certain popular notions about the city, it is necessary to briefly summarize the stories the each tell. *Youngblood* is a film directed by Noel Nosseck which premiered in 1978 and told the story of a teenager living in South Central Los Angeles who descends into the gang milieu.[82] After an altercation at a club, Youngblood becomes more intertwined with the local gang, The Kingsmen. Unbeknownst to him, his brother, Reggie, is running an illicit drug trade, which paves the way for the paths of the two criminal brothers to collide at the end of the film, resulting in Reggie's death. While *Youngblood* is about a character's descent into a youth gang, *The Warriors* tells the story of a gang's journey across the perverse urban landscape. *The Warriors*, directed by Walter Hill and released in 1979, is an action-thriller about a gang trying to escape the cops, competing gangs, and New York City itself, in order to safely make it back to Coney Island.[83] The Warriors are a youth gang framed for killing the leader of the most powerful gang in the city. Their attempt to traverse the dangerous city in one night propels the film's central narrative. *Boulevard Nights*, a film directed by Michael Pressman and released in 1979, tells a story similar to *Youngblood*.[84] It is a coming-of-age film about two brothers, one trying to escape the gang milieu, and the other trying to embed himself deeper within it. Raymond is older, works at an auto-body shop, and is trying to get married to his girlfriend and settle down into a domestic life. Chuco, his younger brother, is his foil, viewing inclusion in their barrio's gang as an aspirational goal and becoming more criminal throughout the film as a result. The story of brothers Raymond and Chuco, and their divergent paths, illustrates the confines of the city and its inherently

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[82] *Youngblood,* directed by Noel Nosseck (1978; Los Angeles, CA: American International Pictures), Amazon Prime Video.

[83] *The Warriors,* directed by Walter Hill (1979; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures), Amazon Prime Video.

[84] *Boulevard Nights*, directed by Michael Pressman (1979; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.), Amazon Prime Video.

criminal nature. While the first three films are located in the city and center minority youths and their existence in gangs, *Suburbia* approaches youth gangs from a different geographic lens. *Suburbia*, written and directed by Penelope Spheeris and released in 1984, locates an emerging white youth gang within the suburbs.[85] While the city is not directly depicted in this film, its inclusion is important because it illustrates the fears that audiences harbored about what would happen if juvenile crime exited the confines of the city and infected America's white, middle-class suburbs. *Suburbia* is the story of a white runaway teenager from the outskirts of Los Angeles who joins a gang called The Rejects, a predominately white gang of runaway teens that have turned to a life of deviance. While the story begins with Evan, a disillusioned teenager who leaves his broken, suburban family, it soon shifts to the experience of The Rejects, focusing on their crimes and their relationship with the community. *Suburbia* is an important transition point for youth gang films of the late 1970s and films of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It reproduced anxieties about the increasing power of youth gangs and their ability to escape the confines of the city, while still focusing on physical blight as productive of youth criminality.

"Wrong Side of the Fence": The Contested City

In films produced at the end of the 1970s, filmmakers portrayed an urban environment that was territorialized by the gangs that lived there. The neighborhoods that were characterized as territories were often captured through the language and imagery of war. However, the symbolism of cities as battlegrounds did not begin with films, rather, a much longer rhetorical and political history that rooted the city in a mythology of "otherness." The urban unrest that characterized much of the late 1960s dominated the public consciousness. In July of 1967, a riot

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[85] *Suburbia*, directed by Penelope Spheeris (1984; Atlanta, GA: New World Pictures), Amazon Prime Video.

raged through the streets of Detroit after officers arrested eighty-five people in a predominantly black neighborhood for drinking. The damage and scope of the unrest was massive. After five days of rioting, a combined force of seventeen thousand National Guardsmen and troops quelled the violence. A total of 2,509 buildings, valued at $36 million, were destroyed. Forty-three people were dead, thirty of whom were killed by police.[86] The devastation was immense; however, Detroit was not alone. In cities across America, black citizens rebelled against repressive policing throughout the long hot summers of the late 1960s. The violence in America's streets and the militarized policing tactics that responded to it further characterized cities as warzones and their occupants as foreign enemies. And as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, the connections between black unrest and black youth crime strengthened, justifying a militarized war against crime in America's streets.

The urban imaginary produced in the wake of unrest and crime inspired fear within the American consciousness and influenced politicians to militarize law enforcement in order to effectively occupy and dominate cities that were perceived to be under attack by a foreign enemy. The new enemy was not foreign though. The enemy was black, young and male, a population that was deemed criminal by location and condition. Highly militarized and professionalized forms of policing were justified through the same rhetorical devices that films used to characterize urban spaces as battlegrounds and gangs as enemy armies. When defending the 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Act, Senator Birch Bayh concluded that the retributive measures in schools would manage "a domestic Vietnam."[87] And in countless political documents and media reports, America's "urban battlefields" were believed to be as

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[86] Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 259.
[87] Ibid, 238.

dangerous as battlefields.[88] While metaphors of urban warzones were used to justify more

punitive measures and militarized policing, they were also used to criticize it. In an interview

with *Time Magazine* in April of 1970, Julian Bond, a young black representative in the Georgia

State House, articulated that "the police have too many armaments like helicopters and tanks that

shoot through whole rows of buildings. The techniques learned in Viet Nam are being brought

back to this country, ready for use against the local insurgents."[89] Even though Bond and others

criticized the militarized representations of the city, this dominating rhetorical device perpetuated

the belief that urban space itself was degenerative, harboring a class of citizens that were not

only poor or criminal but antithetical to American democracy. And the face of these domestic

"insurgents" in the minds of white, middle-class Americans was young and black. Moments of

urban unrest and crime, and the following characterizations of cities as battlegrounds were

reinforced in films at the end of the 1970s which sought to root youth gangs in this physically

perverse setting. These representations invited audiences to view youth gangs as the product of a

city consumed by violence and devoid of traditional power structures to curb or contain it.

While the mechanisms of portrayal differed across the cinematic landscape, each film

invited middle-class audiences to view the city as a battleground. The city became a space

outside American political and legal structures, dominated by youth gangs who were far more

expansive and influential than law enforcement. Within the context of recent urban unrest, films

characterized the city as a contested space of warfare which not only invited, but required

adversarial youth gangs to compete with each other and police for power over those spaces. As

such, the rhetoric of warfare and the visual imagery of battlegrounds that each film offers

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[88] Ronald J. Ostrow, "No Substantial Drop in Crime for 5-10 Years, Official Warns," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Nov. 24, 1974.
[89] "Other Voices, Other Strategies," *Time Magazine*, April 6, 1970, 23.

reflected an imagining of the city that located its spaces and occupants outside normative, American life and within an inherently criminogenic, contested environment. These films, which constructed the city as occupied territory, raised the stakes of the war on crime, and used visual imagery, rhetorical devices, and narrative constructions to cast the spaces themselves as criminogenic, justifying a war on the city itself.

Youngblood characterizes the territorial nature of urban geography by positioning competing gangs within contested spaces, identifying the power of space to dictate violence. In the beginning of the film, Youngblood attends a night club and is attracted to a woman across the room. His attraction draws him towards Sybil, who he later finds out is the sister of a competing gang leader. After seeing their interaction, Youngblood's friend, Bummie, pulls him aside to scold him, chiding "you better not be messing with her man. She's from the wrong side of the fence and we trespassing."[90] This interaction marks the beginning of Youngblood's involvement in the urban gang underworld. Sybil's implicit identification with a certain gang delineated her body as a site of conflict. While the implications of their conversation may be exaggerated for narrative effect, it is powerful nonetheless, demarcating both spaces and people as governed by the gangs they might be implicitly associated with. And in an environment where gangs compete for power in lieu of traditional forms of law enforcement, an interaction that may be perceived as physically or metaphysically crossing a territory has massive implications.[91]

After officially joining the gang, Youngblood proves his worth and dedication by spray painting their name, "Kingsmen," on the competing gang's clubhouse window. While before, Youngblood crossed a metaphorical boundary through a conversation with Sybil, this act was explicitly territorial. Throughout all of these films, graffiti is used as a visual tool to assert

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[90] *Youngblood.*
[91] Ibid.

dominance and power over a space. By breaking the physical boundaries of the clubhouse with a

visual marker of dominance, Youngblood reasserts the contested nature of power within the

city's geography. However, this act of visual power proves inadequate for the leader of the

Kingsmen, Rommel, who claims that physical violence is required to assert true power over a

space. "You ever gone to war before? You draw blood when you go out to war," says Rommel,

indicating Youngblood will be required to enact violence to receive full acceptance into the

gang.[92] Through metaphor, Rommel introduces another layer to the way gangs asserted

dominance in the city. In these films, gang members often referred to themselves as "soldiers" in

a "war" against other gangs for power over an urban "battleground." In *Youngblood*, the

language of war placed cities outside American mythology where violence was understood to be

monopolized by the state. Instead, these films invited audiences to view the city as a place where

power was contested and violence was uninhibited. Dominance was not hegemonic, rather it was

violence that occurred in pursuit of power that created the visual blight of the city and the

criminality that existed within its boundaries. Just a year later, *The Warriors* continued to

characterize the pursuit of dominance in the city through the language and imagery of war.[93]

In *The Warriors*, both linguistic and narrative devices enmesh the urban setting and the

plight of gangs in the language of warfare, emboldening audiences to think of cities and their

streets as dangerous zones of otherness. Before being shot, Cyrus makes a powerful speech to all

the other New York gangs. He refers to the juveniles before him as "60,000 soldiers" who, if

they work together, can dominate the "20,000 police in the whole town."[94] Cyrus concludes by

powerfully stating that "all we have to do is keep up the general truce and take over one borough

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[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] *The Warriors*.

at a time. Secure our territory, secure our turf. Because it's *all* our turf." While the physical city

may currently be demarcated by disparate gangs, Cyrus asks his audience, and the film's

audience, to imagine a world where all the gangs united to fight law enforcement. The rhetoric

employed speaks to popular anxieties about the contested and violent nature of the American city

as the space where gangs and law enforcement fought over power. Further, Cyrus describes

gangs as "soldiers" and neighborhoods as "territory" and "turf" advocating for a city imagined as

a foreign space, unsafe for the white, middle-class citizen to occupy. Cyrus' rhetoric leaves no

room for the city as a space for the normative American experience. By claiming that the entirety

of the city is gang turf, the filmmakers invite audiences to intrinsically link the entire city to

youth gangs and imagine its spaces to be structured by their uncontainable violence.[95]

In an adversarial encounter with a competing gang, the film conveys the Warriors as an

army and their movement through the city as an act of warfare. While traversing the city to reach

Coney Island, the Warriors were forced to walk through a neighborhood that was controlled by

another gang, the Orphans. The leader of the Orphans claims, "well you come armying down

here, invading our territory. No permits, no parley." However, when Swan, the leader of the

Warriors, asserts that they mean no harm and are just passing through, the leader of the Orphans

responds by saying, "take your colors off and you can walk through...you go as civilians, okay?

You go as soldiers and I gotta come down on you."[96] This scene further characterizes urban

neighborhoods not by the communities that live there but the gangs who supposedly dominate

the streets. The language of warfare is not only used to convey power over both territorialized

spaces but helps communicate the notion that in the contested city, youth gangs, not law

enforcement, determine who enacts and receives violence. And because these films often argued

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.

that violence was motivated by control over the city itself, *The Warriors* and other movies invited audiences to understand physical urban locations as determinative of who in the city lives and dies. *Boulevard Nights* maintained this connection through their territorialized imaginings of cities and the violence that occurred as a result of contested spaces.[97]

    Boulevard Nights begins with a young teen attempting to assert visual dominance over a blighted urban underpass by spray painting "11" on it. The boy accompanying him fears the consequences of this action exclaiming, "Hey you didn't say we were coming here man...This isn't our territory...Ese we don't belong here."[98] In this moment, the film recognizes the implications of movement within a city territorialized by competing gangs. The accomplice's greatest fears are realized when the act of visual dominance results in a violent altercation, where the juvenile is harassed and beaten up by the VGVs, the gang who controls that neighborhood. From the beginning, the filmmakers distinctively characterize the nature of territory within the city. They argue that neighborhoods are not divided by traditional power structures, but instead are divided by youth gangs that dominate neighborhoods and monopolize the violence that occurs within them. The young boy's presence within a different "territory" rendered him a target for violence, inviting audiences to believe that existence within the city is determined by space and by proxy, those imagined to control it. However, just as certain spaces are territorialized by juvenile delinquents, others within the city are contested, proving just as much their potential for violence. One such liminal space is the Boulevard, posited within the film as not controlled by any singular gang. The violence experienced on the contested Boulevard characterized the imagined power a disputed space wielded to invite randomized violence. In this sense, whether the physical city space is controlled or contested matters little. *Boulevard Nights*

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[97] Ibid.
[98] *Boulevard Nights.*

reinforced the belief that in the American city, gangs monopolized violence and determined its recipients based solely on the nature of the space itself.[99]

This is further explored later in the film after Raymond and his fiancé, Shady, get harassed by a group of 11th Street gang members outside their hotel. Following this altercation, a group of VGV's ask Raymond why he is not going to violently retaliate. The new leader of the VGV's chides, "some dude hit you up and you ain't gonna do nothing about it?...All I know is when a dude gets hit up and doesn't do nothing about it, he's wankin on his barrio man. He's wankin on his barrio and his homeboys."[100] In this moment, gang violence is directly reliant on constructions of contested urban space. The gang members argue that if Raymond does not commit a retaliatory act of violence on behalf of the gang, he would be explicitly disrespecting the neighborhood he lives in. Through this scene, the filmmakers invited audiences to view violence as dependent on a contested urban geography where competing gangs wielded power and the threat of violence over bordering neighborhoods.[101]

The films produced at the end of the 1970s used visual, rhetorical, and narrative constructions to posit the physical spaces of the city as a battleground for illicit and licit institutions to compete for power. By characterizing the city as an urban warzone, filmmakers invited audiences to fear city spaces perhaps more so than the gangs that pursued power within those spaces. Ironically, films that imagined the city as a "battleground" outside American tradition and the people that occupied these spaces as foreign "others" invited audiences to believe that saving the cities was only possible under those same terms of engagement. As such,

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[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

these films not only undergirded notions of the city as a criminogenic environment through its contested nature, but in turn, invited warfare as the only mechanism to stop it.

The Failing City

In November 1970, residents of Warren, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, combatted political efforts to renew and repair their blue-collar neighborhood. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* encapsulated the racialized anxieties that fueled white resistance to federal projects claiming that white factory workers have migrated to Warren over the past twenty years "in their quest to escape the crime and grime- and for some, the Negroes- of Detroit."[102] The residents viewed resistance to federal funding as a way to reject "the outside world which they particularly fear" and believed that renewal projects would bring the decay that characterized the city to their suburban town. But while the fear of the city was best understood through its physical degradation, a pernicious and racialized viewing of its occupants was implicit. While the citizens of Warren did not want "the way of life" of Detroit, they also did not want the people that characterized that way of life who were largely young, male and black. Harboring those same racialized fears, salesman and resident Henry Wengrzynowicz recalled, "I had a niece that lived in the city, 13 years old, and she was almost raped, shot in the back there. Who is going to guarantee me the same things won't happen here if we vote for this urban renewal program?" Suburban resistance to federal projects was not specific to Warren, Michigan. A distanced view of blighted and decaying cities reinforced connections between youth criminality and urban renewal prompting white, middle-class Americans to resist government projects that might ruin their suburbs. Whether or not it was explicit, these anxieties were racial as suburban residents

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[102] Walter Mossberg, "A Blue-Collar Town Fears Urban Renewal Perils Its Way of Life," *The Wall Street Journal* (New York City, NY), Nov. 2, 1970.

feared urban renewal for its perceived production of blight and its imagined power to create the physical environments for black youth gangs to thrive within.[103]

The films at the end of the 1970s and throughout the early 1980s not only blamed the contested nature of the city for a burgeoning criminal class, but also characterized political failures to rehabilitate the city as a cause of its continued physical degradation that produced a criminal youth population. Shifting ideological waves across the American popular landscape undergirded changing conversations about the merits of certain urban policies. While New Deal liberalism dominated the mid-twentieth century, the ills of the post-World War II period generated backlash against a growing federal government. Conservatives viewed the expanded federal government as inefficient and they found their evidence in the physical decay of the city. In addition, citizens' increasing fear of urban youth criminality reproduced the notion that law enforcement, as then imagined, was not capable enough to stop crime. The anti-big government backlash came from both sides of the aisle as the city became an exemplary image of the failing federal government. Films like *Youngblood* and *Suburbia* reinforced these popular sentiments, blaming the federal government for the perverse conditions that shackled youths into lives of crime. The contradictory nature of this critique underscored the political ambivalence of the films themselves. Even though these films castigated the structures and environments that caused crime rather than the youths themselves, the system to blame was urban renewal. As a result, the failing federal government became a potent symbol within these films that propelled their conservative undertones. By acknowledging the failures of big government liberalism which left cities destroyed and communities unprotected, these films ultimately characterized cities and the creators of their physical decay as producers of urban youth criminality.

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[103] Ibid.

In *Youngblood*, subtle references to failed urban renewal projects help shift the blame on to physical spaces destroyed by the government for Youngblood's descent into crime. In the beginning of the film, Reggie, Youngblood's older brother, comes home to chide his brother for the delinquent behaviors that got him expelled from school. During dinner, Reggie tells Youngblood, "You're gonna have to give mama a little slack. Under enough pressure as it is with the city beating down her neck to move so that they can build another parking lot."[104] This scene introduces the notion that the federal government had the power to contour people's daily lives through their physical presence in the city. The decision to disrupt and displace Youngblood's family was not posited as one made by a person, but by the distant and impersonal "state." While the federal government is not directly mentioned in this dialogue, the use of "the city" as a signifier for government at large further links the deterioration of the family and Youngblood's descent into a gang to the distant state that was uprooting their lives. Although it is a subtle remark, the dialogue implicitly defines the city as a space of government overreach and chides the process of urban renewal as a force of destruction of the home and family. While the film does not invite viewers to understand failed urban renewal as a direct cause to Youngblood's criminality, it does posit these failed projects as creating the perverse conditions where juvenile delinquency is able to develop and flourish. Much later in the film, Youngblood and Rommel, the leader of the Kingsmen gang, walk through an abandoned lot filled with piles of trash and the remains of a destroyed building. Youngblood points to a pile of trash, telling Rommel that "this is my bedroom right here...was my bedroom...it's kinda dusty too...it was always dusty." Through this subtle reference to their destroyed home, the film informs its audience that the city was supposed to acquire Youngblood's home to turn it into a parking lot, but instead, it is just an

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[104] *Youngblood*.

abandoned pile of trash, wood, and scrap metal. The transition between present and past tense

that exists within Youngblood's dialogue analogizes his room's existence in two different states

and characterizes them similarly. Even though the government destroyed his home, Youngblood

describes his home as always being this dusty, reminding the audience of the perverse nature of

poor urban homes even before they were acquired and destroyed by the city. While this scene

reminds the audience of the indigent physical conditions of Youngblood's childhood, it

implicitly links his deviant tendencies with a government policy that destroyed the productive

space of the home, connecting youth criminality to the failures of urban renewal.[105]

The film *Suburbia,* released in 1983, propagates two converging anti-government trends

by blaming failed urban renewal and an increasingly bureaucratic justice system on the

persistence of youth gang criminality. Even though *Suburbia* locates youth gangs in the suburbs

rather than the city, it is relevant because it marks a historical moment where blight and cultural

pathologies were escaping the confines of the city in the popular imagination. Therefore, a youth

gang film located in the suburbs reinforced the anxieties that white, middle class families had

about the criminal potential of their own children, as the conditions imagined to produce criminal

youths extended from cities into suburbs. After running away from his broken and abusive

family, Evan enters the gang when he meets Jack outside of a punk concert. Jack invites him to

be a part of The Rejects after first explaining their living conditions. "It's one of those houses out

by the 605. County bought them up years ago and just left them sitting there all boarded up and

rotting. A bunch of us live in one. It's pretty trashed but it's free. You up for it?"[106] Embedded in

the description of The Rejects' home is the notion that it only exists because of government

failure. As such, the filmmakers invite audiences to believe that failed urban renewal projects

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[105] Ibid.
[106] *Suburbia*.

produced by the distant and bureaucratic state, created physical conditions for youth delinquency to survive and flourish within.[107]

In addition to explicit narrative cues that connect urban renewal to youth criminality, the film metaphorically connects the two through the violent symbol of wild dogs. As Jack, Evan, and a few other boys drive through the blighted suburban environment, a pack of dogs runs out of the sewer. The image prompts Jack to explain their origins- "Well I heard that when people were forced to move from their houses, that some of them left their dogs behind and coyotes came down from the hills and fucked them. After a while, wild dogs."[108] While the film does not explicitly state the connection between wild dogs and crime, the origin of the wild dogs provides a poignant metaphor. The film implies that government-sponsored renewal projects forced families to abandon their homes. Continuing with the metaphor, nature interacted with abandoned domesticity to create a pernicious new breed of animal. In the beginning of the film, one of the wild dogs brutally murders a toddler. The metaphor the filmmakers intend to evoke conveys to audiences that failed liberal renewal and development projects create an environment for a new class of violent youngsters to emerge and terrorize. The metaphor of the violent wild dogs continues throughout as the filmmakers symbolically posit The Rejects as the criminal, human product of failed government projects.

In addition to inviting general disillusionment towards government projects, *Suburbia* reflects a shifting tone in the 1980s that blamed a powerless law enforcement for allowing youth gangs to terrorize the country. These sentiments are depicted poignantly in a Neighborhood Council Meeting.

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.

> Woman: And I live over on Heatherton Avenue, which is a nice neighborhood, or at least it used to be. Now all you get are these wild teenagers parading through like a bunch of terrorists.
> Man: Yes, the little bastards were fighting on my front lawn. I had to hold them off with a shotgun while my wife called the police. And it took me over an hour to get through!
> Man #2: Yeah and that's another thing. The police ain't doing a goddamn thing!

Later in the scene, Officer Rennard defends himself citing his "responsibility by law to adhere to certain procedures." The scene concludes with a pseudo-vigilante character arguing with Officer Rennard, strongly claiming, "if the police can't protect the people, then the people have to protect themselves." This scene conveys the community's disillusionment with an increasingly bureaucratic justice system, which reflected a national mood that partially blamed rising crime on a powerless police force. Americans imagined police forces were more concerned with procedure than stopping crime, lumping ineffective law enforcement into a vision of total government failure. Thus, films reflecting liberal sentiments regarding the criminogenic potential of space used conservative narrative choices to reinforce the belief that the government simultaneously created youth crime and was powerless in their mission to stop it.[109]

"What they Call a Street Tattoo": The Immoral City

In the 1970s, the physical site of the city was cast largely in immoral terms. Cities were symbols of vice, crime, and blight and were viewed as the physical location of the nation's ills. While the history of anti-urban sentiment is long and robust, the decades of urban unrest and the failures of government rehabilitation of the physical city helped strengthen the connections between the location of the city and the youth criminality that occurred within it in the American consciousness. While the social and economic conditions of poverty, unemployment, and broken

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[109] Ibid.

families were linked with inner city conditions and viewed as causes of an emerging criminal moment, these films specifically blamed the blighted physical conditions and violent geography of the city itself. Through the militarized constructions of urban geography and the government's role in the creation of blight, these films invited sympathy on black youths as beholden to an environment that was itself criminogenic. Even though these representations aligned with liberal sentiments that deflected rising youth crime on its causes, these films offered no escape from the city and because of this, no life outside of crime for black, urban youths. Through these representations, the films at the end of the 1970s invited audiences to blame the physically blighted and perverse conditions of the city for their imagined capacity to confine and criminalize a generation of black youths.

While these films used visual imagery to reinforce oppressive nature and criminogenic potential of the city, the relationship between crime and space theorized in America's political consciousness earlier in the decade. In 1972, architect and city planner Oscar Newman developed his defensible space theory arguing that certain physical conditions, like high-rise public housing, which concentrated low-income families in dense locations, made inhabitants "particularly vulnerable to criminal activity."[110] He believed that the architectural design of a structure had the power to reduce crime levels in certain spaces by incentivizing and dis-incentivizing certain behaviors over others.[111] The defensible space theory that attributed crime to physical conditions had policy implications. In 1978, Congress passed the Public Housing Security Demonstration Act which policed, structured, and redesigned urban spaces to reduce crime.[112] Articulating the need for new punitive policies established within blighted urban

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[110] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 288-289.
[111] Patrick G. Donnelly, "Newman, Oscar: Defensible Space Theory," (2010), *Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work Faculty Publications.* Paper 30, 1.
[112] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 286.

spaces, Charles Work, an administrator for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration argued the shared belief that many communities were "custom-made for crime," blaming poorly lit and streets, and deserted subway and bus stops as spaces that invited youth criminal violence.[113] The popular theories, which films articulated and justified, that ascribed immorality on urban spaces, held massive implications as punitive policies in the late 1970s were designed to make urban space incompatible with crime.

Beyond space, many imagined certain times of the day to be productive of crime in the city. In 1969, The National Commission on Crime Prevention and Causes Report warned that "ghetto slum neighborhoods will be places of terror with widespread crime perhaps entirely out of control during nighttime hours."[114] Darkness was feared in the public consciousness as middle-class consumers retreated from urban economic centers to their suburban homes at dusk. Because of this, cities made changes in their urban design to flood the urban streets with light at all hours of the day. After rioting and unrest in Tampa, the city's solution was to "bathe the streets and sidewalks with lights" so that "criminals will disappear."[115] Cities across the country were consumed by the power of physical conditions to cause crime and often pursued policies to curb the imagined criminogenic power of certain urban structures and landscapes.

The visual imageries of urban blight that filled the screen throughout these films reflected the imagined power that perverse physical spaces held in the American consciousness. In conjunction with the contested nature of urban space and blighted physical structures that the federal government created, films posited physical conditions as criminogenic, inviting audiences to view the city as holding the capacity to impose criminality on the subjects that lived

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[113] "LEAA Puts $2 Million for New Anti-Crime Plans," *Baltimore Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), May 35, 1974.
[114] "Final Report on the National Commission of the Causes and Prevention of Violence," 45.
[115] Raymond A. Joseph, "Let There Be Light: Then Crime Will Fall- If It Doesn't Go Up," *The Wall Street Journal* (New York City, NY), Jan. 6, 1971.

there. By characterizing the streets and physical urban spaces themselves as morally corrupt and inescapable, audiences were taught to blame rising crime on the city rather than on criminals themselves. However, produced along with this sympathy towards black youths was the belief that their criminal destiny was pre-determined and inescapable. So, while films invited audiences to adopt liberal criminological perspectives and blame physical conditions for youth crime, they invited conservative solutions implicitly arguing that incarceration was the only way to neutralize black youth criminals in inescapable urban spaces.

In *Youngblood*, visual displays of the blighted city mark Youngblood's metaphysical descent into the criminal underworld, inviting audiences to associate the spaces themselves with his eventual criminality. After Youngblood's initial altercation with the opposing gang leader, his friend Bummie invites him to join the Kingsmen as they traverse an abandoned lot, trashed and graffitied. Youngblood initially says no claiming, "I don't need nobody fighting for me."[116] Bummie responds, "Yea well you got a belong to something. I mean, you don't want to get chumped off, do you?" The dialogue that accompanies the visual imagery links Youngblood's forced youth criminality to the dark and blighted city streets that confine and dictate their existence. Youngblood does not want to join the gang but is told he has to. It is not a choice, according to Bummie. Being in a gang and participating in its criminal activities is posited as a requirement for survival in the city. Thus, the audience sympathizes with Youngblood who the film suggests is forced to join a gang. The visual setting where this conversation occurs is important too. Within popular imagination, an abandoned urban lot at night was a breeding ground for criminality. The camera glides along the characters, using low key lighting to cast them within a shroud of darkness. Their silhouettes and piles of scrap metal from an abandoned

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[116] *Youngblood.*

building are the only items the audience is able to make out. By limiting the camera's focus and cloaking characters and spaces in darkness, the filmmakers locate criminality within the shadows of city streets at night. Reflecting sources that feared the imagined power of darkness to produce criminality, this scene shows Youngblood proving its power by relinquishing his individuality in lieu of gang inclusion. The violent setting and the dialogue that occurs within it invites audiences to view physical spaces in the city as productive of youth criminality, shifting the blame for Youngblood's descent into the Kingsmen to the perverse urban environment.[117]

Later in the film, Youngblood and the Kingsmen follow a drug dealer down an urban street at night. Throughout the scene, the camera points to visual indicators that ascribe moral decay to the spaces themselves. The camera glides past an adult film and book store, a sex shop, and a "cocktails" sign flashing outside a bar. The scene ends with the drug dealer stepping on a bench advertising the police force that reads "we turn in pushers."[118] While this scene ultimately serves as a mechanism to place the characters within their urban environment, it also communicates the criminal nature of the setting itself. The visual cues characterize urban streets as spaces of unfettered vice, which is defined as the behavior of social deviants including "drinking, prostitution, petty crime" and other immoral activities.[119] In the Progressive era, these behaviors were chastised as immoral and endemic within the city. By placing drugs within an environment of vice, the film perpetuates the link between deviant behaviors, like sexual pleasure, with criminal activities, like drug dealing. As the camera glides down the street, the audience is invited to understand a city consumed by illicit activities and criminality. The visual imagery reaffirms the notion that urban spaces and activities that occurred naturally within them

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[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 8.

create an environment for criminality to flourish within. In addition, when the drug dealer

physically steps on a bench that reads "we turn in pushers," the film invites audiences to view

law enforcement as powerless in stopping the crime that inevitably existed within the city.

     Youngblood ends with a song named after its title character. After a shootout in an

industrial lot that leaves Youngblood's brother, Reggie, and his partner Vince dead, Youngblood

walks away, seemingly unaffected, as the funky sounds of the marimba, bongo and guitar seep

in. The title track "Youngblood (Livin' in the Streets)," by War, concludes the film by blaming

the physical streets themselves for the violence that preceded. The song opens with,

> Livin' in the Streets
> No one's gonna beat ya.
> Hangin' with the gang.
> The street will be your teacher.[120]

The opening lyrics to "Youngblood" personify the streets and physical urban spaces as both

enacting violence and teaching its occupants to cope with it. The song invites audiences to

understand the city as being consumed and defined by geographies of violence, where conditions

themselves, both social and physical, dictate life and death. Youngblood's indifferent expression

captures the dissonant tone the film ends with. Just moments before, Youngblood's criminality

led to his brother's death. Yet, his indifference matched with lyrics that blame the streets for

crime rather than the populations that occupy them captures an implicit understanding that

Reggie's death was inevitable and Youngblood should feel no remorse for it. The song's

construction, which placed blame on the city rather than the characters that exacted violence

within it, reinforces the imagined power of physical conditions of the city to impose criminality

on youths and produce lives of crime.[121]

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[120] War, "Youngblood (Livin' in the Streets)," recorded 1978, track 1 on *Youngblood*, Avenue Records.
[121] *Youngblood.*

In *The Warriors,* prominent visual representations of urban blight combined with character positionality reflect a fatalistic understanding of gang criminality in the city. An essential visual marker of blight throughout the film is graffiti. In a scene that begins the film, the leader of the Warriors hands off a bottle of spray paint and tells a member of the gang to "hit everything in sight. I want everybody to know the Warriors were there."[122] Graffiti is used by gangs throughout the film to mark space and is a visual sign of gang dominance. Its omnipresence across all urban spaces throughout the film invites audiences to view gangs as pervasive throughout the city. While graffiti is employed as a visual marker of criminal space, the subway is an equally important setting in the film that locates gangs physically below the city. The subway was a modern manifestation of the criminal depths, popularly imagined throughout history as a space beneath the city that threatened to pollute the urban landscape with criminals and social deviants. Whether the characters are riding on the subway or walking through its tunnels, the stark imagery of the subway as the natural setting for criminality helps audiences further view the physical spaces that existed under the entire city as natural for criminals to exist within. Another scene that depicts the physical setting for criminality and its infectious nature is one which portrays the Riff's clubhouse. The Riffs are an all-black gang that appear to be highly militarized in fashion and discipline. When viewers are introduced to the Riffs, the leader of the gang is riding down an elevator into an abandoned, spray-painted warehouse, where the gang is stoically congregated. During this moment, the audience is invited to view the leader of the Riffs as both literally and symbolically descending into the criminal underworld. The underworld, imagined through the warehouses and subways that confine and mobilize gangs, infects the entire city, enmeshing the totality of its physical locations and

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[122] *The Warriors.*

populations within an inescapable and pervasive criminogenic environment. These visually

poignant settings splayed across the screen and the graffiti that consumes the landscape, invited

audiences to understand the city itself as morally irredeemable and inherently criminal.[123]

While the film focuses on the entire gang and their journey through the city, the

filmmakers clearly characterize Swan, a tall, white, and handsome teen, as the gang's leader.

Throughout the film, Swan is shown to be the reserved, tough, but ultimately, peaceful leader of

the Warriors, advocating for discipline as opposed to random bursts of violence. Swan's

positionality in the film is indicative of the ways in which the physical confines of the city forced

youths into criminality. Throughout the film, Swan seeks to exit the city and the criminal milieu

within it. He is constantly aware and disturbed by the gang's lived condition whereas the other

gang members seem occupied with their journey and mission ahead. Swan is ultimately

unsuccessful in escaping the urban milieu, even though they exit Manhattan and arrive to the

safety of Coney Island. When the gang exits the subway at dawn and enters the same blighted

conditions they just escaped, Swan rhetorically asks, "this is what we fought all night to get back

to?"[124] Swan communicates the disillusionment and inescapability of the city, claiming that the

misery of the city only ends at the edge of Coney Island where the street meets the sea. Through

the positionality and awareness that Swan exhibits as the leader of The Warriors, the filmmakers

depict a character with moral capacity who is forced into gang criminality. The urban

geographies of violence, constructed as degenerative and inescapable, are blamed for the gang's

pre-determined existence. As such, Swan is not offered the capacity to choose a life a crime, but

rather, is required to do so to ensure his survival. The scene and song that end the film enmesh its

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[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.

final moments in a tone of disillusionment, blaming the city as degenerative and productive of the criminals and gangs that occupy it.[125]

In *The Warriors*, the track that follows the final scene is "In the City," a song written and performed for the film by Joe Walsh of The Eagles. The credits roll over a still shot of the Warriors walking along the Coney Island beach at dawn, just after escaping the competing gang who was responsible for the death of Cyrus, the leader of the Riffs. This moment conveys a tone of solemn triumph as the Warriors have finally escaped the dangers of the urban streets. However, they have escaped to Coney Island, which is not characterized as an end to the city but as an extension of its degenerative conditions. Even though "In the City" is a musically upbeat classic rock song, its lyrics invite a similar disillusionment towards the urban environment.

> It's survival in the city,
> when you live from day to day.
> City streets don't have much pity.
> When you're down that's where you'll stay.[126]

Like in "Youngblood (Livin in the City)," the credits song in *The Warriors* personifies the streets themselves as unforgiving and violent, and the city as inherently dangerous. One does not simply live in the city but must *survive* in the city, shrouding the totality of the urban landscape within its violent potential. Furthermore, when claiming that the "streets don't have much pity," the song not only posits survival as a requirement for existence, but personifies the city itself as an arbiter of violence. The song ends with a comment on the inescapable nature of the city.

> But somewhere out on that horizon
> Far away from the neon sky
> I know there must be something better
> But I can't stay another night.

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[125] Ibid.

[126] Joe Walsh, "In the City," recorded 1979, track 5 on *The Warriors: The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, A&M.

The final verse invites audiences to view the city as a vast and pervasive landscape. While the lyrics are exaggerated, they simultaneously communicate disillusionment with the entire urban geography and the seemingly inevitable criminality its vast landscape contains and invites.[127]

Boulevard Nights utilizes narrative metaphors and visual imagery to invite audiences to blame the city, rather than the film's characters, as the true causes of gang criminality. After violence between the VGV's and 11th Street Gang erupts on the Boulevard and Raymond brings his brother Chuco home from jail, Chuco sits in their backyard staring at his caged bird. Raymond asks Chuco if the 11th Street gang thinks Chuco killed one of their men, to which he responds, "that don't matter, does it?"[128] During their conversation, Chuco avoids the gaze of Raymond, instead feeding the crow. Throughout the film, the caged bird becomes a symbol for Chuco, an outcast trapped in an inescapable space. Later in the film after Chuco goes missing, scenes of Raymond staring into the crow's cage are intertwined with Chuco traversing the urban streets at night. The clear association between the caged crow and Chuco invite audiences to understand Chuco's gang criminality as a product of a degenerative and inescapable urban environment where the people inside the space are characterized as grotesque outcasts. In literature, a crow often symbolizes an omen of death or bad luck.[129] Along with the perpetual presence of the cage, the crow is representative of Chuco's inescapable existence as his prescient death is determined through the confines of the city that the cage represents. The metaphor that weaves throughout the film is solidified through the film's ending where the criminal life on the city streets is characterized as pre-destined and permanent.[130]

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[127] Ibid.
[128] *Boulevard Nights.*
[129] "Symbols of the Crow," Faena (Faena), accessed March 14, 2021, https://www.faena.com/aleph/symbols-of-the-crow.
[130] *Boulevard Nights.*

Boulevard Nights ends poignantly with Chuco's tragic death at the hands of the 11th Street gang. As Raymond drives away with Chuco after he avenges the death of his dead mother, he is shot in the back through Raymond's car window. Raymond furiously drives through the city, down into the Los Angeles River, through a sewer, and down the Boulevard as Chuco dies in the passenger seat of his car. The filmmakers place Raymond in a race against city, communicating that the main characters cannot escape the violence of the barrio, no matter how fast they drive. As they speed through the sewer and other symbols of deindustrialized city, the characters are posited as being trapped within the perverse spaces located physically below the city that structure their lives. To save Chuco, Raymond attempts to escape physical symbols of the underworld, like the sewer, but ultimately fails, communicating the fatalistic notion that urban youths cannot escape the violence that the city imposes upon them. The film communicates that the only escape to a life of crime in the city is death. Otherwise, the film characterizes youths as trapped within the physical spaces that dictate their criminal existence.[131]

The credit song in *Boulevard Nights* reaffirms the narrative constructions of the film which depict the inescapability of the city and the inevitability of youth criminality for those who live there. The camera pans from the image of Shady crying into Raymond's arms to the Los Angeles skyline at dawn, where the credits roll to the sounds of Lalo Schifrin's "Street Tattoo." The song begins with a warning,

> Out on the street, a child is born with battle lines already drawn
> And tries to stay alive.
> Out on the street you have to choose
> And even if you want to win you still can lose it,
> What they call a street tattoo[132]

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Lalo Schifrin, "Street Tattoo," recorded 1979, track 1 on *Boulevard Nights (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack),* Warner Records.

Through the song alone, the film invites audiences to understand the tragic ending as destined

from the beginning, by the physical conditions of the urban environment. The lyrics

communicate to the audience that if a child is born in the city, they are born into conditions that

require violence and criminality to order to survive. There is no winning or losing in the city,

only life and death. The song uses the metaphor of a "street tattoo" in order to personify the

streets as spaces of inevitable immorality.

> It's painted deep upon your heart
> You bury them until you die
> And if you die well before your time
> It's only your street tattoo coming true.[133]

The metaphor of the "street tattoo" asks audiences to understand the city as permanent. Being

born in the city, as a product of its spaces, predisposes youths to a criminal existence. Through

the metaphor of the street tattoo and its permanent nature, along with the lyrics that accompany

"Youngblood" and "In the City," the songs that end each of these films invite audiences to blame

their tragic endings on an existence predetermined by the blighted conditions of the city. Each

song specifically personifies urban streets as morally culpable, inviting audiences to understand

the films' tragic endings as a result of conditions largely out of the characters' control.

To be sure, characters in these films are positioned as producers of violence. However,

the narratives each film articulates blames the immoral physical conditions of the cities in the

tragedies of criminality and violence more so than the people themselves. In 1979, Senator

Charles Percy found that "Americans are far more concerned about street crimes than other

crimes."[134] This popular mood that the Senator comments on was reflected in each of these films

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[133] Ibid.
[134] Johnson, "Cost of Black Joblessness Measured in Crime, Fear and Urban Decay" *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Mar. 12, 1979.

as the urban "street" was often the racialized space that Americans located their fears. And just as each film narratively invited audiences to fear urban spaces, so too do the credit songs, which concluded each film by personifying the streets themselves as the true producers of the violence and criminality that occurs. These songs and narratives reflected an environmental understanding of the causes of criminality at that historical moment, which characterized the urban spaces and their physical conditions as the producers of a violent, youth, criminal subculture. And because of the inherently criminal spaces these films constructed, they too offered fatalistic representations of youths of color who were required to partake in criminality and violence to survive. Because of the contested and territorialized nature of the city, and the government's role in producing blighted spaces, the physical conditions of the city imposed an inescapable criminality on black youths and posited no escape to such conditions besides death. So while liberal causes to crime dominated the screen, the lack of solutions to a criminal existence that these films exhibited reflected the lack of policy answers many had to rehabilitating the city. The only thing left to do was to target the criminogenic spaces. Thus, through popular productions of the crime-producing potential of cities and the lack of structural solutions offered, these films ultimately reflected conservative ideologies that fueled the policing of urban spaces.

Conclusion

In March 1982, social scientists George Kelling and James Wilson offered a frightening depiction of a city's criminal potential if left unrestrained.

> A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up, a window is smashed. Adults stop scolding rowdy children; the children, emboldened, become more rowdy. Families move out, unattached adults move in. Teenagers gather in front of the corner store. The merchant asks them to move; they refuse. Fights occur. Litter accumulates. People start drinking in front of the grocery; in time, an inebriate

> slumps to the sidewalk and is allowed to sleep it off. Pedestrians are approached by panhandlers.[135]

The theorists imagined a slippery slope where "a stable neighborhood of families who care for their homes" turns into "an inhospitable and frightening jungle." And they believed its origins to be an abandoned building. Kelling and Wilson cemented the connection between urban space and crime in their article "Broken Windows," published in *The Atlantic* in March, 1982. They theorized that "disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked" drawing from the metaphor that "if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken." Their theory led to the widespread adoption of Broken Windows Policing, a criminal justice strategy that proselytized the connection between crime and appearance and lead to the expansive policing of urban space. In the 1980s and 1990s, law enforcement agencies adopted this theory, claiming that crime would only be reduced if and when "the neighborhood's quality of life is visibly improved." By criminalizing appearance and condition, Broken Windows Policing justified police action against black folks who the police presumed to be criminal because of their existence in poor neighborhoods. *Youngblood*, *The Warriors*, *Boulevard Nights*, and *Suburbia*, reinforced the criminogenic potential of physically perverse cities, and their power to create youth criminals. These films helped justify the policing of appearance and space within the popular consciousness, even as they attempted to shift blame from criminal youths to the cities they lived in. While films of the late 1970s laid the groundwork for Broken Windows Policing to dominate the carceral landscape over the next several decades, when actualized, the criminological theory had insidious effects. The policing of "broken windows" quickly turned into the policing of anyone who existed in or near those

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[135] George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *The Atlantic*, March 1982, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465.

spaces. In an effort to improve the visual landscape of the neighborhoods, cops sought to neutralize anyone they believed contributed to the city's pathologies. This resulted in the continuous and persistent incarceration of black urban youths who police officers believed might contribute to a neighborhood's perverse landscape. So instead of structurally remedying the physical conditions films blamed for the production of black youth criminals, America policed them. While Kelling and Wilson justified Broken Windows Policing through the need to remove adverse conditions and blighted spaces, policing is inherently directed towards people. And the people policed as a result were the black youths that occupied perverse urban spaces. As the policing of space morphed into the policing of pathology, films constructed new ways to grapple with the youth gangs and cities that were increasingly police and surveilled.[136]

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[136] Ibid.

Chapter 3: The Violent Gang

Almost eleven years after ABC aired a special broadcast exploring youth gang crimes in blighted cities, NBC took their turn. On August 14th, 1989, "Gangs, Cops, and Drugs," an NBC News Special hosted by Tom Brokaw, captured the war that was being waged in inner cities and broadcasted it on television screens across America.[137] The goal of the special was to highlight increasingly violent and resourceful youth gangs, and the ways in which their drug trafficking turned neighborhoods into warzones, capturing innocent citizens in its wake. The special opens with a close-up image of a policeman firing rounds of an automatic rifle. In the next scene, three officers, appearing more like troops than law enforcement, forcibly enter a home. Overlaying images of a militarized effort to contain gangs were the striking words of Tom Brokaw. "It is a war. Cops against gangs. Gangs against cops. Gangs against gangs. As in war, the causalities mount every week. Nearly 3,000 people killed and 15,000 wounded since 1980." [138] The narration that opens the report captures the state of the inner city at this moment. Police officers waged a war in urban neighborhoods, utilizing brutal tactics and military hardware to combat increasingly violent gangs characterized as domestic terrorists. To be sure, these youth gangs were not like those described in "Youth Terror: The View from Behind the Gun." The groups of juvenile delinquent portrayed in the 1970s had warped into hyper-violent, sub-state, criminal gangs in the 1980s. Brokaw describes this change when he claims that "in the old days, the fights are over turf. But now, the turf involves control of a drug market and the battles are with heavy weapons to the death." The control over illicit drug empires not only rendered youth gangs more powerful and dangerous, but expanded their scope. In earlier decades, black neighborhoods

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[137] Walter Goodman, "Review/Television; The Mean Streets of Los Angeles, on NBC," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Aug. 15, 1989.
[138] *NBC News Special*, "Gangs, Cops and Drugs," featuring Tom Brokaw, aired August 14, 1989, in broadcast syndication, NBC.

confined youth gang crime, but now, their violence reached beyond, infecting wealthy, white neighborhoods too. "Outside the South-Central area, few cared about the violence because it didn't affect them. Until last year. A young woman, Karen Toshima, was gunned down in Westwood Village in the affluent Westside of Los Angeles."[139] Instead of knives and fist fights, youth gangs now wielded AK-47s, Uzi machine guns, and automatic weapons that they not only used against other gangs, but cops and innocent community members too.

"Cops, Gangs and Drugs" captured many of the popular fears and mythologies of the white middle class in the late 1980s on screen. Through their eye-witness reporting of the inner city, the special report articulated a newly insidious, violent, and expansive gang, which were now enabled by the illicit drug economy to expand their reach beyond the black neighborhoods that previously confined them. While characterizing a bleak environment where cops and gangs were engaged in a militarized battle for the streets, taking the lives of the innocent black folks who lived in those communities, "Cops, Gangs, and Drugs" also reproduced resurgent ideas about the roots of newly violent youth gangs. The report imagined communities where youths were abandoned without responsible black parents, left to make decisions that would inevitably enmesh them in cycles of gang violence and eventual death. The conservative, and largely racially motivated ideas of a black cultural pathology undergirded many of the policies enacted to combat drugs and gangs. The shifts in the popular consciousness depicted through the NBC report were reflected in youth gang films through the mid-1980s and into the 1990s. Within this new historical context, films reinforced the imaginings of powerful drug gangs and the militarized war that ensnared communities of color within cycles of violence, while positing personal responsibility as the only solution to any black youth wishing to escape the gang milieu.

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[139] Ibid.

While *Suburbia* (1983)*, Colors* (1988)*,* and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) invited sympathies towards

the spaces afflicted by the imagined violence of youth gangs, they characterized the "urban

terrorists" that infected those spaces as inherently evil, justifying personal responsibility, good

family values, and ultimately, good choices as the most effective measure to prevent further

criminalization of black youths. The politically ambivalent nature of these films simultaneously

chastised harsh policing and the violence that afflicted inner cities while justifying the

conservative sentiments that undergirded punitive measures in the 1990s.

Before discussing the patterns of these films, their contexts, and the criminal imaginings

they invite, a brief overview of each is necessary. While *Suburbia* was analyzed in the previous

chapter, its inclusion in this chapter is equally important. Not only is it a film that bridges the

distinct periods of the late 1970s and late 1980s, but it provides a cultural space to explore the

changing ideological debates around youth gang crime that were occurring during the 1980s.

While *Suburbia* invited audiences to imagine spaces as criminogenic, they also located their

gang in the suburbs, reflecting the fears of an expanded youth gang that occupied the popular

consciousness. *Colors*, written by Michael Schiffer and Richard DiLello and directed by Dennis

Hopper, was released in April of 1988 and tells the story of two cops in the C.R.A.S.H. Unit of

the Los Angeles Police Department and their fight to contain the city's hyper-violent gangs.[140]

Danny McGavin, played by Sean Penn, is the new cop on the beat, bringing an aggressive

attitude and brutal tactics to his policing of the inner city. McGavin is partnered with Bob

Hodges (Richard Duvall), who has worked in the CRASH unit for five years, and approaches

policing with a kinder perspective. He has developed a rapport with the gangs in an attempt to

police them from the inside. While the film is set up as a buddy cop narrative, it functions as a

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[140] *Colors,* directed by Dennis Hopper (1988; Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures), Amazon Prime Video.

police-gang story that displays the war on gangs and drugs from the perspectives of cops and the communities they police. In contrast, *Boyz n the Hood* views the relationship between gangs, cops, and communities from an alternative perspective. *Boyz n the Hood* was released three years later and was written and directed by twenty-three-year-old, black, South Central Los Angeles native, John Singleton.[141] The film tells the story of a predominately black urban neighborhood from the perspective of the children growing up there. Tre moves from Inglewood to South Central to live with his father in, and befriends Ricky and Doughboy, brothers from the same mother but different fathers. The audience follows the characters from childhood to their final year of high school as the cops that surveil their community and the gangs that terrorize its spaces continue to structure their lives. *Boyz n the Hood* centers its narrative around main characters who are not involved with gangs but within their orbit, attempting to illustrate the effects of living in a neighborhood structured by gangs and cops fighting each other over power.

Beyond the Scope of the Hood: The Expansive Power of Drug Economies

In the 1980s, Reagan amped up the War on Drugs, elevating a "drug crisis into a full blown drug war," as Los Angeles historian Max Felker-Kantor describes.[142] The newly waged and highly violent drug war that militarized police waged was inspired by the changing nature and scope of these youth gangs as a result of the illicit drug economies they participated in. In an internal report published by the California Attorney General's Office titled "Crips and Bloods Street Gangs," the Justice Department warned of much more dangerous gangs that later films captured.

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[141] *Boyz n the Hood*, directed by John Singleton (1991; Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures), Amazon Prime Video.

[142] Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angele: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 194.

>In the past, the Crips and Bloods seemed to be primarily involved in predatory crimes in the Los Angeles area. Today, law enforcement authorities throughout California and other states are reporting the widespread movement of Crips and Bloods gang members from the Los Angeles area into their jurisdictions. Gang members are being linked to the increasing sales of rock cocaine in cities across the nation and to the establishment of rock cocaine houses.[143]

The California Attorney General's Office warned of mobile gangs, citing their increased resources and access to wealth through drug markets as a method of expansion beyond South Central. In other words, youth gangs' involvement in drug markets made them more dangerous and powerful. And increasingly powerful youth gangs threatened to exit the city and infiltrate "virgin territories." These were spaces the report described as "new illicit drug markets" where gangs could sell drugs and make more money than they might within inner cities. This report linked the inclusion of drugs to the expanded scope and violence of youth gangs of the 1980s, an image that films reproduced. These characterizations and linkages justified "a scorched-earth campaign in black neighborhoods of South Central" waged by police in an effort to incarcerate and contain youth drug gangs within those spaces.[144]

Central to the War on Drugs was the effort to contain black gangs and crack cocaine within inner cities. The fear of gangs that infected the popular consciousness was not only spawned by their newly violent nature, but also by the possibility that their drugs and violence might expand beyond the city and inspire criminality among white suburban youths. The California Attorney General's report did not fear gangs' existence in black neighborhoods, but their "widespread movement" into other jurisdictions.[145] Reagan clearly articulated these sentiments when justifying the highly technical surveillance and law enforcement of, what he

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[143] G.W. Clemons, "Crips and Bloods Street Gangs," (California Department of Justice Office of the Attorney General, 1989), 1.
[144] Policing Los Angeles, 190
[145] Clemons "Crips and Bloods Street Gangs," 1.

called, the "urban jungle," by claiming it would "preserve domestic tranquility for traditional

Americans."[146] This racialized imagining of youth gangs posited black inner city gangs as more

violent and insidious, wielding the potential to disrupt the livelihoods of suburban, white, middle

class Americans. These sentiments were reflected in reporting on the disparate and less criminal

nature of suburban youth gangs. In a *New York Times* article written in 1993 on the growing

gang membership in suburbs, the reporters claim that "suburban youth gang activity is so

different from urban gang warfare that it is considered almost a separate phenomenon by police

officers across the region."[147] Even though police claimed that the "activities of suburban gangs

fall somewhere between youthful pranks and the drive-by shootings," the reporters still

characterized the youth gangs that terrorized the suburbs as less criminal than the black and

Hispanic youth gangs that populated the inner cities. This article, like many others, reflected the

fears of gang influence expanding into the suburbs while simultaneously characterizing the white

youth gangs already there as less dangerous.[148]

 Suburbia, and *Colors*, two films produced in the 1980s, specifically spoke to fears that

populated the popular consciousness of the power of drugs to expand the scope and violence of

youth gangs beyond the hood. Just as reports and articles of this historical moment characterized

a more insidious youth gang within the inner city, so too did these films. While films of the

1970s confined youth gangs to the neighborhoods they populated, films in the 1980s depicted

gangs and their newly imagined power and scope through portrayals of narcotics. By blaming

crack cocaine and the illicit drug economy for the violence that ensues, *Suburbia* and *Colors*

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[146] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 308
[147] Melinda Hennenberger, "Gang Membership Grows in Middle-Class Suburbs," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), June 24, 1993.
[148] Ibid.

invite audiences to view the transformative and destructive power drugs had to expand the scope of gangs and increase their power within inner city communities and beyond.

In *Suburbia*, drugs are utilized to depict the imagined power of youth gangs beyond the inner city. While *Suburbia* is the only film discussed that is located in the suburbs, its location speaks to the fears and anxieties white Americans harbored towards gangs and drugs that they believed now had the power to directly influence their own lived experience. In the beginning of the film, after Evan leaves his suburban home to escape his broken family, he walks down urbanized streets at night towards a punk rock concert venue. The images of the dangerous characters and bright city lights and the sounds of cars honking populate the auditory and visual landscape of the scene and blur the lines between urban and suburban. By locating the dangerous streets within walking distance to Evan's suburban home, the filmmakers constructed a newly urbanized image of the suburbs, inviting audiences to view the city's criminogenic environment as contagious. Inside the concert, as a punk musician scream-sings a song called "Throw It All Away," a fellow concert-goer laces Evan's drink with drugs after he initially declines the offer. The perverse and hopeless lyrics of the song overlay a scene which visually depicts profound violence until the camera pans back to Evan who is passed out on the floor with vomit pooled under his mouth. As he slowly stumbles out of the concert venue, Jack, the leader of The Rejects, intercepts him and invites him to join his gang. Through the placement of these scenes, the filmmakers imply that drugs, which afflicted Evan's judgement in a nonconsensual manner, directly lead him to join the youth gang that will dictate his existence for the rest of the film. While drugs are just a substance, they have no borders or barriers, allowing them to exit the inner city and affect the lives of otherwise innocent, white youths.[149]

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[149] *Suburbia.*

In the scene following the punk concert, the filmmakers acquaint audiences with the decrepit state of suburbia, implying gangs and drugs have already infected the previously pure spaces. While Jack drives Evan to The Rejects' clubhouse, Evan reads an excerpt from his mom's diary from May 10th, 1968.

> Evan: Dear Diary, Mark and I are going to be very happy here. The air is clean,
> the skies are blue and all the houses are brand new and beautiful. They call it
> suburbia and that word's perfect because it's a combination of the words suburb
> and utopia.
> Jack: They didn't realize it would be the slum of the future.[150]

By recalling Evan's mother's thoughts and perspectives from fifteen years ago, the filmmakers invite audiences to understand how much the image and reality of suburban America has changed during that time. As displayed in the opening scene, Evan's mother is currently disillusioned with her suburban lifestyle and nuclear family. The notion of a suburban utopia has been shattered, only to be replaced by an expanded slum located beyond the city. This moment articulates the profound disillusionment that accompanied the physical and moral decay that was imagined to have left the confines of the inner city and seeped into the suburbs in the early 1980s. Accompanying this contextual passage is the imagery of The Rejects' clubhouse which reproduced the same sentiments. Jack and Evan drive their car through a neighborhood of abandoned and spray-painted suburban homes when they finally approach The Reject house. The clubhouse is a typical mid-century modern, suburban home blighted and reclaimed through youth iconography. The paned glass that typically shields the entry way is shattered and the exterior walls are graffitied with illegible symbols. The inside of the home is even more stark. Trash is littered across the kitchen and a beetle scurries across the table. The imagery of the blighted and trashed home, both interior and exterior, symbolizes suburban American as

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[150] Ibid.

imagined at the moment- physically destroyed and reclaimed by youth gangs. In previous

decades, the mid-century modern home was a symbol of the morally superior, suburban, nuclear

family. The images of grafittied and trashed suburbia reclaimed by a violent gang articulates

white suburban America's worst fears and the belief that the blight and criminality that was

previously confined to America's cities had the power to reach the suburbs.[151]

In one of the climactic moments of the film, drugs are implicated in the death and

violence that structures the lives of The Rejects. Late in the film, one of The Rejects finds Sheila,

a motherly, teenage girl, dead from a drug overdose. This first moment of true consequence

elicits emotional reactions from the youths in the gang. Skinner starts screaming at the boy who

brought the drugs into the house, while violently damaging the clubhouse. "You and your stupid

dope! Sheila's dead. That's what happened to your stupid dope."[152] Other members communicate

their anger towards Keef arguing, "if it wasn't for you none of this shit would have happened in

the first place. Always such a joke you fucking druggy." Even though the filmmakers reveal that

Sheila killed herself through a drug overdose, they still invite audiences to understand drugs as

the substance that ultimately fuels the emotional unraveling of otherwise disillusioned teenagers.

While depression prompted her to commit suicide, the presence of drugs enabled and invited

death. In addition, besides the last scene of the film, this is the only moment where the youths

deal with violence or death of their own in any meaningful way. Drugs being the substance that

enables this moment reproduces the imagined power that drugs exhibit to transcend the borders

that confine the city and affect the lives of the gangs that terrorize America's suburbs too.[153]

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[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.

While *Suburbia* exhibits the imagined power drugs wield to expand gang death beyond the inner city, *Colors*, a film produced later in the 1980s, depicts the power and hyper-violent tendencies of gangs enmeshed within an expanded illicit drug trade. Youth gangs were no longer posited as territorialized groups, confined within delimited neighborhoods in the city. They were now characterized as vast and economically powerful drug traffickers that harbored the power and resources to enact violence and expand their enterprises beyond the confines of the neighborhoods they occupied. Beginning with a scene at a community town hall that occurs after a fatal drive-by shooting, a black social worker speaks to the largely black audience about the newly resourceful gangs. "I used to run with a gang, alright. Now I work with them. The reality on the streets is that the dope dealer has got the Mercedes Benz, instant money and the women. These kids have eyes. They see what's going on and that is their socialization. It's the values they respect."[154] The social worker's brief monologue is interrupted with an uproar of anger from the community. However, his words briefly dismantle an understanding of gangs as largely harmless youths that are forced into criminal activities because of adverse social or economic conditions. The film portrays gangs that are now wealthy, which allows them expanded access to weapons and locations throughout the city and beyond. And the filmmakers invite audiences to blame this new and insidious reincarnation of the youth gang on drug economies that enable an expanded scope and violence, and with that, the power to socialize the next generation of black American youths.[155]

Later in the film, Hodges and McGavin interact with the visual incarnation of a wealthy and violent gang member. Before the cops arrive, a young adult sits on the front lawn of a home. He is wearing a blue and red Fila windbreaker and is sporting expensive chains and a watch. In

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[154] *Colors*.
[155] Ibid.

the scene, he is speaking with three ten-year old boys. Right before McGavin and Hodges roll

up, he hands them a large bag of cocaine and instructs them to

run so they do not get caught by the officers. This scene visually represents the influence that

drugs and drug dealers wield over youths in the community, reproducing fears in the popular

consciousness that gangs will socialize the next generation of America's youth into violent

criminals. While communicating the power gangs have over youths, the filmmakers also posit a

new image of gangs. They are not poor like before. In fact, they have ample resources and are

fueling illicit economies that ultimately make them more dangerous and powerful.[156]

While most of the police-gang interactions in *Colors* occur in South Central Los Angeles,

the inclusion of gang violence located outside the inner city communicates the power of illicit

drug economies to infect and terrorize those spaces. On a patrol near Venice Beach, Hodges

spots High Top, a Blood gang member and drug dealer, driving along the street. After seeing

him, a foot chase ensues through the crowded streets. High Top pushes a white man off of his

motorcycle and steals it, prompting McGavin to get in his car and chase him. The chase causes

havoc in the commercial streets of Venice Beach, leading to multiple crashes which ultimately

catapults High Top through the window of an upscale restaurant. He crashes to the ground,

shattering glass and disrupting meals. After regaining balance, he gets up and grabs an innocent,

white woman, taking her hostage. McGavin enters the restaurant as High Top grabs the woman

around her neck placing her in front of him to shield him from a potential shootout. High Top

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[156] Ibid.

then throws her down and jumps into a kitchen where a violent fight ensues, ultimately ending when Hodges arrives and forcibly arrests him. This particular scene is significant for its location. This scene is the only one that visibly occurs outside of South Central Los Angeles, inviting normative white audiences to imagine what would happen if gang violence terrorized their communities. The chase to capture the criminal visibly disrupted commercial zones of Los Angeles and terrorized a white woman, enmeshing an upscale restaurant and its diners in potential violence. While the woman taken hostage is ultimately freed, the filmmakers use this scene to characterize the potential targets for the expanding youth gangs that terrorized spaces and populations outside the inner city.[157]

Beginning in the 1980s, American cities globalized in ways that expanded their profound economic impact and image. In conjunction with expansive economies and burgeoning commercialism the reinvigorated America's metropolises, the imagined walls that confined the blighted city and its populations started to dismantle. An alarming result of a newly accessible commercial economy and an interconnected global economy was the injection of drugs into American life. *Suburbia* and *Colors* ultimately use drugs to symbolize a new image of the youth gang- one separated from specific neighborhoods, and able to exact more violence across various territories. The hyper-violent image that these films reinforced ultimately justified the War on Drugs and Gangs which criminalized black inner-city youths for their potential gang identity and subjected black neighborhoods to a militarized campaign against youth gangs. The policing of inner-city gangs ultimately enmeshed black urban neighborhoods within cycles of unprovoked violence perpetuated by law enforcement and the street gangs they were supposedly fighting.

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[157] Ibid.

Sirens Wail, Helicopters Whirl: Cops, Gangs, and the Communities Caught In Between

In 1987, the LAPD hosted the first Los Angeles Gang Symposium, an event intended to abate the fears of folks in the city that the police were waging an unwinnable war against gangs. During the event, a detective got up on stage and spoke to the mostly elderly population claiming that "Eighty five percent of the [gang] crimes are committed against innocent citizens. There used to be a time when gangs fought within themselves but now you can't go anywhere without the realistic threat of gang violence rearing its head."[158] Behind him, a slideshow depicted the "weapons strength that has fortified gangs," including photographs of "teenagers brandishing automatic weapons, rifles, shotguns and semi-automatic handguns" and a picture of a "husband and a wife counting money as their three-year-old toyed an automatic Uzi."[159] The whole event was a call to action. The police officers depicted the violence that so-called "urban terrorists" enacted and advised that black communities should "band together" and make gangs "unacceptable in the community."[160] The Los Angeles Gang Symposium characterized the state of the inner city in the late 1980s. Not only were gangs endemic to the environment, but the violence with which they were characterized "rationalized a militarized war to protect law abiding residents."[161] News reports and films often characterized the inner city in militarized terms which invited suburban Americans to view the city as a foreign space of "otherness." These depictions, however, placed innocent black communities at the center of what was posited as a domestic assault against "terrorists" who threatened to destroy American life.

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[158] Ralph Bailey, Jr., "LAPD Seeks Community Help Against Gangs: Urban Terrorists, LAPD Looks to Citizens in War Against Gangs," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), April 30, 1987.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles*, 192

In order to more effectively wage a war against gangs and drugs in urban neighborhoods, police adopted policies which criminalized black existence in certain spaces under the guise of gang prevention. What resulted was innocent black folks brutalized by police and ensnared in the carceral system, a phenomenon that youth gang films characterized as reprehensible. One such practice was "Civil Gang Abatement," a tool of community policing proposed by Los Angeles City Attorney and future mayor, James Hahn. Civil Gang Abatement was proposed as a tool to incarcerate black youths who were presumed to be involved in gangs without actually catching them doing anything explicitly criminal. From the language of the text, it would "effectively prevent imminent criminal activity by arresting persons for prohibited patterns of conduct which are known to precede and facilitate these crimes."[162] Inspired by clearly racist linkages between black youth activity and crime, this tool would effectively criminalize all inner-city youths who appeared dangerous through their appearance and the spaces they occupied. Civil Gang Abatement was inspired by "Broken Windows Theory," developed in 1982 and widely practiced across police departments in the decades to come. In order to ensure that the neighborhood can begin "to look and feel safer, all at the same time," Hahn created a list of actions to be abated, which included but was not limited to, congregating in certain spaces, "blocking and obstructing sidewalks and pedestrian thoroughfares," "wearing and possessing certain identifiable hats, shirts, belts," yelling certain words or phrases and "possessing paging devices and or portable cellular telephones" in certain spaces. In essence, Civil Gang Abatement would have criminalized black youth existence and was justified through presumptions of so-called criminal activity located in the neighborhoods where cops and gangs were at war.[163]

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[162] James K. Hahn, "Civil Gang Abatement: A Community Based Policing Tool of the Office of the Los Angeles City Attorney," (L.A. City Attorney Gang Prosecution Section).
[163] Ibid.

Other punitive polices in addition to Civil Gang Abatement criminalized existence in the inner-city, and contributed to the militarized depictions of a war between gangs and cops. The Military Operation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act (1981) physically linked domestic and national security by permitting "defense agencies to provide local police forces access to weapons, intelligence, research and military bases to improve drug interdiction efforts."[164] California's Street Terrorism and Enforcement Prevention (STEP) Act of 1988 criminalized participation in a street gang, and explicitly utilized militaristic language to transform black youth criminals into terrorists in the public consciousness.[165] Along with these laws and many more, the LAPD and other law enforcement agencies across the country created inter-agency departments that were specifically tasked with the eradication of gangs. The Community Resources against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) unit and Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams were specifically created to "intimidate, remove and incarcerate as many gang members as possible, conducting geographically targeted gang and drug sweeps" that, historian Max Felkor-Kantor has noted, occurred most acutely in black and brown neighborhoods.[166]

What resulted was the mass incarceration of black and Latino/a youths who lived in communities where cops waged their war on drugs and gangs. These neighborhoods were increasingly characterized as militarized zones, due to the brutal tactics that police utilized to eradicate and incarcerate the hyper-violent gangs they were met with. Both *Colors* and *Boyz n the Hood* tell the story of Los Angeles communities policed by militarized cops and terrorized by militarized gangs. While each film centers their narrative on different subjects, they both locate the battles between warring factions of cops and criminals in black urban neighborhoods,

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[164] Hinton, *From the War on Drugs to the War on Crime*, 311.
[165] Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles*, 206.
[166] Ibid, 198.

inviting audiences to view these communities sympathetically for the unwarranted violence that occurred on their streets. Even as these films critiqued the narratives of earlier films that justified the brutal policing of urban spaces, their representations still characterized black neighborhoods as spaces dominated by violence. Where the narratives of earlier films and those discussed in this chapter diverge is through their constructions of the innocent communities that lived in inner cities and were entrapped within cycles of violence. By simultaneously characterizing crime fighting as warfare and delineating between the criminal youth gangs and the innocent communities they populated, these films perpetuated imaginations of the city as a space structured by black violence while inviting sympathy towards those who innocently lived within those zones. In other words, in a war between gangs and cops, these films argue that true victims were the communities caught in between.

On one side of the war, these films posit that gang violence often targeted the innocent communities they populated. However, filmmakers used acts of random and often unwarranted gang violence to suggest that the neighborhoods and the gangs that claimed those spaces were distinct from each other. In earlier films, gangs were intertwined and identified with the "barrio" often using geographic identifiers to mark their territory. However, in *Colors* and *Boyz n the Hood*, the implicit connection between gangs and the spaces they occupied was weakened, inviting audiences to view youth gangs as terrorist occupiers of neighborhoods, rather than people who lived there. Films posited youth gangs' existence in the community as solely violent rendering their innocent populations victim to their dangerous and often illicit activities.

In *Colors*, gang violence against the family and community occurs in multiple spots throughout the film. Shortly following the drive-by murder of a member of the Blood gang, the film depicts his funeral. The imagery of the small and decrepit church is paired starkly with those

who filled its seats to mourn the youth's death. On one side of the church is the boy's family dressed in muted tones, somber for the loss of their loved one. One the other side is the youth's gang, dressed in casual Blood attire. The Bloods walk up to the casket and pay their respects by placing flowers in his suit lapel and a bullet in his casket. The camera follows the boy's mother's reaction as she looks in horror at the children who enabled the death of her son pay their respects at his funeral. Following the imagery that places gangs outside of the rest of the community, the pastor delivers a fiery sermon that reaffirms these sentiments.

> I knew this boy whose mama brought him up best she could. It wasn't the lack of love that brought this boy down. It was the scourge of drugs and gangs! And what makes this day so special is we have now declared war upon this plague. Til we see that this scourge of gang violence is driven from us. We've been bullied too long by these sawed-off gangsters. By these gang-bangers as they call themselves and now it is time for decent folk for the people of god to start banging back. Are we afraid of these hoodlums? Are we afraid of these terrorists?[167]

Before the pastor can finish, a group of Crips splay rounds of bullets into the church requiring everyone to duck and scream in fear. The rhetorical equivocation between gangs and terrorists is visually mimicked and reaffirmed with a brutal gang shooting that not only intends to enact violence on Bloods but any community member in the church. And the filmmakers are clear to not blame broken families in the cycles of death and criminality that "plague" the community but gangs themselves, who the pastor characterizes through metaphors of war, as violent characters who use the community as a battleground to enact random violence on those who challenge or contest their power. There is also significance in the space the violence occurs within. By locating a drive-by shooting in a church, the filmmakers communicate the imagined power of gangs to denigrate a holy space of community.[168]

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[167] *Colors.*
[168] Ibid.

Later in the film, the White Fences, a Hispanic gang in South Central, and their friends and family gather for a communal house party. The party is jovial as lots of people celebrate and dance with alcohol and marijuana. Interrupting the festivities, the ominous Crips car slowly slides by while three gang members dressed in blue fire rounds into the home, breaking glass windows and wooden doors and forcing everyone to duck and hide. Even though no one the Crips were targeting died from the shooting, the bullets reached the house next door, killing a woman as she watched television with her husband. When the police arrive, a cop consoles her crying husband as Hodges sighs over his young, innocent spouse who was so brutally murdered as a result of the gang's violent actions. Not only did the gang terrorize the harmless, communal event, but their violence afflicted the innocent neighbors next door. This scene invites audiences to view the communities that gangs operated within as innocent bystanders in a militarized war over contested territory. Through militarized depictions of gangs and the violence of their actions, *Colors* implicitly placed gangs outside the community with which they enacted violence on and within. The youth gang violence portrayed throughout the film targeting other gangs and innocent community members invited audiences to view black neighborhoods as militarized zones where occupying groups enact violence on those who live there. These constructions displayed obviously in *Colors,* are further articulated in *Boyz n the Hood*.[169]

Boyz n the Hood posits the black neighborhood as the battleground for a war between youth gangs and law enforcement. By highlighting the hyper-violent nature of the gangs that occupy those spaces, the filmmakers invite audiences to view the main characters of the film, and the black neighborhood at large, as victims and innocent bystanders in a war that presumed criminality on black youths and ensnared those same populations in cycles of violence. The film

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[169] Ibid.

begins with a blank screen. Even though the opening credits appear and the title card sweeps the screen, the sound of a drive-by shooting is the focus. Bullets ring, folks scream, police call for assistance, and a young boy cries "they shot my brother, they shot my brother."[170] As the sounds of the police helicopter envelope the cries for help, the screen reads "One out of every twenty-one Black Americans males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another Black male." These opening moments roots the film in a reality of ubiquitous violence that consumes the city. By erasing the presence of a face or image to the violence depicted in the audio, the filmmakers invite audiences to understand this experience as universal within black urban neighborhoods. From the beginning, the film ensnares innocent families and youths in the death and violence that gangs produce in American cities.[171]

An important moment later in the film displays the confining effects of gang violence while simultaneously separating the identity of the gang members from the community they occupy. One evening, Ricky and Tre drive on Crenshaw Boulevard. The street is packed with cars and juveniles enjoying the social space. Ricky and Tre approach Doughboy, Ricky's hardened and more deviant brother, who was hanging out separately on the boulevard with his friends. As they talk to each other, a group of black young adults dressed in red and black intentionally bump into Ricky while walking past him. Ricky reacts with aggressive annoyance and a verbal altercation occurs prompting a woman associated with the gang to ask, "can't we have one night where there ain't no fighting and nobody gets shot?"[172] Doughboy responds by telling her to shut up while pulling out a handgun, indicating the real potential for violence. Moments after the gang walks away and the boys resume their conversation, the gang leader

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[170] *Boyz n the Hood*.
[171] Ibid
[172] Ibid.

shoots several rounds of a machine gun into the sky, prompting all the youths on Crenshaw to scatter in fear. The violence and terror that ultimately spawned from a bump in the middle of the street invites audiences to view gangs as producers of terror within the communities they occupy. Instead of being a part of the community, the gang terrorizes the youths and confines them under the constant threat of random violence. The gang is also cloaked as "other" within the neighborhood through their singular identity. Even though Doughboy is characterized as deviant, selling drugs and consuming alcohol with a group of friends, the filmmakers never place him explicitly within a gang. This intentionally distances all the main characters of the film from the gang, further characterizing these criminal groups as separate from the characters that define the neighborhood's normal social sphere. Even the deviant characters like Doughboy are explicitly not part of the youth gang, which limits gang inclusion to truly criminal youths.[173]

In the climactic scene of the movie, Tre and Ricky walk to the corner store. What seems like a normal day on the streets of Los Angeles turns into a moment of horror when the gang appears to be trailing the boys. Tre and Ricky unwisely agree to split up to divert the gang. Unconcerned, Ricky walks through an alleyway scratching a lottery ticket. The red car pulls up and before Ricky could run away, a gang member rolls down the tinted window and fires his shotgun twice, shooting Ricky in the leg and the chest. With Ricky's death left his future football successes and the promise of escaping South Central. But escaping the inner city, the film posits through its most poignant metaphor, occurs as frequently as winning the lottery. Through the tragic death of a main character who was so close to achieving legitimate success, the film condemns the gang violence that terrorizes the community. While most youth gang movies analyzed in this project end in a death, Ricky's death in this film rings poignantly as it was

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[173] Ibid.

unprovoked. The gang murder was an act of violence that affected a youth not in the gang but

within its orbit. Through the death of Ricky, the film invites audiences to view the gang as a

terrorizing force, enacting violence most regularly on innocent members of the community.

In the film's final moments, after Doughboy avenges his brother's death, he sits with Tre outside

his home. While reflecting on the tragedy, Doughboy offers the final statements of the film-

> Turned on the TV this morning. Had this shit on about living in a violent world.
> Showed all these foreign places. How foreigners live and all. I started thinking
> man. Either they don't know, don't show, or don't care about what's going on in
> the hood. They had all this foreign shit. They ain't have shit on my brother, man. I
> ain't got no brother.[174]

In this somber final monologue, Doughboy communicates the disillusionment that accompanies

every day in the inner city. The feeling of being forgotten permeates black youth consciousness,

for while the war on gangs wages on, the filmmakers imply that nothing is being done to help the

people that the war affects. By comparing news coverage of foreign wars to that of the gang

violence in the streets, the film intentionally demarcates the line between domestic and foreign,

critiquing the urban wars waged that target criminal "others" while placing black communities

under the constant threat of violence. The inner-city kids, like Tre and Ricky and Doughboy,

who exist within the scope of gangs, cannot escape the violence that structures their lives. It is a

sobering final scene, which communicates the disillusionment of the forgotten communities that

live in the middle of a never-ending war.[175]

On the other side of the violence is police. While the War on Drugs and Gangs justified

harsher police tactics in order to neutralize gangs, law enforcement often obfuscated the line

between innocent and criminal youths leading to the incarceration of those presumed criminal

based on their blackness. Reflecting the pressing reality of police violence, *Colors* and *Boyz n*

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[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid.

the Hood depict cops nonchalantly abusing their power, warping their mission to protect and serve as they instead chose to surveil and incarcerate. By highlighting the police brutality that afflicted the innocent communities caught in between the police's war against gangs, these films temper their conservative sentiments through liberal sympathies by inviting audiences to chastise callous officers who obscured the line between legal and criminal violence.

In *Colors*, the disparate policing techniques displayed throughout the film are partly the function of its central narrative. The film, at its core, is a police procedural that interrogates the effects of both broken windows policing and community policing. While this film reflects the debates occurring within popular discourse about the efficacy of certain law enforcement tactics, the moments that depict brutal policing of the inner city invite audiences to understand law enforcement's mission to fight gangs as perversely enacting more violence on the community. This further placed black neighborhoods at the center of an imagined war between gangs and cops that simultaneously characterized cities as zones of "otherness" and placed the communities that lived in those spaces as innocent occupants of a contested and war-torn territory.[176]

In a scene depicting a community town-hall, a black cop pleads for citizen cooperation in their battle against the neighborhood criminals. The officer claims, "Our community has kids out there who are dying over colors, I mean actually dying over red or blue and what we need is your help. We need your people to testify when you see something going on out there. We're outnumbered, we're outgunned, we're tired. We need your help."[177] By referring to the neighborhood as "our" community, he explicitly draws a battle line, placing cops and the community on one side, and the gangs that terrorize those communities on the other. However, after this brief monologue, the crowd of black community members erupts in discontent. "What

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[176] *Colors*.
[177] Ibid.

the fuck do you think we're doing here! We're fed up! We're sick of this shit! And police ain't never gonna get anywhere man, shaking people down, shining lights in our eyes, treating all of us like criminals cause where we live! And right in front of our kids!" The flood of discontent from the community invites audiences to understand an antagonistic relationship between law enforcement and the people they police. While from the perspective of the cops, they are and undermanned force attempting to stop the most violent and criminal elements, from the perspective of the neighborhood where the policing most often occurs, they are enacting violence against those who are not even criminal.[178]

Later in the film, Hodges learns that a black youth he let walk free was selling cocaine throughout the neighborhood. After confirming the black youth was a dangerous criminal, McGavin's aggressive tactics that presumed all black youths to be criminal was further justified and exploited. In a montage of brutal policing, McGavin chokes a Crip gang member to expel drugs from his mouth and later, sprays graffiti in a young child's eyes for spray painting an "x" through a name on a wall. The montage of police violence against neighborhood youths, both affiliated with gangs and not, invites audiences to question to what end police should go to stop gang violence. The audience assumes the perspective of Hodges in this situation, an advocate of community policing who consistently tempers McGavin's brutal tactics. Fed up, Hodges angrily confronts McGavin arguing that he is no different than the violent communities he polices, claiming that he is "nothing but a gangster."[179] In this moment, the film acknowledges that brutal policing obfuscates the line between cop and criminal. To Hodges and the audience he is meant to embody, McGavin's violence is just as bad as the violence that gangs enact on each other and the community. The line between righteous and disordered violence is blurred when cops target

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[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.

innocent children instead of criminal gangsters. Just as the title "Colors" might refer to the blue and red of the siren or the blue and red of the competing gang attire, the film questions the tactics of cops throughout the film just as it does the violence that gangs pursue. By simply questioning the validity of some policing tactics, the film invites audiences to castigate police actions for troubling the line between legal and criminal. Even though their intention is to remove gangs from black communities, the violent tactics these officers use to do so ensnare the same communities in the violence they are attempting to prevent. In *Boyz n the Hood*, similarly brutal instances of police brutality are presented, depicting the violence from gangs and cops that confines innocent black communities. Ultimately however, the liberal sentiments that rebuke police violence in *Colors* and *Boyz n the Hood* cloak the more conservative ideologies that undergird each film.[180]

Boyz n the Hood begins with Tre's life in Inglewood in 1984. Tre is a young black boy and the opening of the film suggests that black youths are socialized by violence endemic within the community. In his elementary school class, images of the children's drawings appear on screen. The camera slides past drawings of a man in a casket, a cop car driving towards a black man with his hands up, and an LAPD helicopter with its searchlight pointed on to the street. The elementary school drawings juxtaposed with perverse images they depict create the impression that black youths in inner cities have grown to understand death, crime, gang violence and police surveillance as normal to their lived environment. This scene projects the notion that youth understood their world through crime and punishment, and the militarized battle for the streets that cops and gangs waged every day.[181]

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[180] Ibid.
[181] *Boyz n the Hood*.

As Tre grows up with his father, the film characterizes the community as more violent and surveilled then it was before. In 1991, Tre and Ricky are seniors in high school and Ricky is preparing to play college football on a scholarship to the University of Southern California. In a scene where the recruiter visits Ricky at his home, the auditory indicators of omnipresent police surveillance are acutely present. The well-dressed, black recruiter arrives, clearly appearing out of place, and aware of it too. During their meeting, sirens wail and helicopters whir, filling the auditory landscape, almost drowning out the recruiter's voice. Ricky is unaffected by it, failing to notice the sounds that consume the landscape, while the recruiter is clearly startled, looking up at the sky concerned for what the presence of such a helicopter might mean. The auditory landscape and the visual reactions that ascribe meaning to the sounds imply that panoptic surveillance defines the lives of those who live in South Central, so much so that they do not even hear it. The lack of reaction from Ricky is juxtaposed, however, with the recruiter, who is meant to embody the audience's perspective of horror, as he watches the material effects of an innocent man's life shaped by police surveillance.[182]

After a scene depicting the terror of the hyper-violent gang on Crenshaw, the filmmakers juxtapose this experience with police brutality, further blaming cops for brutal tactics that entrap innocent black youths within opposing systems of violence. As Tre and Ricky quickly drive away from Crenshaw chiding the gang violence that dominates their neighborhood, a police car

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[182] Ibid.

commands them to pull over. The two police officers, one black and one white, approach Tre's

car. The callous black cop is the same one that appeared earlier in the film. After Tre answers

"no" when asked if he has any drugs or weapons on him, the black cop responds harshly to Tre's

tone he perceived to be disrespectful. The cop flips Tre over and places a gun on his neck.

> Oh you think you're tough? You think you're tough huh? You scared now? I like
> that. That's why I took this job. I hate little mother fuckers like you. Little niggas,
> you ain't shit. Think you tough huh? I could blow your head off and you couldn't
> do shit. How do you feel now? What set you from? You look like one of them
> Crenshaw Mafia mother fuckers...huh?[183]

After a tight camera shot holds on the police officer seething in his own hatred, the camera

moves to Tre, with his head as far back as it can go, gun against his neck, as a tear rolls down his

cheek. When the police radio goes off, the cop looks up to see the white officer and Ricky

watching the scene unfold. At that moment, the black officer seems to snap back into

consciousness, wishing the kids a good evening and driving away. The brutal and sobering scene

depicts the power law enforcement wields to enact violence on whoever they chose. By placing

this scene directly following the horror of unprovoked gang violence, the filmmakers invite

audiences to blame brutal police tactics too for the cycles of violence and death that plague the

innocent black community. The police officers in this scene commit the same horrors as the

gangs by placing innocent black youths, Tre and Ricky, under the direct threat of violence.

However, this scene is decidedly criticizing the chaotic violence brutal cops enact. By policing

black youths as if they are all enemy gang members, the police obfuscate the line between gangs

and the innocent community members they terrorize. By placing a scene of police violence

directly after a scene of gang violence, the filmmakers invite audiences to sympathize with the

main characters who live within an oppressive environment. When Tre breaks down at his

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[183] Ibid.

girlfriend's house moments later, the film displays the effects that this crushing environment has on the youths that innocently live there. It is not a broken family or social ills that causes Tre deep trauma, but the opposing threats of gangs and police and the omnipresent threat of unprovoked death that structures the daily lives of those in the inner city. The panoptic police surveillance that dominates the streets, along with the youth gangs who terrorize its spaces produces fear of these increasingly violent structures that dominate the inner city. These representations reinforce the threat of gangs and cops while inviting sympathy for the innocent victims they terrorize.[184]

In both *Colors* and *Boyz n the Hood*, the filmmakers contemplate an environment occupied by two competing forces of terror. While the positionality of the main characters is different in each film, they both blame gang violence and police brutality for ensnaring innocent black neighborhoods in cycles of violence. By characterizing youth gangs as totally separate from the identity of the neighborhoods they occupy, the films invite audiences to understand these gangs as violent domestic terror threats rather than residents who live in those spaces. However, these films ultimately offer sympathy to the communities where the battle between police and gangs is located by characterizing both aggressive police tactics and the panoptic surveillance that structures the existence of black likes in the inner city as reprehensible. In its totality, the war on gangs located in black communities in each film reinforced imaginings of a violent city engulfed in a war. And even though liberal dimensions seemingly propel the films through the sympathies they offer innocent black communities, the inherent delineation between gangs and black folks that undergirds each film ultimately reinforces the belief that criminality is a choice, depicting those who choose that life as irredeemable.

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[184] Ibid.

"Just Say No:" Conservative Philosophies Guiding Crime Prevention

> When times get rough, and you want to blow off steam, drugs aren't they answer, they aren't the key. Watch your back, don't hang with the wrong crowd, don't do drugs, that's what you should vow. So take my advice, do what Officer Brown says, or else you'll wind up hurt or dead.[185]

The above excerpt was written by a 6th grader, Norrell Fuller, for the Inner-City Drug Abuse Resistance Program Essay Contest in 1993. The contest was created by DARE, otherwise known as Drug Abuse Resistance Education, a police-community program that taught children to resist peer pressure and "just say no" to drugs.[186] Despite less than certain results on the program's effectiveness, it was massively popular and spread from Los Angeles into schools across the country. An article from the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the 1994 'Kids Convention' for DARE. The auditorium reverberated with "6,000 elementary school children screaming with high-pitched, eye-watering intensity: 'no, no, no!'" in what the article describes as a "combination rock concert, school assembly and political convention."[187] Just eleven years after DARE entered Los Angeles schools in 1983, the popularity of the Kids Convention spoke to the ways in which conservative solutions to crime and drug abuse reverberated through the American education system and the larger popular consciousness. Instead of attacking the root economic or social conditions that enabled the existence of crime and drugs black communities, DARE and other conservative policies highlighted personal-responsibility and choice narratives as the only way to stop youth gangs. The program and the values that undergirded it was taught to ten million students from the ages of five to eighteen in the United States every year.[188] In

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[185] "DARE Essay Winners: Say No to Drugs," *The Morning Call* (Allentown, PA), June 3, 1993.

[186] Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles*, 211.

[187] Susan Moffat, "'No!' Is Their Rallying Cry: 6000 Youths at Meeting Loudly Pledge to Avoid Gangs and Drugs," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), April 22, 1994.

[188] "D.A.R.E. Gradates Say Program Has Helped Them Avoid Drugs, Alcohol," *Los Angeles Sentinel* (Los Angeles, CA), July 22, 1993.

addition to the ideals that DARE propagated, it solidified a lasting relationship between the

LAPD and Los Angeles Unified School District which brought law enforcement closer than ever

to the youths they were tasked to police.

In addition to reinforcing responsibility within youths, DARE extended beyond the

classroom and into the home. The National DARE Parent Program was intended for parents who

sought skills to make sure their children stayed drug-free. One of leaders of the DARE Parent

Program, succinctly stated the mission and goals of a DARE curriculum targeted towards

parents. "You have to have enforcement, you have to have education, and the family structure

and the family values need to be there, too."[189] The leader captured the link between good youths

that made positive choices to stay away from crime and the families that raised them. These

sentiments and the DARE Parent Program at large captured a resurgent belief that posited

"community pathology as the root cause of crime."[190] Instead of focusing on fixing structural

conditions that entrenched certain communities in cycles of poverty and crime, the DARE Parent

Program and others like it reinforced an "inherent criminality of black and brown youth" raised

within and passed down through broken families.[191] In this sense, these programs retooled racist

assumptions of black broken families which the Moynihan Report in the 1960s posited as

indicative of a cultural pathology that rendered black people more prone to criminal activities.

President Clinton spoke to these assumptions and reaffirmed them, toeing the line between his

liberal political ideology and the popularity of conservative solutions to curb crime. Throughout

his campaign for president, he not only stressed the importance of investing in black

neighborhoods "but he also lamented the breakdown of the family and other institutions in many

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[189] Jennifer Andes, "Parents Dare Say No, Two York Programs Emphasize Family Values," *Newport News* (Newport, VA), Jan. 12, 1994.
[190] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 308
[191] Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles*, 205.

inner cities."[192] He argued strongly for black communities to uplift their children and "take

responsibility" for the crime that was rampant in their neighborhoods.[193] These sentiments were

sanitized and no longer appeared to be racially charged, even as they blamed black families and

their lack of values for raising criminal children.

The popularity of personal uplift and family values as a cure to the crime of the inner city

contextualized the films that were produced at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s. While

some of these films invited sympathy for the innocent black folks afflicted by gang and police

violence, the solutions they offered those characters were rooted in a conservative belief that just

saying no was enough. Despite hyper-violent gangs, the presence of drugs, and the panoptic

surveillance that turned cities into warzones, these films ultimately argue for the inherent

capacity of individuals to choose whether or not to engage in gang activities. By clearly

delineating between black youths in gangs and those who innocently live in the communities

they occupy, the films implicitly suggest that the decision to join a gang is indicative of inherent

and irredeemable immorality. While the films at the end of the 1970s closely intertwined gangs

and their neighborhoods and approached gang inclusion as an unfortunate but inevitable part of

growing up in the city, these later films operated under a less fatalistic approach. *Colors* and

Boyz n the Hood implied an inherent capacity to choose gang inclusion despite adverse

conditions, while simultaneously arguing that those who choose gang violence are inherently

criminal and immoral. While these perspectives seem mutually exclusive, the films invited both,

reinforcing the contradictory nature of cultural pathology and choice narratives as both

undergirding conservative theories of crime at this moment. In addition, the individualist

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[192] Ronald Brownstein, "Racial Unrest Presents a Touchy Dilemma for Clinton," *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), May 2, 1992.
[193] Ibid.

narratives that these films championed ultimately undermined narratives about structural causes to crime. Despite sometimes acknowledging the lack of economic opportunity or gentrifying forces that afflicted inner cities, these films diminished the destructive power of structures and systems by focusing on the productive power of families to raise moral children. Regardless of the liberal sentiments castigating the horrors of police brutality, the solutions these films imagined were contextualized by conservative policies that focused on incarcerating individual criminals rather than repairing the structures that caused crime.

In *Colors*, participating in a gang is posited as a choice, suggesting that inclusion in those systems of violence is indicative of inherent criminality. Unlike films produced at the end of the 1970s which displayed a much deeper connection between the gangs and the neighborhoods they were a part of, films produced during this period clearly delineated the criminal youth gangs from the innocent communities they occupy. Through this separation, films invite audiences to understand inclusion in a gang as indicative of the inherent immorality and irredeemable nature of youth gang inclusion. While aggressive police officers are posited as destructive to their community, their capacity to change and reform delineates them from the gangs they police. The youths involved with gangs, the filmmakers imply, actively choose lives of violence and crime, which invites audiences to view gang inclusion as indicative of a deeper human capacity for immoral behavior. The imagined power of youths to simultaneously choose gang inclusion coupled with the mythology that the choice is indicative of a deeper, criminal nature reproduced black cultural pathologies on screen and affirmed the fears that a generation of soon-to-be violent criminals would further corrupt the American landscape.

In a scene inside the White Fences' blighted clubhouse, a black social worker speaks to the youths about life outside of the gang. He tells the young adults that their future is promising

if they choose for it to be. The youths aggressively push back at his claim that gangs are

escapable, leading to an argument that places two competing philosophies of youth violence

against each other.

> Youth: There's always gonna be gangs. There's always gonna be fighting. There
> always was, there always is. No one's gonna stop it. That's just life.
> Social Worker: You can stop it for yourselves.
> Youth: Well fuck you man I don't wanna stop nothing!....Go tell your fairytales
> somewhere else.[194]

While the social worker embodies the capacity to escape the gang and choose a life devoid of

criminality, the filmmakers present the gang members as resistant to the narrative that criminality

is a choice. By portraying perspectives of both the social worker and the gang members however,

this scene invites conflicting perspectives on the causes of crime. The film communicates both

the existence of violent gangs in the pathologized barrio as a fact, while also indicating that

youths can choose lives that avoid gang inclusion. While these conclusions are seemingly

antithetical, they represent the contradictory nature of the conservative philosophies this film

purports. Inherent criminality and the choice to be criminal, while appearing to be mutually

exclusive, are nonetheless the dual theories that conservative believed determined criminality.

However, the film ultimately portrays the inherent criminality of the gang member by displaying

his willingness and excitement to commit acts of violence. When presented with the choice to

escape gangs, the youth says he "don't wanna stop nothing." This scene reasserts the notion that

these youths want to be criminals and genuinely believe their existence invites no opportunity for

success outside of their gang. Despite the existence of perverse inner-city conditions, desire

propels youths to choose gang involvement, reinforcing their immoral nature.[195]

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[194] *Colors.*
[195] Ibid,

The final moments of the film emphasize the inherently criminal nature of those that choose youth gang criminality as opposed to the reformable nature of police brutality. In *Colors*, a gang member murders Hodges, the only police officer in the film to respect the youths, which emphasizes the truly evil nature of those who chose to be involved in gangs. In the penultimate scene of the film, the White Fences' gather after their assault on the Crips. They celebrate their successful vengeance and the mass death they enacted upon their enemies. Reflecting on the tragic death of one of their own during the assault, the antagonist youth from prior scenes romanticizes his death, claiming, "when I die, I wanna go just like that, man."[196] Moments after, the LAPD approaches. Suddenly, the youth from before grabs a gun, screams "no future in it vato" and shoots Hodges in the chest. He is met with immediate police retaliation as several officers kill him instantly. As Hodges lays on the ground, tragically taking his last breaths, the leader of the White Fences' turns and smiles, relishing the death of another police officer. The killing of Hodges suggests that gang members are inherently criminal beings. The glimpse of Frog smiling at Hodges' dead body reveals the villainy of all those involved in gangs, and the increasingly violent nature of the youths who believe that their destiny is to enact violence on behalf of their gang, understanding the glory of the death that may follow.[197]

Directly after this scene, McGavin is shown patrolling South Central with his new partner, a reflection of his prior, more violent tactics. McGavin asks him to be more tamed in their policing of the ghetto, signifying a full transformation of the main character into the reflection of his former mentor. This final scene displaying McGavin's transition is important, for it indicates the capacity for violent cops to change, something that the younger generation of violent gang members do not have. By juxtaposing the ultimate evil of the gang with the

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[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid.

redeemable and changing tactics of the police officers, the film ultimately invites audiences to view gang violence as a result of some inherent immoral capacity that certain youths occupy. And while the film castigates gang members for their inherent criminality, it reinforces conservative ideological perspectives through its depiction of police officers. Even though McGavin was a brutal and abusive cop, he was just one bad individual within an entire system. Through its depictions of police, the film reinforces conservative ideologies that favored individual morality over inherently perverse structures by implying that police brutality was not representative of the entire police system. Furthermore, through McGavin's transformation, the film grants bad cops the capacity for redemption, while depicting gang members as irredeemable criminals. So while *Colors* characterizes the immoral nature of police brutality, the final moments of the film confirm that the true evil of the inner city is youth gangs, because of their inherent desire to choose criminality. This notion is further reinforced in *Boyz n the Hood.*[198]

While the perspective *Boyz n the Hood* offers is slightly different due to the main character positionality of black community members rather than white cops, the filmmakers too argue that youth criminality is a choice, curbed by the productive nature of good family values. By positioning the youth gang as foreign to the three main kids in the film, the filmmakers invite audiences to view those who make the decisions to join gangs as completely incomprehensible criminal "others." In addition, by showing the ultimately productive power of strong fathers and good families in steering youths away from criminal lives, the film reinforces strong black families and good foundational values as the most effective tool to exit the inner city. Despite acknowledging that the lack of jobs and economic opportunity afflicted black neighborhoods,

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[198] Ibid.

Boyz n the Hood ultimately subverts structuralist explanations for crime in lieu of the conservative arguments of pathology and choice.

In the beginning of the film, Tre's mother, Reva, decides it would be best for Tre if he lived with his father in South Central Los Angeles. When explaining to Furious why she is leaving Tre with him, she reaffirms the sentiments regarding the power of black fathers articulated in the Moynihan Report claiming, "I can't teach him how to be a man. That's your job."[199] After Reva leaves Tre, Furious instructs him to rake up all the leaves on his lawn. In commanding his son to complete this household chore, the film depicts the hard work Tre will do, and the values Furious intends to instill in him. Through Reva's reasoning and the display of fatherhood that follows, the filmmakers suggest that Reva intends to shield Tre from crime by exposing him to the powerful impacts of productive black fatherhood. When Tre comes back in after an afternoon of work, Furious sits down with him to articulate the rules of the house.

> I don't gotta do nothing around here except for pay the bills, put food on the table and put clothes on your back. You know Tre you may think I'm being hard on you right now but I'm not. I'm trying to teach you how to be responsible. Like your little friends across the street, they don't have anybody to show them how to do that. They don't. You're gonna see how they end up too.

Through Furious' monologue, the film explicitly depicts his motivation for being a harsh parent. His language implies that a strong family is the best socializer against criminality and that developing a sense of personal responsibility will shield Tre from a descent into gang life. However, he communicates his theory by directly comparing Tre's upbringing to the boys across the street, Ricky and Doughboy, who are being raised by a single mother. Furious effectively foreshadows their descent into criminality that will render them targets for gang violence, and blames a broken family and ineffective parenting in their deaths posited as inevitable. In the

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[199] *Boyz n the Hood.*

following scene, Doughboy's mother is sitting on her couch smoking a cigarette as he walks

about the living room, ignoring her lecture. The image of the living room is stark, as it shows a

coffee table littered with trash, cigarettes, markers, magazines and trash. Coupled with the image

of a disorderly home is the mother's harsh words to her young son. "You ain't shit. You just like

your daddy. You don't do shit and you're never gonna amount to shit. All you ever do around

here is eat, sleep, and shit. Look at this place. Way ya'll act, ya'll must think I'm the maid." The

harsh and demeaning language that Doughboy's mother uses towards her ten-year old child

invites audiences to immediately scorn her parenting tactics as ineffective, and indicative of a

future criminal nature in her children that Furious predicts just minutes before. While Douhgboy

and Ricky never explicitly join a gang, Doughboy's criminality and eventual incarceration, and

Ricky's death at the hands of a gang is seemingly explained through the absence of a father and

the ineffective parenting of their mother. By juxtaposing Furious and Tre's conversation that

emphasized respect and responsibility with this conversation that displays anything but that, the

audience is prepared to endure the effects of her parenting and view her children's eventual

descent into the criminal underworld as a product of such.[200]

Furious further communicates the power and responsibility incumbent on good parenting

while fishing with Tre. After asking his son what he knows about sex, Furious reminds him that

"any fool with a dick can make a baby but only a real man can raise his children."[201] He follows

with a look into his past:

> I wasn't but seventeen when your mother was pregnant with you. All my friends
> was dropping out of high school, hanging out on corners in front of liquor stores,
> getting drunk, getting high. Some of them was robbing people. Some of them was
> even killing people...Anyway, I wanted to be somebody you could look up to.

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[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid.

By describing his own decision to avoid criminality to become a good parent as a rarity among his friends who were doing otherwise, the film implies criminality is a choice, and one that unfortunately many black youths choose. The film explicitly characterizes the typical black youth experience as criminal, reinforcing racist assumptions that justified the policing of black youths who appeared to be criminal based solely on their skin color and neighborhood they lived in. However, the film also celebrates the choice that Furious makes to eschew criminality in lieu of raising his son, which reinforces the power good black fathers held to structure the lives of their children away from gang violence. By portraying the productive power of a successful black father, this film resurfaces notions of black cultural pathology which castigated the majority of black fathers for abandoning their children. And because this film claims that Furious' presence in his child's life is an outlier, this film implicitly suggests that most black fathers are absent, entrapped in deviant livelihoods and cycles of criminality and incarceration. While portrayed in less explicitly racist depictions, this scene retooled conservative ideas propagated in the Moynihan Report for the present moment. The scenes that the filmmakers choose to show in the most formative years of Tre, Ricky, and Doughboy's lives are important. They communicate the true and disparate impact of parenting on youth development and will later prove to be the evidentiary roots that explain the choices that define the triumphs and tragedies of the rest of the film.[202]

After the film transitions to depicting the three youths in their final year of high school, the power of good parenting to influence youth's decisions on gang involvement is tested in the climactic moments of *Boyz n the Hood*. Seething with furious anger and sadness, Tre decides to seek vengeance on the gang that killed Ricky. He storms into his house pushing back tears that

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[202] Ibid.

are streaming from his eyes and grabs his handgun. Furious stops Tre before he can go and imposes his presence on the angry and horrified young man who just lost his best friend to the gang violence endemic to the inner city.

> Furious: Oh you bad now huh? You bad. You gotta shoot somebody now, huh? Well here I am. Come on, shoot me. You bad right? Look, I'm sorry about your friend. My heart goes out to their mother and his family but that's their problem, Tre. You my son, you my problem. I want you to give me the gun... Oh I see. You want to end up like little Chris in a wheelchair, right? No, no you want to end up like Doughboy, huh? Give me the mother fucking gun, Tre...You're my only son, and I'm not gonna lose you to no bullshit, you hear? I love you man.[203]

In the face of a profound and unprovoked act of gang violence, Furious' parenting and Tre's decision making is ultimately tested through the climactic moments of the film. If successful, the monologue communicates the power good parenting wields to stop the cycles of black violence and death that so pervasively afflict the inner city. Even though it seems like Furious' stern parenting has initially prevented a poor decision, Tre grabs the gun and leaves moments after his father's lecture. The following scene is filled with suspense. Furious sits in his living room, rolling metal balls between his hands, contemplating his work as a father and role model. Intertwined is the image of Tre riding in the back of Doughboy's car as they drive down the street seeking vengeance. The film switches back and forth between images of father and son, directly linking Furious' parenting with Tre's choices that will follow.

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[203] Ibid.

It is almost as if Furious is attempting to control Tre indirectly, infecting his consciousness with the lessons and values that Furious has spent seven years teaching him. Tears stream down Tre's face as he watches Monster load the shotgun. Conflicted, Tre finally tells Doughboy to let him out of the car. In this moment, Tre makes the ultimate decision and eschews the cycles of black violence that continuously subject black youths to criminalization, incarceration, and eventual death. The filmmakers clearly credit Furious' parenting too, for the values he has instilled in Tre have effectively led him to weigh the consequences of gang violence, and ultimately choose otherwise. While showing the positive effects of good parenting, this moment also suggests participation in gang violence is a choice. While Doughboy may not be smart enough to avoid seeking revenge, the film posits that Tre is, thus granting capacity to all black youths in the inner city to choose their relationship with the gangs that terrorize their communities. Even though gang violence may afflict those who innocently live within the orbit of their activities, the decision to contribute to that violence, the filmmakers argue, is a choice that can be influenced by parenting and has profound implications. While Tre exits the vehicle, realizing his future is not worth the vengeance he might enact, Doughboy chooses otherwise, and violently murders the three gang members that killed his brother. Despite the separation that the film places between the youth gang and Doughboy in order to truly enmesh gangs in a shroud of "otherness," Doughboy's criminal retaliation is posited as a tragic choice that could have been prevented by the support and parenting of a father.[204]

The final image of the film shows the effects of the youths' decisions. As Doughboy walks away from Tre's yard back home, a caption appears- "The next day Doughboy saw his brother buried. Two weeks later he was murdered. In the fall, Tre went to Morehouse College in

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[204] Ibid.

Atlanta, Georgia. With Brandi across the way at Spelman College."[205] By describing the future

of the characters, the filmmakers clearly communicate the effects of their experiences in South

Central on their lives beyond their youth. By contributing to the cycles of gang violence,

Doughboy becomes enmeshed within it, ultimately leading to his death weeks later. His choice,

which the film posits as partially a result of misguided parenting, ultimately lead to the continued

violence that afflicts South Central. Juxtaposing Doughboy's death, however, is Tre and Brandi's

success, which is ultimately posited as a result of his decision to not seek out vengeance,

diligently opposing tempting criminal forces. Through the film's final sequences, the filmmakers

imagine a way out of the hood. While the negative effects of gentrification and the lack of jobs

are referenced throughout the film, these explanations of crime are subverted by narratives

advocating for the power of good parenting to influence youths' choices. Ultimately, even

though gang violence and police violence structure the contours of youth existence, good role

models have the power to create youngsters who avoid their consequences. While the film may

chide brutal police officers and violent gangs for the adverse conditions they afflict on to

innocent black families, the film ultimately argues that personal responsibility and family values

are the solution to conditions that trap youths in these cycles of violence. By doing so, this film,

and *Colors* along with it, offer a perspective that blames adverse conditions for subjecting

neighborhoods to undue violence, yet ultimately, places responsibility on the community

themselves to transcend those conditions.[206]

Conclusion

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[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.

The youth gang films of the mid 1980s in to the early 1990s produced an imagined gang much more powerful and violent than previous films did. *Youngblood*, *The Warriors*, and *Boulevard Nights* characterized youth gangs as endemic to their urban environment, offering a fatalistic view on black youths who grew up in their purview. While these films contended that the blighted city was to blame for an inherently criminal existence, they offered no solutions for youths to exit the gang violence which they constructed as inevitable. In contrast, *Suburbia*, *Colors*, and *Boyz n the Hood* depicted gangs which had expanded in scope, influence and violence, reaching beyond the city and affecting the lives of all Americans. The inclusion of drugs and depictions of youth gangs existing beyond the city produced an image of a more insidious gang, threatening to affect all American life. The expanded scope of gangs warranted a War on Drugs, which in these films, was depicted to enmesh innocent black communities in a militarized battle between cops and gangs. And despite the sympathy the films invite, by placing youth gangs at a distance from the main characters, the filmmakers invited audiences to view those characters as inherently criminal, claiming that good decisions influenced by strong families were the only way to truly escape a life of crime. While these films offered liberal sentiments by chastising the brutality that cops and gangs afflicted on black communities, they ultimately offered no clear solutions to the structural problems that afflicted these neighborhoods. To these films, the answer was similar to the one posited by DARE- "just say no." And if you said yes, to being in a gang, selling drugs, or doing both, then that indicated an irredeemable, reprehensible criminal nature. The only way for American society to deal with these inherently criminal subjects was to lock them up. By blaming the people instead of the systems they were trapped within, these films justified the age of mass incarceration in the American popular consciousness.

Epilogue: "Way Down in the Hole"

In 2002, writer and police reporter, David Simon, went way "down in the hole" to explore Baltimore through the institutions that corrupted the city.[207] In *The Wire* (2002-2008), the city of Baltimore was a character itself. Simon produced a slow-burning, episodic and serialized depiction of Baltimore, showing the institutions that fueled the city and the people who comprised them. "Whether he was exploring police departments, drug cartels, labor unions, the school system, newspapers or city hall," Simon was most interested in the connective thread- the wire- between these institutions and the city.[208] *The Wire* was explicitly not interested in individuals but instead, devoted its seasons to the structures and systems that corrupted and decayed Baltimore. Writer, Peter Clansfield, noted that *The Wire* approached the urban environment differently than its predecessors. In lieu of persistent depictions of cities as economically depressed landscapes of crime populated by residents portrayed as "irredeemably lawless or savage," *The Wire* focused on the "more abstract economic, political and ideological forces" that structured the city and its populations into cycles of corruption, violence, and decay.[209] In a show about the "post-industrial American tragedy," the institutions themselves and the wire that connected them all were the main characters to blame for the city in decay.[210] Unlike the films explored in this project, *The Wire* unpacked the structural causes of crime and blight in urban America, not chiding the environment as criminogenic or the people who populated it as irredeemable, but the systems that undergirded the city as corrupted. While critics

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[207] Peter Clandfield, "'We Ain't Got No Yard'": Crime, Development, and Urban Environment" in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television,* ed. by Tiffany Porter (New York: Continuum, 2009), 42.

[208] Dorian Lynskey, "The Wire, 10 years on: 'We tore the cover off a city and showed the American dream was dead,'" *The Guardian* (London, UK), Mar. 6, 2018.

[209] Clandfield, "We ain't got no yard," 38.

[210] C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Porter, "'I am the American Dream': Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction," in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television;* ed. by Tiffany Porter (New York: Continuum, 2009), 4.

and academics praise the show for its expansive scope and realistic portrayal of the city, it did

not garner popular viewership or critical acclaim when it was initially released.

The Wire suffered from low viewership throughout the entirety of its run. At the show's

peak, it garnered an audience of four million per episode, an abysmal showing compared to the

18.2 million viewers who tuned into *The Sopranos*, a mob show on HBO that same year.[211] This

begs the following question- how did a show that captured resurgent critical and academic

acclaim in the years following its conclusion amass low popularity during its run? Its exploration

of crime and urban decay is certainly not the reason. In 2002, the highest rated show was CBS's

flagship show, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, a forensics crime drama.[212] What made *The Wire*

different? Perhaps it was the small production budget, its unideal time slot, or the "boring 'anti-

drama' moments" that characterized the nuance of the show.[213] However, it seems that its

persistent display of structures, and its unabated commitment to institutions over individuals is

what simultaneously made the show unique and brilliant for some and boring for others.

The context of its creation and release is significant too. By 2002, the Violent Crime

Control and Law Enforcement Act had been law for eight years. The sweeping crime bill

allocated billions of dollars for law enforcement, prison construction, and crime prevention, and

in doing so, massively expanded the scope of the carceral state enveloping many black youths in

its wake.[214] Occurring simultaneously was a massive reduction in crime. The homicide rate fell

from 9.8 per 100,0000 in 1991 to 5.8 per 100,000 in 1999 and the violent crime rate dropped by

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[211] Eric Schall, "Why Did 'The Wire' Have Low Ratings When It First Aired on HBO?," *Cheatsheet,* February 5, 2019, https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/why-did-the-wire-have-low-ratings-when-it-first-aired-on-hbo.htm/

[212] "Top-rated United States Television Programs of 2002-03," *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Top-rated_United_States_television_programs_of_2002%E2%80%9303

[213] Schall, "Why Did 'The Wire'..."

[214] Flamm, *Law and Order,*184.

around 30 percent over that same period.[215] While incidence of crime on America's streets

plummeted, fear of crime did not. In 1994, fear of crime was at an all-time high. And as violent

crime decidedly decreased in the following decades, the American public persistently believed

that crime was increasing. In a 2010 Gallup Poll, over two-thirds of Americans said there was

more crime in the United States than there had been in the previous year and 60% of Americans

believed that crime was an "extremely" or "very serious" problem.[216] In a television series that

blamed the institutions that ran the city for crime that afflicted its spaces, perhaps *The Wire*'s

choice to shift the blame away from criminals was its downfall given the context. Perhaps its

persistent dedication to structures and humanizing perceptions of criminals made it unpalatable

to wider American audiences. While its popularity during its original run was minimal, perhaps

the decreasing incidence of crime that contextualized the series provided the cultural space for a

show centering urban institutions to gain critical and academic acclaim. While these explanations

are largely conjecture, what is sure is *The Wire*'s structuralist approach to portraying crime and

blight in America's cities is distinct from the environmental and individual ideologies that

propelled previous cultural productions.

In the 1970s, films portrayed the criminogenic nature of the city in ways that appeared

liberal, however their depictions of these spaces as confining and perverse stoked fears of black

youth criminals co-opted by conservatives. The fatalistic perspectives these films offered, pre-

determining a life of gang crime for their youths, justified the policing of urban space. However,

the harsh policing of space turned into the mass criminalization of people. Beginning in the

1980s and into the 1990s, films showed the potential of more violent and resourceful gangs with

[215] Ibid.
[216] Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans Still Perceive Crime as on the Rise," Gallup.com (Gallup, March 23, 2021), https://news.gallup.com/poll/144827/americans-perceive-crime-rise.aspx

access to drug markets. These hyper-violent gangs were met with militarized police in ways that ensnared innocent black communities caught in the middle in cycles of criminalization, violence and death. While these films appeared to be liberal through the sympathies they offered their characters, the solutions to crime they imagined were inspired by anti-structuralist narratives that advanced productive black families and good choices as the only way to exit the inner city. By refusing to address the structural causes to crime like economic disinvestment, lack of education, or gentrification (among others) and instead focusing on environmental causes and individual causes, these films implicitly advocated for conservative solutions to stopping crime and advanced the myth of perverse cities and the black, criminal youths that populated them in the American imagination. While *The Wire* still reinforced mythologies of the decaying and corrupt city in the popular consciousness, the causes and solutions it imagined reflected structuralist perspectives that offered the city and its populations hope for reform.

On March 24th, 2021, thirty-nine years after "Broken Windows" was written, an article titled "Why America's Great Clime Decline Is Over" was published in *The Atlantic*.[217] In it, staff writer Derek Thompson argued that "Americans are experiencing a crime wave unlike anything we've seen this century" and interviews sociologist Patrick Sharkey, who claims that the current increase in violence is concentrated in communities that have experienced disinvestment and a lack of institutional support.[218] While a few years of data is not necessarily predictive of long-term trends, if crime does continue increase to a varying degree, culture will respond. When youth crime increased in the 1970s, cultural productions of youth gangs reinforced the myth of the urban, black youth criminal. The question then becomes, who or what will we blame now?

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[217] Derek Thompson, "Why America's Great Crime Decline Is Over," *The Atlantic,* Mar. 24, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/is-americas-great-crime-decline-over/618381/
[218] Ibid.

Will an increase in crime lead to a resurgence in popular productions of criminogenic spaces? Or will films blame cultural pathologies or inherently criminal black youths? While the future is uncertain, the youth gang films between 1973 and 1994 indicate the culture we produce and consume has implications that span far beyond the screen.

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