The story of John Turner

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I MET John Turner (a pseudonym), a twenty-one-year-old black man, a week before Thanksgiving in 1985. It was about two-thirty in the afternoon, and I was in a carry-out restaurant I regularly patronize. I had noticed this person behind the counter, in the kitchen, sweeping the floor, and busing tables, but I had not thought much about him. On this particular day, he stopped me, excused himself, and asked if he might have a word with me. I was surprised, but I said, “Sure. What do you want to talk about?” As he began relating what was on his mind, I saw that his story was relevant to more general social issues with which I am seriously concerned, and I asked his permission to tape the conversation. He consented.

Adapted from a chapter in Adele V. Harrell and George E. Peterson, eds., Drugs, Crime, and Social Isolation: Barriers to Urban Opportunity (Urban Institute Press, 1992). None of the individuals in this account, except the author, are referred to by their real names.
John Turner was in "deep trouble" with the law. He was scheduled to appear for a court hearing in less than a week on charges that he had violated probation. He was very upset and was considering leaving town for Mobile, Alabama, where many of his "people" (relatives) lived. He said he would almost rather do this than appear "before the judge again," because he was sure the judge would send him away to prison for five years. I tried to advise him of the possible consequences of not appearing before the judge, saying he would be a fugitive from justice, in which case he would probably be hunted by the authorities; in any case, he would feel hunted. I pressed him to continue with his story.

John began with the history leading up to his predicament. He said that about two years earlier, he was seeing a young woman who lived outside his own neighborhood, in a territory of a rival group of boys. Philadelphia is said to be a "city of neighborhoods," but more than this, the young men of many individual streets organize informally bounded areas into territories. Then they guard the territories, defending them against the intrusions and whims of outsiders. These territories can become extensive, involving numerous other boys who then form larger corporate units that lend a certain structure to the general neighborhoods. Each neighborhood unit is responsible for the public behavior occurring within its boundaries. Members of the unit police the streets, harassing outsiders and strangers. It is not uncommon for a young man to walk up to a complete stranger, particularly a young male, and inquire about his business on the street or about who gave him permission to use these particular streets. If there is no acceptable answer, there may be a fight. The behavior of these young men has an impact on the crime rate of the respective areas; at times they commit the crime, at other times they discourage it. If they like a neighbor, they may protect him from assault; if they dislike him, they may rob his house or indicate to others that his house or car is fair game.

Local male groups claim responsibility over the women in the area, especially if they are young. These women are seen as their possessions, at times to be argued over and even fought over. When a young man from outside the neighborhood attempts "to go with" or date a young woman from the neighborhood, he must usually answer to the boys' group, negotiating for their permission first. Otherwise, members of the group, including some of the women themselves, may consider it wrong to date an outsider. Women
who deviate from these expectations may be subjected to social control in the form of harassment by both young men and young women. The young men come to see themselves as the women's protectors, if not their heroes.

**Trouble**

As indicated above, it so happened that John Turner was seeing a young woman in a neighborhood adjacent to his own. The woman was being harassed by some of the young men and women of her neighborhood, and over a number of days they had been "bothering her." The young people would gather around her house, sit and stand outside, tease her and call her names. Upset, she would call John and inform him of the situation, and he would feel compelled to respond in some way. Sometimes he would go to her.

John is a high school graduate, a former halfback for the football team, and he has "done a lil' boxing." He is about five feet, nine inches tall and weighs about 165 pounds; he is built like a prize high school football running back. He likes to dress in fashionable navy blue or dark green FILA athletic suits, designer jeans, T-shirts, jackets, and expensive, clean white "sneaks." In this uniform, he is a striking figure on the streets.

At twenty-one years of age, John was the father of four children out of wedlock. He had two sons who were born a few months apart by different women, one daughter by the mother of one of the sons, and another son by a third woman.

John said of his own parents' relationship:

He [John's father] left seven years ago, and he don't have much to do with us. That's between my mom and dad. That's them. I'm grown, now, and I try to help my mom as much as I can, 'cause I'm all she got. I'm her oldest son. My brother is just a baby. He got epilepsy. And my sister, she a woman, and she can only be so strong.

John had a reputation as a "runner" (gang leader), for "running" his own neighborhood with the help of his boys, although, at the time I met him, he claimed he had "left that life alone." As proof of his gang days, he had a four-inch knife scar on the back of his neck, a gash left by a gunshot wound on his leg, and numerous scars on his hands and knuckles indicating the many incidents of street violence to which he had been a willing or unwilling party. He spoke of occasions on which he had fought three and four men at a time and won.
At about eight o'clock on the night in question, his girlfriend, Audrey, who lived with her mother in the adjacent gang territory, called John and said she was being harassed by some of the young men and women of the neighborhood. John, being “a man,” told her not to worry, that he would come over and see about it. Because the young men of the neighborhood had fought with him before, and with his experience of the streets, John knew there was a good chance for trouble that night. He wanted to take a measure of protection; he did “not want to be hurt again or killed by these guys.” So before leaving he put his mother’s derringer pistol in his pocket. He did “not want to hurt anybody, but just wanted to scare them if I had to.”

At about nine o'clock that night, on the way to the home of his girlfriend, John spied a commotion on the street: police cars with flashing lights, policemen and residents standing around. Almost a block away, he began to tense up and instinctively ditched the pistol under a parked car.

Confronted with this situation, he expected to be stopped and frisked, and indeed he was. He cooperated. When the police demanded identification, he dutifully gave it. They asked his destination and he told them. But then a woman who had seen John throw something away spoke up: “Officer, that young man threw something under the car back there.” The policemen searched under the car and found the pistol. “Is this yours?” they asked him. “Yeah,” he said, “it’s mine.” He told the policemen that he feared he would be attacked by a group in that neighborhood, young men who had stabbed him in the neck before. He explained that he was not “out to hurt nobody, but just wanted to scare them if I had to.” John figured that if he cooperated, if he were “a man about it and told the truth that they’d maybe let me go.” But he also felt he had little choice; since the pistol belonged to his mother, he thought they could trace it to him anyway. “So I told the truth.”

**Arrested and sentenced**

But instead of releasing him, the police arrested John for illegal possession of a firearm, even though they “understood” he was telling the truth, that his story was plausible. It was not that unusual for a young black man in that neighborhood to carry a pistol around “for protection.” John says they were impressed by his cooperation and by his politeness. They had determined that he wasn’t the person they were looking for, but because he had bro-
ken the law, they said, "We have to arrest you." At his court hearing, the policemen appeared and even spoke on John's behalf, saying to the judge, "He's a good young man. He did what he was told, and didn't act smart."

But the judge gave John five years' probation and a $500 fine. John gave me the following account:

I went to court by myself, with the public defender. They didn't even tell me that I had to get a public defender. When I went there, the public defender was there. He was lookin' for me. When the case came and he seen me get up, he said, "Oh, you Mr. Turner." He rushed me, rushed me through. I didn't know anything about this. This was my first time ever being locked up. I don't have a juvenile record. [This was] just like taking somebody out of college and throwing them in jail and expect for them to know what to do. I didn't know what to do, man. I didn't know I had to get a public defender. I didn't know these procedures to go through. I never been on probation, I never had to report to nobody. This is new to me, man. I could see it if I was an everyday criminal doing this as a everyday thing, but you just can't take somebody off the street and label them and put them in an environment that they don't even know anything about. Understand what I'm saying? And you know what? I woulda' did better working by myself. He [the public defender] just came at me with bullshit. And he didn't do no good but made things worse for me. He tried to get me to lie to the judge. When I told him I wanted to plead guilty, he said, "They ain't got nothing against you, they can't say it [the pistol] was yours, tell him it wasn't yours." I said to him, "Man, I'm not going in there lying. 'Cause if he find out I'm lying, I might get worse treatment than I'm gettin' now." So I told the truth. My grandmother always told me, "Tell the truth and shame the devil." Know what? I shoulda told a lie! 'Cause if I woulda' had no probation. They couldn't a pinned it on me, 'cause he didn't have no proof. But nowadays, you tell the truth, it's just as worse if you had hung yourself, and I told the truth. I found out that my mom bought the gun in Virginia and didn't register it, so they couldn't a traced it back to nobody. They asked for the receipt for the gun, but my mom said, "Let them go on and keep the gun." They gave me a green sheet for me to come back and get the gun. My mom bring the receipt with the numbers on it and everything. My mom have it at home, now. My mom say, "I think it's best for them to keep the gun. Then there won't be no more trouble."

During the hearing John protested the sentence, saying that he had three children to support. (At that point in his life, John had only three children. By the time I met him, he had a fourth, a premature daughter who had just been born, and now he has several more.) The judge said in reply, "What am I to do? Lots of
criminals have children.” And John responded, raising his voice, “You’re wrong, judge. I’m not a criminal! I’m not a criminal.”

John was then assigned a black female probation officer who was about twenty-seven years of age. John says that because he was unemployed at this time, he was unable to pay his fine on time, yet the probation officer held him accountable for this. Concerned about John’s fine, his mother, who worked at a major pharmaceutical company based in the Philadelphia area, became involved and got him “on at her job” as a “lab technician, handling urine samples. It was the best job I ever had in my life. I was making $16,000 a year, which is pretty good for a young black man.”

As he began working and bringing home a steady income, John was able to purchase an automobile, date young women, and become a popular person within his own peer group. But during this time, his relationship with his probation officer began to sour. He claims they had something of an informal relationship, whereby if he could not appear at her office, then he would call. She would also call him to set up meetings at his home, but when she would arrive, he might be outside in front of his house, or at times she would miss him altogether. This would go into her report along with something like “found in the street,” John said.

One evening, approximately a year after his initial encounter with the law, John was stopped for a traffic violation. The policeman ran a computer check on him and found there was a “detainer” on John, that he was wanted by the police. Evidently he had not paid his fine. So the policeman arrested him, took him to jail, and booked him. By his own account, John remained in jail for approximately two weeks without notification of his family. This was during Thanksgiving of 1984, which John says was “very sad around my house since I wasn’t there.”

Finally he had a hearing before the judge who had originally sentenced him. The judge asked him if he was presently employed, to which he answered yes. The judge wanted to know the name of his employer and John gave the name of the pharmaceutical company. To this the judge responded, “Then you must make a good salary. Your fine is $1,300, and you must spend thirteen weekends in jail.” John said his probation officer did not speak up for him and remained silent during the whole proceeding.

In the course of all this, John’s employer said he must quit his job “temporarily,” until his legal difficulties were resolved. Thus, he quit his job and spent his weekends in jail, but after serving his
time there was no job waiting for him and he was left unemployed. John then began looking for a job unsuccessfully for many weeks. The various places where he inquired told him they needed no help or that they would call him. As his best efforts repeatedly proved unsuccessful, he became increasingly demoralized.

**Problems at work**

Finally, after much looking, John found a job as a busboy at an Italian restaurant at the minimum wage. His duties included busing tables, mopping floors, peeling potatoes, and general "prep work" for the restaurant. In this job, John said, he was paid about $100 per week. Though his work shift varied, he often worked seven days a week, usually from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. or so. Further, his pay was reportedly irregular; his employer at times paid him on Monday, then on Friday, or gave him $50 on Friday, then another $50 on Monday. John found that he sometimes had to argue with his boss for his pay. Also, on this job he had to endure the insults of his Italian co-workers. John said:

> These people right off the boat have no respect for blacks. They would call me nigger right on the job. They were always messing with me. Now, the boss was a good man. He liked me, and we got along, but the rest of 'em didn't give a care about me, and would call me out of my name.

John is the type of person who is used to settling and resolving disputes physically, and when the other person is "wrong," he must be made to answer to "justice." Once one of the young white men of the restaurant was riding him, so John invited him outside to "settle it in the parking lot." When they went to the lot, John began to talk and when this did not "work," he punched the other employee in the face and "busted his lip." The next day, reportedly, the boss very reluctantly told John not to take off his coat, that he was fired. John then was unemployed for a few days before the boss called him back, mainly because he was such a "good worker." But John felt that in general the people of the restaurant were prejudiced against him.

This perception made his work there very stressful, for while he wanted to lash out at people he defined as adversaries, he also had to keep the job for his family, including his mother, his sister, his epileptic brother, his girlfriend, and his children. He also needed money to pay his fine, which he claims he was not always able to
do on time, and (as indicated above) this led to other difficulties with his probation officer. Feeling trapped in his job, John didn’t know what to do; he simply endured.

Because of his problems paying his fine, John told me he had to go before the judge again, a judge who had the reputation, even among the police, of “hanging young black males.” John was all but certain that the judge would send him away for five years. In an earlier encounter, he had seen the judge and the public defender “laugh at me. They don’t mean me no good.” At this point John had very little faith in the criminal justice system, particularly as it applied to black males.

By the time I met John Turner, he had stepped into the role of his absent father. With the prospect of a jail term looming, he said:

I got to help out at home as much as I can. My mom, she don’t have a boyfriend, she don’t have a fiancé. I’m all she got. I’m her oldest male child, and she depends on me. I’m her backbone.... Now, I don’t mind going to jail. I mean, I can take it. I’m a man. I’m not scared of jail. It’s my family. They need me. I make just $400 a month, and I use it to help make ends meet for my family. I bring home every penny I can. I can’t go to jail. But I just don’t know what to do now.

A day in court

Intrigued by his story and wanting to render whatever assistance I could, I offered to contact an attorney for John, while advising him that if he fled he would be a fugitive.

I then contacted an attorney I knew, Leonard Segal, a partner at a prestigious law firm in Philadelphia’s Center City, and told him about John. I gave him John’s telephone number, and he called John. After hearing John’s story, Segal told John, “Don’t you worry about a thing. You’re not going anywhere. I’ll take the case.” Then John said, “How much is it gon’ cost me?” “Absolutely nothing,” Segal replied. John was somewhat skeptical but very happy about the prospect of real legal assistance.

Because the case came before Segal on short notice, with two days before the hearing, Segal had a schedule conflict and had to be out of town on the day of the hearing. He told John that he should look out for a female public defender whom Segal knew, that this person was to represent John. He reassured John that he would be on the case, but John was clearly worried and nervous.
The story of John's life thus far seemed to be about people letting him down. Thus, in this situation he expected to be let down again.

Early on Wednesday morning, the day of the hearing, John called me to convey this discouraging news. In addition, he informed me that Segal had asked him if he had any money, feeling that meant Segal would want to be paid after all. I assured him that this was not the case, that Segal probably wanted to know if he had money with which to pay the fine, if necessary. John seemed to relax with that explanation.

However, he needed my support and was obviously worried that even I might not show up at the hearing as I had promised. I reassured him, "Don't worry. I'll be there. Listen, no matter what happens, I'll stay on the case, even if you do have to go away [his euphemism for going to jail]."

Because of heavy traffic, I arrived at City Hall, where the hearing was to be held, at five past nine, five minutes after the hearing was to have begun. I rushed up the stairs to the courtroom. As I approached the courtroom, I saw John, his mother, and others standing outside. John's mother was about forty-five years old, but she seemed tired this morning and looked much older. She was dressed in a dark green dress. Her lips were painted dark red, and her fingernails matched. She smelled of perfume.

I could see John's eyes brighten as he moved toward me. He seemed to come to life. He smiled, "Hey, Eli," and he shook my hand. I returned his greeting. John was dressed in an old parka, a "gangster cap," and boots. I wondered why he had not come to court dressed in more formal attire, and a few days later I asked him about this. His reply was, "The judge might've thought I had some money or something so I just cooled it."

As I approached, John said to his mother, "Hey, Mom, this is the professor." She looked at me with a half smile and extended her hand, "Hi, Eli. Thank you so much for what you're doing for John. His father has not done right by these kids, and I'm all alone. Thank you so much for helping us out." John's mother was somewhat familiar with me, acting as though she had known me for a long time. But she was genuinely appreciative.

After a while, I asked John about the public defender. "He's in there," he said, pointing toward the courtroom door. I had expected a female because of Leonard Segal's instructions, so I was surprised to find that John's counsel was a man. As I walked into the courtroom, John followed and pointed out a thirty-five-year-old
white man dressed in a dark gray pin-striped suit, sitting in the front of the courtroom. By now, we were standing around in the back of the room talking. The proceedings had not yet begun, and there were many other cases to be heard. There must have been about forty people in the room. Soon the lawyer got up and started toward us.

Dressed in a brown tweed jacket with a tie, I introduced myself: "I'm Professor Elijah Anderson of the University of Pennsylvania and I'm here on behalf of John Turner. I'm very much concerned that we do all we can for him." He said, "I'm George Bramson, and I'm associated with Leonard Segal's law firm. I arrived at the office this morning and saw this piece of paper that said 'Get over to City Hall and see about John Turner.' So I'm here."

I was very happy to see the lawyer there. But he gave the impression that he felt he had better things to do than spend his morning defending John Turner. He kept looking at his watch and he mentioned he had a deposition to take at ten-thirty. It was now nine-thirty, and I became concerned that he might not have time to see John's case through this morning. Moreover, I gained the distinct impression that Bramson was not comfortable defending John Turner.

**Giving Turner a chance**

As Bramson and I talked, the others left for seats nearer the front of the room. Bramson and I spoke about "the situation" of the courtroom and the likes of the people here. I got the impression that Bramson was very ready to assume that everything was all John's fault. He didn't say it, but he strongly implied that John was irresponsible and he expected me to agree with him, which I did not. But I didn't say so because I felt John's case was compromised enough; the last thing I wanted to do was to alienate the attorney. Bramson said, "It seems that John doesn't listen to people, and he's failed a number of times to fulfill his probationary obligations." My view of John was more sympathetic. I felt he was a somewhat confused young black man in trouble, and to some extent a victim of his circumstances. Although not entirely blameless, he was a person who needed a chance and a helping hand of support; he was like a fly stuck on flypaper, and the more he struggled to get off, the more stuck he seemed to become. But the lawyer's view seemed hardened.
Finally I said, "Do you think the judge will lock him up?"
"Well, I don't know. A lot of it's up to his probation officer," he said, nodding toward the front of the room. I looked at her and asked, "Have you tried to talk with her?" "Yeah, and she's really against him," he said. "Think it'll do any good if I speak with her?" I asked. "You can try, see what happens," he said.

With that I went up to her and introduced myself. She offered a friendly smile and extended her hand, which I shook. "I'm here on behalf of John Turner, and I'm trying to do all I can for him. Can we talk?" I proposed. But with the mention of John Turner's name her expression changed completely as she coolly shook her head from side to side, and returned to her paper. Barely glancing at me, she said, "It's out of my hands now. It's up to the judge." She didn't look up again. I left and returned to Bramson. He said again, "Well, you know, a lot depends on her. My plan is simply to argue for a continuance so that when Leonard Segal returns he can take it from there." That left me wondering what would happen and fearing the worst. We waited.

At nine-thirty the judge had yet to arrive. Then we got word that he would be delayed and another judge would sit in his place. Bramson was cheered by this, for there was a good chance that the new judge would not be as arbitrary as the original "hanging judge." Meanwhile, a number of other cases went before ours. And we waited. Bramson mentioned that there was a good chance we would be able to get a continuance, if not some resolution of the matter. The large courtroom was abuzz with people. We sat off to the side of the room, reading newspapers, drinking coffee, and making small but quiet talk.

Finally, at ten-thirty, the acting judge called John Turner. I asked Bramson if I should approach the bench with them. He said, "No, but give me your title again.... I'll use you as a character reference in my appeal." Bramson, John, and his mother approached the bench. From the other side of the room, John's probation officer rose and moved toward the bench.

Bramson presented John Turner's case, asking for a continuance of the case until a time when Leonard Segal could take it. The judge looked over at the probation officer and said, "And what do you think of that, Ms. Johnson?" She replied, "No! No, your honor. This is his fifth time for messing up. No." (Actually this was his third time before the judge.) She was adamant. The judge concurred: "We'll have to wait for Judge Hoffman. He'll be in
later this morning." Those gathered before the judge dispersed. Bramson approached me, saying, "Holy cow, you may as well get ready to spend the whole morning here." He was perturbed, for it meant missing his scheduled business for the morning. Yet he felt constrained to be there since his boss, Segal, had directed him to come. He left to make phone calls to rearrange his day. I was very grateful he planned to remain. I made my own phone calls. Then we waited and waited, watching other cases pass.

Finally Judge Hoffman himself arrived, and right away he began living up to his reputation for highly unconventional behavior on the bench. For instance, on this day, right before John’s case, he called one man who was at home in his sickbed and accused him of being absent from court only because of the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. He made a big show of this, and spectators in the courtroom were laughing at his antics. Bramson chuckled but also shook his head in apparent rejection of such behavior in a judge.

Finally the judge called John Turner. Again Bramson, John, and his mother rose and walked to the bench. The probation officer joined them. Judge Hoffman’s performance this time was completely unexpected. He seemed very respectful to John’s mother. "What a lovely mother you have, Mr. Turner," he said, nodding appreciatively. The lawyer, Bramson, made his appeal, but the judge rejected it out of hand, saying it was unnecessary. He said, "Young man, I’m going to give you a new probation officer. Now, I want you to report to your probation officer weekly and pay your fine on time. You must pay $100 per month. Now, if you don’t do this, you’re going to have to see me again. I don’t want that to happen. You do as you are told, and everything will be fine," he lectured. The judge seemed nice and very different from what I had been led to expect. (I suspect, however, that if John had had an ordinary public defender, the case would have been handled less sympathetically than it was.)

When the hearing was over, at twelve-thirty, John’s mother, Bramson, John, a few others, and I all felt very relieved at the outcome. We met in the corridor, and the lawyer began to lecture John, reiterating some of what the judge had said. John listened attentively and nodded his head in agreement. His mother was also attentive. We then thanked the attorney, said our goodbyes, and dispersed.
Finding a union job

John returned to work at the Italian restaurant/carry-out, and his employer welcomed him. In many ways John was a very good worker, reliable, punctual, and honest. On occasion, to keep up with him, I would visit the carry-out and observe him there, mopping floors, busing tables, or preparing food. He would give me the latest on his situation, telling me about his desire “to do better in life” and saying how grateful he was that I had helped him out in his time of need. I was moved when he told me he had prayed and thanked God that I had come into his life and helped him. He said, “I didn’t think people did that anymore.”

As time passed, John appeared to be getting on fine, although he seemed always to be working. His fine was $100 per month, and his salary was not much more than $400. With this money, he was expected to help his mother, which he was very proud to do, and contribute to the support of his four children by three different women, which he did in the form of irregular small payments to their mothers. His employment at the restaurant did not include benefits of any kind. And John said he worried a great deal about what would happen if one of his children had an accident or came down with a serious illness. Because he made an effort to support his children financially, he conceived of himself as a responsible father; he simply wished to make more money.

Hence, John began actively looking for a better job, searching seriously but to no avail. In time, he concluded, “It’s hard out here for a young black male. I’m telling you.” Repeatedly, prospective employers would allow him to put in an application but would never call. As this was happening, John was facing increasing tensions with his fellow employees. He complained that they would sometimes pick on him and taunt him “because they know I can’t fight back. I need this job and they know it. They know I won’t hit back, we do argue a lot.” Although John had problems with his coworkers, he got along well with his boss, the proprietor of the restaurant, who said of him: “Yeah, John is a good worker. He’s all right. He’s just young and he has something of a temper. But he’s a good worker. He always comes on time. He listens to me. I like him. He’s a good boy.”

Seeing that John was having such a difficult time, I thought I would look into the matter and see if I could help him find a better employment situation. I contacted Curtis Hardy, a sixty-year-old
black union steward at a hospital in West Philadelphia whom I had known for about five years. Curtis is married and has three children, two of whom have graduated from college. Arriving in Philadelphia from North Carolina some twenty-five years ago, Curtis now lives in Germantown, a racially and class-mixed area of the city. After rising to union steward he has a real sense of accomplishment on his job. For him, the work ethic is very important, and he has placed great emphasis on it in raising his children.

Approaching Curtis about John's situation, I told him I knew a young black man who badly needed a job. I mentioned John's difficulties and said I thought he needed a break. But Curtis seemed hesitant. He said, "I been burned too many times now." I persisted, trying to make a case for John. I told him John was twenty-one years old, was supporting four children out of wedlock, was well built physically, and was a good worker. I told Curtis that the new job might be a real turning point in John's life. Instead of $3.50 per hour, he would be earning $8.50, and he would experience a kind of job security he had never had before, not to mention excellent dental and health benefits for his children. After a while, Curtis was still skeptical but relented and said, "All right, tell him to go to the union hall on Tuesday and look for Joe Harris. Say I sent him. And tell him not to mess me up."

I was very pleased, but I noted Curtis's reluctance and his concern about being "messed up." Could such concerns be important in some way to the noted lack of networking among black people today? What did he mean by having "been burned too many times?" It was clear that I was asking him to vouch for someone he believed to be at risk.

**Trust and insecurity**

It may be that black people who sponsor someone like John Turner are concerned on at least two levels. On the one hand, because of the peculiar history of race in our society, they may sense their hold on their own position to be somewhat tenuous. They themselves have had to wage a serious and often fruitless campaign for the full trust of employers and fellow workers. If one is to be sponsored on the job, one must be fully trustworthy. On the other hand, there is the twin concern that another black person might easily "make you look bad." Curtis, as a union steward, was not concerned so much with losing his job. But he was concerned
about being "messed up," which for him has much to do with look-
ing bad to oneself or others, particularly relatively powerful whites
on the job. In response to these insecurities, black men such as
Curtis tend to husband their resources and are usually extremely
careful when recommending other blacks for jobs.

John was thrilled to hear about the prospect of getting a good
job. He was eager to go to the union hall, even though it was across
town and he lacked transportation. He was punctual. He spoke
with Harris, as Curtis had instructed, and was quickly signed up. It
was now a matter of waiting possibly two weeks (at the most)
before he would be hired, and he would definitely be hired; Curtis
had said so and John had faith in my word.

But a week later, I went by the restaurant/carry-out where John
worked and asked for him. His co-workers said, "He's in jail." I
was shocked. "What happened?" I asked. "Oh, he beat up his girl-
friend," one man told me. John had been calling his employer, try-
ing to get bail money, but to no avail. I didn't know what to think.
After a few days, I phoned John's home in hopes of getting infor-
mation about him. To my surprise, John himself answered the
phone. I said, "John! I heard you were in jail. What happened? .... I
was in jail," he said. "I just got out." "What happened?" John told
me:

Well, see, this girl, the girl who's the mother of my one son, Teddy.
See, I drove my girlfriend's car by her house with my other son [by
another woman] with me. I parked the car down the street from her
house and everything. So, I took John, Jr. [his son] up to the house to
see his brother, and we talk for awhile. But when I got ready to leave,
she and her girlfriend followed me to the car. I got in the car and put
John in. Then she threw a brick through the window. Glass was flying
everywhere. My little son coulda got cut by it. So, I got out of the car
and went around and slapped the shit out of her. She knew better than
that. I didn't really beat her, I just slapped her. Then she went home
and told her momma that I beat her up in front of her girlfriend. So
then her momma got all hot and called the cops, and they came and
got me. They locked me up for four days, Eli. It's a trip. Eli, you got to
see that place. We got to talk about it. There were like sixteen guys in
one cell, all black guys. It's a shame, man. I ain't no criminal, I don't
belong there. It's terrible. I think I got this bad cold from being in
there. [He was currently suffering from the flu.] But then my mother
talked with her mother, told her what really happened, and then her
mother understood. So, she talked her daughter into dropping the
charges. So they let me out. But I'm out now, Eli. I'll tell you about it.
Oh, Eli, the hospital called me. I'm supposed to start work on Monday.
I congratulated him on the prospect of his new job, but I began to be a bit apprehensive, having second thoughts about John and all I was trying to do for him.

Within a week, John was hired as a janitor at the hospital. He was an enthusiastic worker at his new job. Curtis liked him and began taking him under his wing, showing him the ropes and introducing him to the work culture. John told me that when he first met John, Curtis had lectured and warned him:

Now whatever you do, don't mess up. Good jobs are hard to come by, and you know this is a good job. You must keep your nose clean, do as you're told, come to work on time, and everything will be all right. You'll be on probation for the first thirty days, and if everything checks out, you'll be in the union. You'll be set. Do what your supervisor says, but the main thing is to do your work. If you have any problem whatsoever, come and see me. Your professor's got a lot of faith in you, boy. He thinks a lot of you. Now, don't mess him up. Don't mess him up.

After two weeks at his new job, John was a big success. When I asked Curtis for a report, it was glowing: "Yeah, he doing alright. He's a good worker, works a lot of overtime. He's always on time, do as he's told. Uh-huh, he's a good worker."

After five weeks on the job, John had a stellar work record, a fact of which he was very proud. He passed his period of probation and was admitted to the union. Getting into the union was an important milestone in John's life; he had often spoken of how good his life would be when he got into the union. "The union" had some sort of mystical appeal to John; he had never been a member of one, and he associated it with real power, independence, and job security.

More trouble

I didn't see John for almost three weeks after that, and I assumed things were going well in his life. But then one night at ten o'clock I received a telephone call from him. I was immediately concerned because he normally went to work from 4 p.m. until midnight.

"Hey, John, what's up?" I asked.
"I'm in trouble."
"What happened?"
"They tryin' to put me in jail."
"Who? What?" I asked, trying to catch up with him.
"I got home a couple days ago, and my mother hands me this piece of paper saying I have to report at three-thirty that day at the courthouse, so I did."

"What's the charge?" I asked.

"I didn't pay my fine. The judge wouldn't listen to me. And my probation officer acted like he didn't know me," John replied.

"Well, have you been making your meetings with your probation officer?" I continued.

"Yeah, I been making every meeting, once a week."

I suggested we get together and talk at the Broadway Restaurant, located in the heart of the black community. We met there. John showed up with Lionel, his half-brother, whom he had found out about from his father only two years before.

We sat down and began talking. John was very depressed. He seemed not to understand the charges against him. He repeated the story about his mother presenting him with the court order, the way the judge treated him unsympathetically, the way his new probation officer (a person with whom he thought he had a good relationship) was indifferent to him in front of the judge.

"Cause I didn't pay my fine, the judge said to me eleven to twenty-three months in jail," said John.

"Oh, no!"

"I begged him not to do it, that I would try to come up with the money, some way. Then he came down to six months in jail. He said that by not paying the fine that I was 'playing with the court.' I told him that I was trying to take care of my family and my kids. I told him I just didn't have the money. So he told me six months and gave me two days to report for incarceration. He said the best thing I could do now was to come back with some money, and if I do that then I might not have to go to jail. Man, I don't want to go to jail."

"Have you been paying on your fine at all?" I asked.

"Yeah, I paid $50, but me and my probation officer made a deal. He told me that I could pay what I could pay, and they couldn't send me away as long as I didn't have the money to pay," said John.

"But, John, you're making $8.50 an hour, you work at least forty hours a week plus overtime. You mean you couldn't pay some of your fine?" I was incredulous.

"Well, I'm trying to help my mother out. I'm trying to give money to my kids. And I been putting some money away in case
something happens. My kids. I'm saving money for their college education," said John.

"Well, John," I said, "if you don't pay your fine, you could go to jail. And if you're in jail, you won't be around to help your kids out. These people [the courts] mean business. They're serious."

John simply held his head in his hands and looked tired and sad. Lionel then backed me up, saying, "Man, why didn't you pay your fine? I don't want to see you go away. But there ain't no justice downtown, not for no black man. You got to do what they say. You shoulda paid it."

Looking forlorn, John said, "I took him [the judge] $200, and I told him I would try to get the other $1,100. It's the money for my kids' college education, but I'll take it out [of the bank]. And he [the judge] told me that if I pay my fine, then maybe I won't have to go to jail. So I'm gon' get the money. Eli, I don't want to go to jail. I got a real chance, now. The best job I ever had, and don't wanna blow it." We soon left the restaurant, and I drove Lionel and John to their respective homes.

One important consideration here is the manner in which money is spent by a person in John's circumstances. Money seems to disappear. With money, John becomes an important figure to his friends and family members. He helped his mother with her household bills. He took his girlfriend out, he bought shoes for his children, he loaned money to his friends; he simply ran through a significant portion of it. The more money John made, the more places he had to spend it. At the same time, he tried to hoard it or put a portion he thought he could afford away. And instead of paying his fine, John was saving this portion of his money at the local credit union; he had accumulated at least $1,300 there. Defending his behavior, he said he wanted to have money "in case something happens" to his children. If John, Jr. "hurts himself and has to go to the hospital, I want to be able to pay them cash money." When I asked about his medical benefits at work, he said, "They just began after I got into the union [a month after he began working]."

John, as I mentioned before, has considered himself the man of the house since his father left home seven years before I met him. In taking over his father's role, John presents himself as very responsible. He feels obligated to help his mother and siblings and to give his mother a portion of his money. When he has more, she gets more. A similar principle operates where his children are concerned. To meet this responsibility, he takes cash to his various
“girlfriends,” the mothers of his children. When he buys shoes for his children it is an action fraught with symbolic meaning, in a small measure fulfilling his role as father and provider.

The next day, John took the $1,100 to City Hall. His understanding was that if he brought the money down, he would not have to go to jail. But in reality, the judge had only said he would consider his case with new information. There was no guarantee, but a paid fine was to be a positive development. However, after paying the money, he was locked up and placed in jail for six months. He called me that evening and said, “I’m in jail. I need a lawyer.” He said the judge said he now needed a “private attorney” to “file a petition for early parole” and the judge would consider it.

The probation officer

As I thought of John’s predicament, I wondered about his relationship with his probation officer. Shouldn’t the probation officer have been monitoring the situation more closely? John and the probation officer seemed to have something of an informal, if not arbitrary, relationship. His probation officer was now a thirty-year-old black male who seemed, at least initially, to be supportive. John could call him, and they could talk. And John said he met him at all the appointed times. But when the problem of not having paid the fine arose before the judge, the probation officer became very firm and formal. John said that at the hearing the probation officer ignored him and “acted like he didn’t know me.”

Could it be that the probation officer was trying to protect himself because of his sense that such “informality” with a client might compromise his job? On the one hand, it would seem that this informality would be supportive of certain humane goals of probation and would allow the probation officer to press John on the matter of his fine. On the other hand, this relationship could be considered irregular by “the system” and thus could result in disciplinary action for the probation officer. People like John—low-income black males in trouble—generally have a very low status in the minds of those staffing the system. Black probation officers, in particular, may feel that it is especially important to distance themselves from such persons, who are defined as outcasts. John’s probation officer was only a class removed from him. He was familiar with the likes of John and had little time for “people like that.” Equally important, he knew where such people fit and what they mean in the culture of the local court system. When con-
fronted by this system, the probation officer was likely to look out for himself first. A person, color notwithstanding, far removed from John's world may be able to be supportive of him. But a black person very near him in the class structure may feel quite threatened by him. In a tight situation such as that of the courtroom, his primary concern was with his own employment situation; he protected himself first.

This scenario becomes all the more complicated because of the probation officer's wish to be of assistance to someone like John. Yet he found this desire difficult to realize and was left being inconsistently formal and informal. The probation officer's interest in helping John was indicated to me in a telephone conversation I had with him. After learning my identity, he was very interested and helpful. He gave me various pieces of information on the deal made between John and the judge and attempted to "collude" with me against the judge. Knowing that I was working to help John retain his job, the probation officer advised me:

I want you to know this: when John Turner was released to make arrangements with his employer for his stay in jail, he didn't tell them he was being incarcerated. He told them he was going to have an operation, and so he was going to be out for two weeks. So you shouldn't go back and tell his employer that he's in jail.

In this way, he tried to be helpful and ended by saying, "If there is anything else I can do, let me know." I took him up on this and later, after John was released from jail, I sought a second interview with him. The following interview with the probation officer supports and expands the foregoing analysis:

When I first met John Turner he lied to me. He told me he was in to see me a week earlier and that we had discussed something. I caught him in a lie. He turned me off right then and there. From then on, I did not feel like going out of my way for him, and I will and do go out of my way for some others. I supervise 150 people, and he is only one case. I told him that if he didn't pay his fine that he was going to be incarcerated. No, I didn't hold hands with him and try to walk him through the system. There are guys I will do that for—they're older, they're the ones who respond. The younger guys are arrogant, and they think the world owes them something. The older ones know better, and I feel better about helping them.

And the thing is, this guy knew that he was wrong. He knew about this judge's reputation. He even told me about the judge; he said the judge is crazy. So he knew better. He's a self-directive person, arrogant and manipulative. He thinks it's all his show. He felt he was justified in carrying the weapon, since he'd been attacked by those guys, and
that he shouldn’t have to pay the fine. He wanted to get by, that’s all. He had a lot of opportunities to pay. I mean he could have paid something, $10, something symbolic. But he didn’t pay anything. And when you see him, he’s wearing gold chains and nice clothes, so he can’t say he didn’t have the money. Since he came before the judge all those times and still had not paid his fine, the judge just got fed up. He felt John Turner was not taking him seriously, especially when he came up with $1,300 overnight. When he locked him up, the judge felt he had the last laugh.

Toward the end, we became friends. We talked more, and once I walked his girlfriend to the train to show her how to get out of town. We talked, and he wanted to have dinner, but I said no. I didn’t think we should stretch it out. But we reached an understanding; he knew he was going to jail. To people like him, though, jail is no big deal. They go to jail, sit around and play cards; they don’t mind so much. They’re not afraid of jail, and that worries me. Going to jail for them is not the same as it is for me, or for you. I got a nephew in prison right now, and he tells me about the life there. Alcoholics sitting around getting high in jail; they make their own stuff right in jail. He wanted me to bring him drugs, can you believe that? I still live in the black community. I want to get away from all riff-raff, but I’m just not able to afford one of those big mortgages yet, ha-ha. I’ve got seventeen nephews and nieces, because I got so many brothers and sisters. And I try to look out for them. But frankly, I’m afraid of some of these younger guys, what they’ll do to people like me and you. They don’t care, don’t worry about jail. They’ll take you out of here.

Socialization

After three months of incarceration, John, with the help of another private attorney I found for him, was allowed to leave prison on a work-release program and he returned to his job at the hospital.

Over the next year, I periodically talked to Curtis to see how John was doing. He would tell me that John was doing all right, coming to work, doing his job. But at a certain point I found out from John that Curtis and his boys were giving him [John] a hard time on the job. This was interesting because so many of the men who worked as janitors were solid, working-class black men who were imbued with the work ethic, went to church, and were family men. They were reacting to the insertion into their group of a person who threatened their values. In a sense, John Turner was an interloper, and because of this, and because he was considerably younger than the other men, he was someone to be socialized, to be “brought along” and shown the error of his ways. These men
had great misgivings about John's many women, his babies, and his cavalier attitude toward taking care of them. And John continued in this behavior and by now had several more children. In fact, a boy such as John can take a certain amount of pride in having babies. According to the norms of the street, it suggests virility, manliness. But in terms of certain other working-class values, such behavior is considered irresponsible, and Curtis and his men prided themselves on being responsible. So when they see the problems of the street—the drugs, the crime, the violence—they are ready to blame the people who engage in these behaviors.

Thus, when given the opportunity, these people will often attempt to reform the John Turners of the world. They do this not in a violent way but often in ways that can wound emotionally. The men John worked with would joke with him, make fun of him, kid him about his women and children, all in an attempt to shame him into behaving in the right way, to "bring him along." And Curtis, even though he was trying to be the "old head" and help him, began to "put his [John's] business in the street." For example, the men would be standing around getting ready to go to work and women would walk by. The men would make appreciative murmurs about the women among themselves, and one day Curtis said to John so that everyone around could hear, "You'd better keep that thing in your pants. You can't take care of the ones you've got now." All the guys started laughing at that, but John felt very bad; he felt his business had been put in the street. This kind of thing continued to happen from time to time, and eventually John got tired of it.

At the same time, the streets were beckoning. John wanted to make more money. He wanted to be a hustler: He had already been a gang member, so the transition to street life was paved for him. And he wanted to show the guys at work that he didn't have to put up with their taunts. So one day he quit. He gave no notice; he simply didn't show up for work. After that I lost contact with him for over a year, but I did talk to Curtis and some of the other men, and this story came out. They did not admit to their part in so many words (they claimed he didn't want to work), but in conversation it came out that they had been ribbing him, trying to socialize him, trying to defend themselves from the likes of him.

In addition, the mothers of John's children had begun making demands on him. When he acquired a steady income and excellent benefits, several of them tried to legalize their claim on him
or, as people in the community say, they "went downtown and got papers on him." This played a part in souring him on his job. Another factor was that his mother, to whom he was so tied, had left Philadelphia and gone south, and he needed to be able to visit her. So he summarily quit his job, and I lost touch with him.

**Drug dealing**

About a year later, however, I ran into John on the street. We shook hands, he said how happy he was to see me and that we had to get together because he had so much to tell me about what had been happening with him. So we arranged to meet at a restaurant. At that meeting we started out talking about various things, and ten minutes into the conversation he revealed that he had dealt drugs but that he had given it up. I asked him, "When did you quit?" ‘Two weeks ago," he said. I was rather taken aback by his life style and began to wonder what was going on. I did not, however, act shocked or offended, because that would have scared him off (although I did wonder what he thought of me, the proper, decent professor, listening to this account of the low life), and he went on to tell me about the life of a drug dealer. He described crack-houses; lives destroyed by drugs; people selling everything, including food stamps for their children, to buy drugs; crack whores who spend their days prostituting themselves for a high; people ringing his doorbell at all hours of the day and night, desperate for crack; the large amount of money he made; the cars he bought; the valuable things people gave him for a $10 capsule of crack; the way he was the king of the neighborhood. At the same time, he suggested that he was a humane dealer and in fact was often helpful to victims of addiction. He told me of one woman who gave one of the boys who worked for him all her food stamps for some drugs. When he found out about it, he searched her out and returned half of them so she could feed her child. He said the drug dealing couldn’t really "take" with him because he didn’t have the heart for it. To be a successful drug dealer “you have to be cold and hard and uncaring,” and he could not be that way.

So John was ambivalent about this life, which I guess was why I was attracted to him. He seemed to care about the right things, yet he was stuck in his environment in that he was somehow drawn back to it even when provided the opportunity to escape. When I was first getting to know him, these glimmers of hope, of corrigibility, that he displayed now and then spurred me to want to help
him out. I felt that if he only had a break, he could make it. But over time, as I got to know him better and better, much of that feeling began to dissipate because he never seemed fully committed to improving himself. Having been given several opportunities, John had more and more responsibility to help himself; yet he did not respond to these opportunities. This caused me to be less and less interested in helping him; I became increasingly disappointed by his behavior, but I still had hope for him.

An interesting aspect of this situation is the way in which John saw me. Compared to the ways of the streets, I played the role of a chump. By befriending John, I allowed him to see me as naive. But he was ambivalent about this because even though I am a university professor—I've made it—I could still talk his language and so I had a connection to his background. I was a puzzle to him, but he was ready to resolve this puzzle in a way that would benefit him. Even though he saw me as naive, he knew that I was also very helpful to him. To keep me interested in helping him, he had to paint himself in the right way. So, for example, he pointedly talked about going to church, about wanting to be a hard worker, about taking care of his family, about saving his money for his children's college education. All these statements, so he thought, would resonate with me and connect him, in my mind, with the "great middle-class tradition." Some of this talk was, I believe, sincere, but some of it was probably game-playing, calculated to shape my opinion of him and maintain my interest in helping him.

We spent a long time talking. He told me about his life over the past year, about going down south to stay with his mother, working at a construction job there, trying to help his mother out, and then about coming back to Philadelphia and working as a drug dealer, and why he gave up selling drugs. Part of the reason he stopped, he said, was that he saw death. So many of his friends had been killed or were under pressure from people in the neighborhood. He was also bothered by people coming to his house at all hours and by what drugs had done to decent people he had known growing up. He talked about girls he had known as a teenager who had been very picky about the boys they allowed near them, but who now would have sex with anyone just for a high. I think a part of him was genuinely confused and even demoralized by the things he saw going on around him, and he saw his role as a drug dealer as somehow incompatible with certain elements of decency that he genuinely aspired to. So even though he was caught up in this life,
and liked to present himself as a tough young man, it was clear that he was mentally torn. Even as we were sitting in the restaurant, he waved to a friend of his who drove by in a Bronco, someone who was probably a drug dealer. His ambivalence cuts both ways and this makes it hard to trust him.

John, after all, was a gang "runner" or leader; his ties to the former gang members remain very strong. He was in many fights with them, which solidified the loyalty among them and also instilled bravado in him as an important aspect of his identity. These boys had no doubt also become drug dealers, and they considered him one of them. Because of these connections, I could not believe John could leave the drug trade just like that. When he said, "I quit two weeks ago," I was highly suspicious. My sense is that it is very difficult to get out of the drug business once you get into it.

**Trying again**

At any rate, as we were leaving the restaurant, John asked if I could lend him $5. Now this was after telling me how much money he made selling drugs, how many articles of leather clothing people have given him, how much jewelry. So what did this mean? If he really had no money, maybe he really did quit. Something must have scared him, or intimidated or provoked him to the point that he decided he had to get out. I gave him the $5, but that was not all he wanted. He also wanted his old job back. He wanted me to go see Curtis and convince him to give him his job back. I said I would do what I could, but I had no intention of appealing to Curtis again. I thought that since I had given him the $5, I wouldn't see him again for a long time.

However, a week later he called me. "What happened? What did you do? How did it work out?" he wanted to know. I replied, "I haven't found anything yet, but I'll keep trying." I was trying to stall him. Then one weekend when I had been out of town, I returned on Saturday night to hear from my wife that John Turner had come to our house with his girlfriend. She wouldn't let him in but told him that I was in my office. So he called my office—over and over. My answering machine had one desperate inquiry after another on it: "Where are you? Where are you, man? I need a job." As my wife was telling me this, he called the house. He needed a ride from another section of the city to his sister's house, where he was now living. Over the protestations of my wife, I agreed to go pick him up because I had by now come to realize that
I had to sever my contact with him, and in order to do that I had to come up with a way to keep him from contacting me.

I drove to the corner at which we had agreed to meet, and John was waiting for me along with his girlfriend. They got in the car and I drove them home, stopping for gas on the way. Now John wanted $10. I gave it to him but with the even stronger conviction that I had to end our relationship. So I asked him if he had ever thought about joining the Army. “Can you do that?” was his response. In his mind, I was almost a magician. I could make impossible things happen. So I told him to meet me at my office at ten o’clock Monday morning and we would go down to see the Army recruiter together. He agreed to that and then before we got to his sister’s house he asked me out of the blue if I had an extra suit. This totally surprised me, and I asked him what he needed the suit for. He said, “Well, I want to go to church on Sunday,” invoking once again the respectability and decency that are supposed to keep me interested in helping him. Yet I think there was a part of him that really did want to reform. I don’t think it was totally a matter of manipulation. I said, “No, I don’t have a suit,” and he let it drop. I dropped him off at his sister’s house, which is in a dangerous neighborhood in which people get shot every day, locked my car doors, and left. The next day I looked over the want ads in the newspaper, and I noticed that many restaurants were changing their kitchen staffs. I became encouraged that even if the Army did not work out, there were job prospects for John.

On Monday morning John showed up at my office punctually at ten o’clock. It was a rainy morning, and we got into a cab and went down to the Army recruitment office in Center City Philadelphia. We went in and I introduced myself and John to the black sergeant who was the recruiter on duty. I was dressed in a sports jacket, and I explained that this was a young man who was interested in going into the Army. And the first question from the recruitment officer to John was, “Are you on probation?” John of course had to say yes, to which the recruiter replied:

When you get that cleared up, we can talk. We can’t talk until you deal with that. You could go to the judge, go to your probation officer, and try to work out a deal. If the judge says O.K., then maybe we can do something. We do do that. We let people go into the Army to get their lives straightened up.

John could only say O.K. to that and we left with the feeling that we had struck out.
We then went to the probation office, which is only a few doors away. We went up to the sixth floor and tried to find John’s latest probation officer. She had gone to the bank on personal business. We waited for her to return for quite a while, but then John became impatient, and I was becoming more anxious to resolve this whole situation. Finally, we left and switched to Plan B, which was to investigate the want ads I had found the previous day.

As we were walking down the street on our way to the first of the restaurants, John began to question my position. He asked me if I thought “all that professor shit” works. “What do you think?” I answered. He was not at all sure. “If you had been a white professor, do you think it would have worked?” he wanted to know. He thought that professors have influence with recruitment officers, and if I had been a “real” professor I probably could have convinced the sergeant to accept him, thus reflecting his understanding of bureaucracy. He finally said, “It don’t work, man. I think you’re naive.” This was really a major development in our relationship because he had never called me that before. We talked about this for awhile until we reached the restaurant district. John all the time giving me static about my failure to get him into the Army: “You didn’t do it. You couldn’t do it.” I finally got fed up with this and took John into the first restaurant we came to.

We walked in and asked for the manager. I explained that John was looking for a job, had restaurant experience, and was a good worker, and the manager, after looking us up and down, sent us back to the kitchen to talk to Al. Al asked some of the same questions the manager asked, then excused himself to confer with the manager. When he returned, he looked at John and said, “When can you start?” We were both very happy with this development, but John was ecstatic. He had a look of anticipation fulfilled on his face. We didn’t even discuss the wage. This was a former drug dealer who was willing to work at anything, in part because he really did want something other than the tough, hard life of the drug dealer. At that point I left him to go back to my office, but I asked him to call me later.

**Gratitude and new demands**

John didn’t call, but at four o’clock in the afternoon, he came by. He walked into my office and gave me a huge bear hug, and his first words were, “I got it, man, I got it! How’d you do that? How’d you do that?” This was again the magician thing, as though
I had done something magical by getting him this job. All I had really done was talk to the manager sensibly. But my very presence and the way that I spoke may have been what he was looking for. It might have helped him to trust the job application. John and I then went out to a restaurant to talk over the events of the day. John reiterated his disappointment with the Army recruiter for not helping him out and his conviction that, had I been a white professor, he would have been more forthcoming. But he thanked me profusely for not giving up on him after that failure and for coming through at the restaurant.

I then asked him to tell me what had led to his quitting his job at the hospital, because I had never heard his side of the story. John explained that the men there were always "on my case," that they would tease him about his girlfriends and his children and also about his position as a "halfway man," since during part of his tenure there he was still partially incarcerated, spending his nights in jail but allowed out to work during the day. He talked about how the men embarrassed him in front of the girlfriends who came to see him, as well as in front of other workers who had not previously known of his background. He claimed that they spread his reputation as a stud around the entire organization, and also that their talk was for the most part motivated by jealousy of his success with women. He also brought me up to date on his women and children. He told me that one girlfriend had "used him" to get pregnant twice and then forbade him to see her or the children. He explained how lonely he had been after his mother left, how difficult Thanksgiving had been without her, how he had enjoyed being down south with her. But he had to come back because of the terms of his probation and because of his children. "I'm not the type of man to walk out on kids. They mine, I'm gonna stand by and take care of 'em as a man. I'm gonna do my part." He reiterated his disgust at what drugs have done to the black community in general as well as to various individual people in his life.

After telling me all this, John again asked me for money—$150 this time. After reflection and a little resistance I gave it to him, fully expecting never to see it again but also never expecting to see him again. His code of honor would forbid him to contact me again without paying me back, and my experience with him had taught me that he was unlikely ever to have the money. This was how I was finally able to sever our relationship. I had continued to help John even after it had become apparent that he was using me,
because I wanted to see how he responded to various situations. At this point, however, I felt I had developed a rather complete picture of him, in addition to which I was beginning to feel uneasy about our association. Consistent with my expectations, I have indeed not seen him since, but I have heard of him. The street life that he found so compelling seems to have brought him to a corner in Baltimore. There he had an altercation with somebody over something, perhaps a misunderstood drug deal, and he wound up being shot in the gut. On the streets it is said that as a result of that shooting he is "carrying around a bag" and will be for the rest of his life. He is now about twenty-seven.

**Street life vs. the culture of decency**

An important lesson to be learned from John's story is that of the basic incompatibility between "the street" and the more conventional world of legitimate jobs and stable families. When the street and the conventional world collided for John, the street prevailed in part because he lacked the personal resources to negotiate the occupational structure then available to him. At the point in his life when the wider system became receptive to him in the form of a well-paying job, it was too late. The draw of the street was too powerful, and he was overcome by its force.

John—like so many young black men caught up in similar circumstances—appeared when I met him to be adrift between the street and the wider, more conventional society. But given the way he had been raised—learning at an early age to survive by the laws of the street—the street had a profound advantage in vying for his heart and mind. Moreover, the various pieces of human capital he had accumulated over the years were more easily negotiable on the streets. In other words, the streets proved much more receptive to him than did the wider, more legitimate society, and this receptivity encouraged John to invest his personal resources in what could be described as an "oppositional culture," which in many ways is a response to a feeling of rejection by the conventional society. John became fixated on this oppositional culture, rejecting the means for achieving status sanctioned by the wider society while accepting the dominant culture's goals of material success—money, gold, clothes, sneakers, cars, etc.

Too often the wider system of legitimate employment is closed off to young men like John, by prejudice, by lack of preparation, or by the absence of real job opportunities. Yet they are able to
observe others—usually whites—enjoying the fruits of the system, and through this experience they often become profoundly alienated. The boys often develop a contempt for the society they perceive to have contempt for them. In these circumstances a racist reality looms large in their minds. Feeling that their opportunities for conventional advancement are blocked, young men like John Turner are drawn to an alternate means of gaining the things they see that others have. After growing up buffeted between an unresponsive conventional world and the street, they drift. Here they are easily drawn into the receptive street culture, where a cunning intelligence mixed with a profound street wisdom and physical prowess are highly valued. With these resources, they negotiate and compete fiercely for very scarce coin: respect and wealth.

This street-oriented subculture is often violent. A primary value is physicality and a willingness to resolve disputes through violence. Authority is asserted through conflict; shouts, bites, punches, knife cuts, and gunshots are traded here. It is very important to be "bad," to be "mean," in the idiomatic sense, because to be mean is also to be cool. It is extremely important not to be "square" or approximate through behavior or sympathy the wider conventional society.

The predatory influence of the street culture constitutes an enormous problem for the rest of the inner-city population. Young people who are not strongly anchored in the conventional world are at risk of being preyed upon. Given the drugs, poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunity, and other social problems besetting the community, well-meaning parents find it difficult to anchor their children in conventional values.

In fact, in underclass communities, conventionality and the street culture wage a constant battle for the hearts and minds of the younger residents, and this dichotomy has become an organizing social principle. The residents generally divide their neighbors into those who are "decent" and those whom they associate with the street. The culture of decency is characterized by close and extended families, a low-income financial stability, deep religious values, a work ethic and desire to "get ahead," and strong disapproval of drugs and teenage pregnancy. The street represents hipness, an emphasis on achieving and maintaining status based on one's person (not on one's achievements, as in the dominant culture), and a contempt for conventional values and behaviors, which are easily discredited because of their association with whites.
these can include doing well in school, being civil to whites, and speaking standard English.

**Beyond the oppositional culture**

This oppositional culture is alluring in large part because the conventional culture is viewed as profoundly unreceptive by many blacks in the inner cities. Youths observe the would-be legitimate role models around them, and many find them unworthy of emulation. Legal hard work appears not to have paid off for the old, and they see the relatively few hardworking people of the neighborhood struggling to survive. From their elders and peers they hear repeated tales of racist treatment; and by now most have experienced it firsthand. At the same time, through street-oriented role models, a thriving underground economy beckons to them, in which enormous sums are promised, along with a certain thrill, power, and prestige. Streetwise and impoverished young men easily find places in the drug trade.

In the past, manufacturing jobs provided opportunities for young men like John and at the same time supported the values of decency and conventionality by having them pay off. The loss of these jobs has damaged the financial health of the inner city and undermined the quality of available role models. One important casualty has been the relationship between “old heads” and young boys. The old head was a man of stable means whose acknowledged role in the community was to teach and support boys and young men in their late teens and early twenties, in effect to socialize them to meet their responsibilities regarding work, family life, the law, and common decency. But as meaningful employment has become increasingly scarce and the expansion of the drug culture offers opportunities for quick money, the old head has been losing prestige and authority. In his place, a new role model is emerging. The embodiment of the street, he is young, often a product of a street gang, and indifferent at best to the law and traditional values. If he works at the low-paying jobs available to him, he does so grudgingly. More likely, he is involved, part time or full time, in the drug trade or some other area of the underground economy. He derides conventional family life: he has a string of women but feels little obligation toward them and the children he has fathered. His displays of self-aggrandizement through fancy clothes and impressive cars make their mark on young men like John.
By enforcing conformity to external displays of "manhood," the oppositional culture ravages the individuality of those who fall victim to it, eroding their sense of personal identity and thus of personal responsibility as well. In John's case, his very identity was derived from the oppositional culture, and ultimately it immobilized him in the face of opportunity.

This reality has serious implications for society as a whole and for social policy. The progressive nature of the impact of the street points to a need both for very early intervention, in programs such as Head Start, before the oppositional culture has a chance even to begin developing in the child, and for continuing intervention with pre-adolescents and adolescents. It is extremely important, in particular, to give maturing boys (and girls, too, for that matter) job training and education in the practicalities of operating in the world of work. This training must then be rewarded with real jobs. The system must be more receptive to the John Turners of the world. The creditable promise of a job gives these young men a realistic outlook on life and a positive sense of the future, and at the same time builds hope and social peace.

The question of outlook is extremely important here. John envisioned a good life but was unable to accept the changes in behavior necessary to achieve it. In fact, the street life competed quite effectively with his vision of the good life. My experience with John suggests that simply providing opportunities for members of the underclass is not enough. They must also be provided with an outlook that allows them to invest their considerable personal resources in those opportunities. Only then can they leave behind the attitudes and behavior that block their advancement in the mainstream but that also give them security in negotiating their circumscribed world. These young men are being written off by mainstream society, they know it, and the world is the poorer for their loss.