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## TRAPPED

Alice Goffman \*10 lived among men in a broken neighborhood to examine how policing and prison altered their lives

# Life on the Run

*A rising star in sociology chronicles the human costs of America's penal system*

**BY MARC PARRY**

ON A WINTER AFTERNOON IN 2004, a woman waits in the detective unit of a Philadelphia police station. Two officers, outfitted with combat boots and large guns, enter the room. The cops place their guns on the table, pointed at her.

The woman is 22, tiny, and terrified.

The officers show her a series of photos of men from her neighborhood. Two of the men are her roommates, Mike and Chuck, low-level drug dealers who keep crack and guns in the shared apartment. Some of the photos were taken in front of her home.

Spewing obscenities, the cops press for information about her roommates and threaten criminal charges if she fails to cooperate. "If you can't work with us," one says, "then who will you call when he's sticking a gun to your head? ... He'll kill you over a couple of grams. You know that, right?"

Such scenes are nothing unusual in the poor black neighborhood where this woman spends most of her time. Girlfriends and relatives routinely face police pressure to inform on the men in their lives.

Unknown to the cops, though, there is a difference this time. The woman under interrogation, Alice Goffman '10, has been watching them.

**A** decade later, Goffman is emerging as a rising star of sociology. The 2004 interrogation shows why. Since spending her 20s immersed in fieldwork with wanted young men — a project she began as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania and continued in graduate school at Princeton — Goffman has been documenting the "profound change" in the way America governs urban ghettos. In a book based on her Princeton dissertation, Goffman, now an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, shows how the expansion of America's criminal-justice system is reshaping life for the poor black families who exist under the watch of its police, prison guards, and parole officers. The book, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (University of Chicago Press), will be released in April.

Goffman's project reflects a broader effort by Princeton sociologists to study the roots and ramifications of mass incarceration. Starting in the mid-1970s, the United States stiffened its laws on drugs and violent crime and ratcheted up the police presence on city streets. The number of people in American jails and prisons has risen fivefold over the past 40 years. There are now 6.9 million people under criminal-justice supervision. "In modern history," Goffman writes, "only the forced labor camps of the former U.S.S.R. under Stalin approached these levels of penal confinement."

Goffman's book is an up-close account of that prison boom told largely through the story of a group of young friends in a poor neighborhood of Philadelphia, which she calls 6th Street (the events did not take place on the real street of that name). The study describes how fear of confinement has transformed work, health, and family life, causing men to disengage from the very institutions that might put them on a better path.

The threat of incarceration has created "a new social fabric," Goffman writes, "one woven in suspicion, distrust, and the paranoid practices of secrecy, evasion, and unpredictability." It has turned ghettos into "communities of suspects and fugitives."

Over six years of fieldwork, Goffman shed much of her



**Alice Goffman '10, who conducted her research in Philadelphia, outside the city's detention center in February.**

old life to view the world through her subjects' eyes. With them, she dodged police, partied, and discussed shootings. She watched a nurse's aide pull a bullet out of one boy in an off-the-books, kitchen-table surgery; accompanied people who arranged for drugs to be smuggled into jail; and attended nine funerals of young men killed in the neighborhood. She had received the men's permission to write about them.

To her frustration, when she discusses her research publicly, people often ask questions not about mass incarceration, but about "the story of a blond young woman living in the 'hood.' " "This is a community worried that at any moment, its members will be taken away," Goffman says. "So, to me, that's the story ... I'm completely irrelevant to the story that I'm trying to tell."

Goffman's bid to remain irrelevant is hampered by a personal detail. Her father, the late Erving Goffman, was one of the defining sociologists of the 20th century. In 1959, his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, changed scholars' understanding of the self by portraying people as actors. Rather than core identities, he argued, we adopt different performance strategies in different settings, to make others view us in ways that suit our social ends. Goffman published another classic two years later, *Asylums*, based on his fieldwork at a mental hospital. His account of psychiatric practices contributed to the deinstitutionalization of mental patients.

Erving Goffman had been an important figure on the Penn faculty. Sarcastic and skeptical, he spoke little about himself, disliked being photographed, and had the unprofessorial habit of leading seminars in sweat clothes. So great was Goffman's reputation that professors, not just students, attended his classes.

In the 1970s, he helped to recruit and mentor an up-and-coming ethnographer named Elijah Anderson, now at Yale. By the time Alice Goffman turned up at Penn, decades later, Anderson had become a prominent figure in the field, known for his study of ghetto life, *A Place on the Corner*. Anderson supervised her undergraduate thesis about the 6th Street men, and calls her work "riveting." He also told her stories about Erving Goffman, describing, for example, the man's knack for making himself invisible as he observed people.

Alice Goffman never knew her father, who died in 1982, when she was a baby. She seems reluctant to speak much about him, and quickly changes the subject when I bring him up. But she writes, in an appendix to *On the Run*, that his shadow may have pushed her to go "further than was safe or expected" in her own research.

**"I got to move like a shadow," one of Mike's friends told Goffman — because a stable public routine could land them back behind bars.**

"Six years in the field is an extraordinary amount of time by any standard," says Princeton sociologist Mitchell Duneier, who supervised Goffman's dissertation. "That is something that gives you a purchase ... on social life that is not going to come from a one-shot interview or from a few observations."

Still, scholars have been writing urban ethnographies since W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899. Why should people pay attention to this one?

Because only during the past 10 to 15 years has the country seen the emergence of extraordinary incarceration rates among young, poorly educated black men, answers sociology professor Bruce Western, who taught at Princeton when Goffman was working on her Ph.D. About 35 percent of black male high-school dropouts under age 40 are now behind bars, Western says, compared with an incarceration rate of 0.7 percent for the population as a whole. "What this means for day-to-day life has never really been shown in such detail before," he says.

Western says Goffman's work raises basic questions about policing and penal systems conceived to promote public safety and improve quality of life in poor communities. "What her research shows is that these institutions may be self-defeating and may carry very significant social costs," he says. "And so the whole effort to improve public safety through criminal-justice supervision and through incarceration may have significantly backfired, and may in many ways have contributed to the ongoing poverty and shortage of opportunities that we see there."

**O**n a Sunday evening in August, I meet Goffman to hear that story at an Afghan restaurant in New York City, where she's in town for sociology's annual conference.

The interview, her first, begins with a lesson in eavesdropping.

After we've chatted for a few minutes, Goffman mentions that she's listened in a bit on other tables while carrying on the conversation with me. Her technique involves focusing on one conversation for a couple of seconds and then moving on to another, in a circle. The point of this exercise, which Goffman teaches students, is to practice valuing what you hear around you, not just what people tell you.

"All the action is over here, in this direction," Goffman says, gesturing behind us in the narrow, low-lit kebab joint. "The worst are the couples who have been together for a long time. Conversation declines with length of relationship."

Nursing a cup of hot water with sugar and cream, Goffman explains that she didn't set out to study young men on the run. She stumbled on the project by doing pretty much what she's doing now: observing social life.

It began in her freshman year at Penn, when she got a job in a campus cafeteria. Penn's mostly white students often griped about the mostly black older women who worked there, calling them lazy and rude. So, for a class, Goffman conceived an ethnographic project to learn what the cafeteria workers thought of the students.

Over time, working alongside them led to tutoring her boss's grandchildren. Tutoring them led to living in the neighborhood. And living there led to hanging out on a daily basis with Mike and his friends, who exposed Goffman to a world she never had read about. (All the names in the book are pseudonyms.)

Mike, a part-time crack dealer whom Goffman describes as bearded and intense, appeared to command respect among the



neighborhood's young men. When she was set up on a date with him, he showed her a recent gunshot wound to his thigh. The date was a disaster. But Mike took her under his wing like a sister.

Mike and his friends mystified Goffman. "They sort of had jobs, but they also seemed to have income that they didn't speak about," she writes in *On the Run*. "They were getting arrested and coming home on bail and visiting their probation officers. They got into fights; their cars were stolen or seized by the police. It was all confusion and chaos."

Goffman came to understand that many young men in the neighborhood earned money by selling drugs at least some of the time. And many were caught in a web of legal entanglements, often involving arrest warrants for minor infractions. During a five-year period in his mid-20s, Mike was behind bars for three and a half years. He spent 87 weeks on probation or parole under five overlapping sentences. He appeared in court at least 51 times.

Men like him lived a paradox. The penal system was supposed to shape them up. But its tentacles had become so invasive that the opposite happened. Goffman argues that the system encourages young men to act "shady" — "I got to move like a shadow," one of Mike's friends told her — because a stable public routine could land them back behind bars.

Take work. Once, after Mike was released on parole to a halfway house, he found employment at a Taco Bell. But he soon grew fed up with the crowded house and decided to sleep at his girlfriend's. That resulted in a parole violation. When Mike went back to the Taco Bell, two parole officers arrested him. He had to spend another year in state prison.

Goffman's research subjects avoided hospitals for similar reasons. One night Mike and his friends Alex and Chuck were shooting dice. On the way home, a man robbed Alex,

pistol-whipped him, and pounded his face into a concrete wall. When Goffman and Mike reached him, Alex was drenched in blood, searching for his teeth on the ground. His nose and chin were broken.

Yet Alex resisted being taken to the hospital. Police in the emergency room run the names of young black men through their database, Goffman explains. Alex was on parole, and feared that the police would arrest him or slap him with a parole violation. That would send him back to prison.

Girlfriends, too, could become paths to confinement. Three months into a budding romance with a woman named Michelle, Mike missed a court appearance, triggering a warrant for his arrest. Officers knocked down her door and took him away.

When police brought Michelle in for questioning, they told her that Mike — who had been selling drugs in the suburbs during this period — was claiming that she was the one who had been selling the drugs. They showed her texts and phone calls indicating that he still was involved with the mother of his kids. They threatened to take away her child.

Michelle buckled. She gave police a statement detailing Mike's "activities, associates, and the location of his drug-selling business," Goffman writes.

"You see this in movies with high-profile criminals," she tells me over dinner. "It's just that this is happening for really small amounts of drugs. Most of the guys in this neighborhood have had this experience a number of times, where their girlfriend is brought in and threatened with arrest and eviction and loss of child custody to give up all the information about him."

By the winter of 2004, when the Philadelphia police threatened her with criminal charges (she was never charged), Goffman's seriousness of purpose was becoming dangerous.

That year, one of Mike's 6th Street friends rekindled a

conflict with guys from 4th Street. Mike came home with seven bullet holes in his car. He began wearing a bulletproof vest. When Goffman and the 6th Street guys were apart, she writes, they checked in every half-hour by text.

“You good?”

“Yeah.”

“OK.”

Later that year, Goffman was questioned again, this time by officers she believes were federal. The agents — whose unmarked cars apparently had been circling her apartment — had a reputation for taking only the cases they were certain to win. They told her it was in her best interest to tell them everything she knew about Mike. She did not.

Goffman’s academic life fell apart. She missed meetings. She failed classes. She applied to graduate school, but it seemed to her equally likely she’d end up in prison.

That spring, after more than a year of court dates in an attempted-murder case, Mike took a deal and pleaded guilty to gun possession. He went to state prison.

“In a silent apartment filled with Timberland boots, empty cartridges, and a sizable gangster-movie collection,” Goffman writes, “I found out I had been accepted to graduate school at Princeton.”

**T**here was a time when this kind of firsthand human observation dominated sociology. It first blossomed in the 1920s at the University of Chicago, where Robert Park exhorted students to “go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.”

A slew of crucial studies followed: Frederic M. Thrasher on Chicago gangs, Norman S. Hayner on hotel life, Paul Goalby Cressey on “taxi-dance” halls, Louis Wirth on the Jewish ghetto, Clifford R. Shaw on the story of a delinquent boy, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton on the “black metropolis.”

In ethnography, a method rooted in anthropology and now pivotal to sociology, researchers enter the world of their subjects and attempt to understand those people within the context of their daily lives. Starting in the 1960s, urban ethnographic research became marginal as sociologists turned increasingly to surveys, statistics, and computers. But the field has undergone a revival in the last 20 years.

Goffman gravitated to Princeton largely because she wanted

**“The people who are involved in violent conflict, who are selling drugs, they’re all the victims of each other. And we need to see those people as human.”**

to work with Duneier, one of the top teachers in this tradition. As an undergraduate, she had read Duneier’s book *Sidewalk*, a study based on the five years that he spent with a group of poor black men who made their living on the streets of New York’s Greenwich Village. “You’ll never walk by another homeless person or interact with another person on the street the same way after reading that book,” Goffman says. Princeton also appealed to Goffman because it was near enough to Philadelphia that she could continue her undergraduate project on 6th Street.

Within Wallace Hall, Goffman encountered a group of sociologists who were helping to shift our understanding of prison. Instead of just looking at prison’s relationship to crime, scholars like Bruce Western and Devah Pager — now both at Harvard — studied how incarceration produces inequality. Western dug into statistics to reveal the depressing story of how common it had become for young, poorly educated black men to go to prison. Pager showed how having a criminal record severely hampers employment prospects.

In graduate school, Goffman began to grasp the broader context of her shoe-leather scholarship: the escalation of criminal-justice intervention into the lives of black families like Mike’s. “It was at Princeton,” she says, “that I figured out what story I wanted to tell.”

That story dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when urban street crime surged and authorities responded with more police and harsher penalties for the sale and possession of drugs and for violent crimes. Get-tough policies continued in the 1990s even as crime and violence “began a prolonged decline,” Goffman writes. Under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, 50 new federal offenses were established, and billions of dollars flowed into urban police departments.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, Goffman writes, “the near-unanimous endorsement of tough-on-crime policies by police and civic leaders accompanied the mushrooming of federal and state police agencies, special units, and bureaus. These policies increased the sentences for violent offenses, but they also increased the sentences for prostitution, vagrancy, gambling, and drug possession.”

As policing changed, so did the drug trade. Twenty or 30 years ago, says Goffman, the business was much more stable. Higher-level dealers controlled neighborhoods. A corporate-like hierarchy protected their workers from the police and from people who might rob them. But faced with intensified policing, the drug business devolved into a more fragmented market, in which each dealer protected his own product with his own gun.

For the young men caught up in it, selling drugs became more unstable, violent, and legally risky. The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics has estimated that about one in three black men will go to prison in his lifetime if current incarceration rates continue, compared to one in 17 white men. Goffman and others view the situation as a setback to the advances that African-Americans made in the civil-rights movement.

Outside the left-wing precincts of academic sociology, many readers may conclude that Goffman’s subjects are violent criminals who belong in prison. Other academics emphasize that targeted policing reduces crime.

Jerry Ratcliffe, a criminal-justice professor at Temple University, ties Philadelphia’s drop in homicides to “police officers’ being active on the streets, being focused on violent-



crime neighborhoods, being focused on crime hot spots ... and [on] repeat offenders." Police have increased their pedestrian stops in recent years, he adds, making it riskier for people to carry guns. The professor, who has spent more than a decade studying crime and policing in Philadelphia, admires Goffman's research. But he wonders about its practical applicability.

"It's fine to have a sociological perspective that says that this is wrong," says Ratcliffe, a research adviser to the Philadelphia police commissioner. "But we need to be able to provide mayors and politicians and community members viable alternatives."

Goffman views the criminal-justice system from the perspective of black poverty. The penal system, she argues, has become America's way of managing that problem. She suggests that people abandon the divide in their heads between victims and offenders. "The people who are involved in violent conflict, who are selling drugs, they're all the victims of each other," she says. "And we need to see those people as human and to see what's happening to them as something that could be prevented."

Signs of change are emerging, influenced by two trends: Crime rates remain down, and state budgets face financial duress. The Obama administration has announced it would no longer invoke mandatory minimum sentences in certain federal drug cases; some states are decriminalizing marijuana and experimenting with changes in probation and parole. Over the past couple of years, national imprisonment rates have declined for the first time in more than three decades. "The current has flowed mostly in one direction for 30 years," says Western. "And now we're starting to see a real change in the way people are talking about the criminal-justice system."

Goffman, for her part, faced a rocky readjustment to academic life. In graduate school, she continued to live

in Philadelphia, maneuvering between the violence and poverty of her field site and the well-trimmed affluence of Princeton. On her first day on campus, she cased the sociology department's classrooms, identifying TVs and computers she could steal in the event that she needed some quick cash. She feared white men, the younger professors especially. Even though she knew they weren't cops, her chest pounded when they came close.

She also came to understand how much she had missed by not hanging out with other undergraduates at Penn. Having restricted her media diet to the things Mike and his friends consumed, she couldn't follow conversations about current events. She didn't know the music her fellow Princeton students talked about. To Goffman, who turned up in tight hot-pink sweatpants, these students seemed so reserved. To Goffman's peers, judging by the way they looked at her, she seemed half-crazy.

"It's one thing to feel uncomfortable in a community that is not your own," Goffman writes in *On the Run*. "It's another to feel that way among people who recognize you as one of them."

It's been harder for her research subjects. Some of them are dead. Others aged out of crime, only to experience what Goffman describes as a defeat in aspirations. They resign themselves to scraping by in low-paying jobs and to never earning enough to own a home or support a spouse.

Mike went straight after returning from prison a couple of years ago. Now in his 30s, with another son, he works at a warehouse and washes cars. He still lives in Philadelphia. ♦

*Marc Parry is a reporter at The Chronicle of Higher Education. This article is adapted from one that appeared in that publication Nov. 18, 2013.*