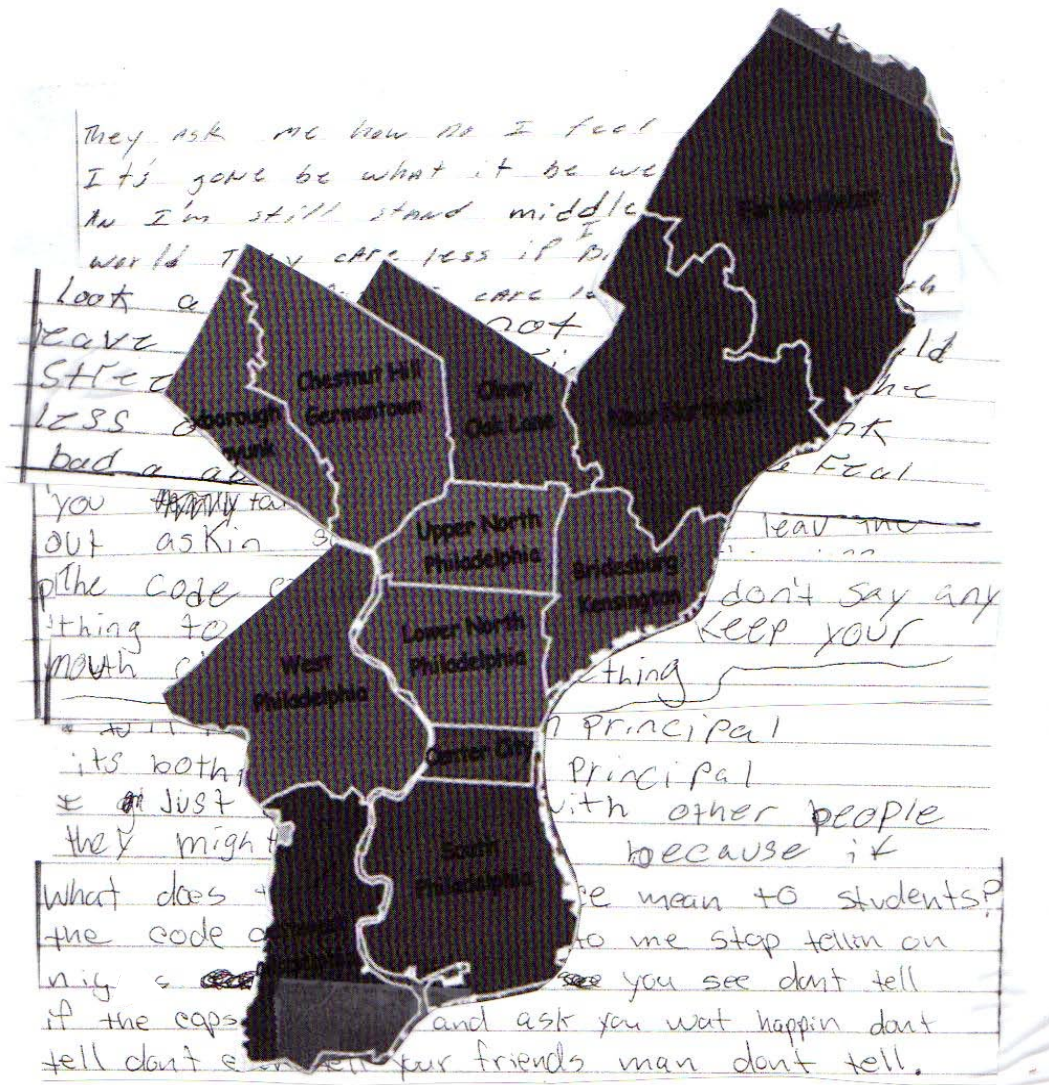


# The Commonwealth Verses



## Elijah Anderson: "The Code of the Street" Writings from Philadelphia's Youth Music from E3 Girard Students

This booklet combines “The Code of the Street,” an influential essay written by scholar Elijah Anderson, with samples of poetry, prose and music composed by young Philadelphians. Anderson’s analysis adds another dimension to the young people’s writing, and vice-versa.

Dr. Anderson, world renowned for his work on urban America, taught sociology at the University of Pennsylvania before leaving to become the William K. Lanman, Jr. Professor of Sociology at Yale University. Though he could not attend the *Muted Truth* forum, Dr. Anderson graciously shared his essay “The Code of the Street,” so that, even in his absence, his valuable voice could be heard.

In “The Code of the Street,” Anderson explores the sociological roots of urban conduct. He discusses the factors that can influence young men into making poor life decisions. Because ‘Stop Snitching’ remains a thriving principal of ‘The Code of the Street,’ Anderson’s expert analysis is highly relevant to our discussion.

Young people from Don’t Fall Down in the Hood, Congreso de Latinos Unidos, E3 Broad Street and E3 Olney provided the poetry and writing samples. Youth from E3 Girard wrote and composed the music sample. All of these organizations work with young people who have strayed from the beaten path. Many (though certainly not all) have encountered law enforcement along the way.

The opinions presented by these individuals do not represent the views of the United Way or of the Stoneleigh Center. Rather, they express the very real frustration some inner city youth feel towards the criminal justice system. While we may not agree with some of the thoughts expressed in this book, we must accept these perspectives and include them in any dialogue aimed at improving the situation. Any forum that did not give voice to these frustrations would be inherently flawed.

The young people prepared these writings following group discussions on police, drugs, prison, and the meaning of being a snitch. At the end of the booklet is a CD composed by young musicians who attend the E3 center on Girard Avenue. These musicians worked for two weeks to compose an honest expression of their troubled relationship with police. They have demonstrated that hip-hop can be a healthy, artistic vehicle to express social frustrations.

Enjoy!

Sam George  
Stoneleigh Center Junior Fellow, 2008

# The Code of the Street

## BY Elijah Anderson

Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community, none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression. It wreaks havoc daily with the lives of community residents and increasingly spills over into downtown and residential middle-class areas. Muggings, burglaries, carjackings, and drug-related shootings, all of which may leave their victims or innocent bystanders dead, are now common enough to concern all urban and many suburban residents. The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor--the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future.

Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior. Although there are often forces in the community which can counteract the negative influences, by far the most powerful being a strong, loving, "decent" (as inner-city residents put it) family committed to middle-class values, the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of "the streets," whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society. These two orientations--decent and street--socially organize the community, and their coexistence has important consequences for residents, particularly children growing up in the inner city. Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values--and the majority of homes in the community do-- must be able to handle themselves in a street-oriented environment.

This is because the street culture has evolved what may be called a code of the streets, which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence. The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and are enforced mainly by the street-oriented, but on the streets the distinction between street and decent is often irrelevant; everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive; it is literally necessary for operating in public. Therefore, even though families with a decency orientation are usually opposed to the values of the code, they often reluctantly encourage their children's familiarity with it to enable them to negotiate the inner-city environment.

I see cops everyday  
I watch cops everyday  
I watch cops beat people up

I watch cops try to take drug dealers  
Off the corner  
But they keep  
Coming back

My mom says not to tell the cops nothing  
Or I'll put this family in danger

I sit and watch the cops

***-Justice*** (Age 12)

At the heart of the code is the issue of respect--loosely defined as being treated "right," or granted the deference one deserves. However, in the troublesome public environment of the inner city, as people increasingly feel buffeted by forces beyond their control, what one deserves in the way of respect becomes more and more problematic and uncertain. This in turn further opens the issue of respect to sometimes intense interpersonal negotiation. In the street culture, especially among young people, respect is viewed as almost an external entity that is hard-won but easily lost, and so must constantly be guarded. The rules of the code in fact provide a framework for negotiating respect. The person whose very appearance-- including his clothing, demeanor, and way of moving--deters transgressions feels that he possesses, and may be considered by others to possess, a measure of respect. With the right amount of respect, for instance, he can avoid "being bothered" in public. If he is bothered, not only may he be in physical danger but he has been disgraced or "dissed" (disrespected). Many of the forms that dissing can take might seem petty to middle-class people (maintaining eye contact for too long, for example), but to those invested in the street code, these actions become serious indications of the other person's intentions. Consequently, such people become very sensitive to advances and slights, which could well serve as warnings of imminent physical confrontation.

This hard reality can be traced to the profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city black people, particularly the young. The code of the streets is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system. The police are most often seen as representing the dominant white society and not caring to protect inner-city residents. When called, they may not respond, which is one reason many residents feel they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined to aggression. Lack of police accountability has in fact been incorporated into the status system: the person who is believed capable of "taking care of himself" is accorded a certain deference, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control. Thus the street code emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin. Exacerbated by the proliferation of drugs and easy access to guns, this volatile situation results in the ability of the street oriented minority (or those who effectively "go for bad") to dominate the public spaces.

Raheem

5/1/08

Woop o Woop!

It's June 22nd  
the crime and the case  
10pm on my steps was the time and the  
place  
Under cover cops surrounded the  
place  
Within a short time put the  
pound in my face  
All I heard was get down  
I was thinkin sit down  
But when I hit ground  
they start throwin kicks round  
That's when I heard woop woop  
I was thinkin calm down  
trying to get a grip  
But them sirens was a loud sound  
I'm in a room  
two soldiers with a clip  
time to talk tryna give a soda to  
a snitch  
but eventhough they try to turn  
me to a easy snitch  
I looked him dead in the face  
and said I plead the 5<sup>th</sup>

## DECENT AND STREET FAMILIES

ALTHOUGH almost everyone in poor inner-city neighborhoods is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America, the decent and the street family in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation, two contrasting conceptual categories. The labels "decent" and "street," which the residents themselves use, amount to evaluative judgments that confer status on local residents. The labeling is often the result of a social contest among individuals and families of the neighborhood. Individuals of the two orientations often coexist in the same extended family. Decent residents judge themselves to be so while judging others to be of the street, and street individuals often present themselves as decent, drawing distinctions between themselves and other people.

In addition, there is quite a bit of circumstantial behavior--that is, one person may at different times exhibit both decent and street orientations, depending on the circumstances. Although these designations result from so much social jockeying, there do exist concrete features that define each conceptual category.

Generally, so-called decent families tend to accept mainstream values more fully and attempt to instill them in their children. Whether married couples with children or single-parent (usually female) households, they are generally "working poor" and so tend to be better off financially than their street-oriented neighbors. They value hard work and self-reliance and are willing to sacrifice for their children. Because they have a certain amount of faith in mainstream society, they harbor hopes for a better future for their children, if not for themselves. Many of them go to church and take a strong interest in their children's schooling. Rather than dwelling on the real hardships and inequities facing them, many such decent people, particularly the increasing number of grandmothers raising grandchildren, see their difficult situation as a test from God and derive great support from their faith and from the church community.

Extremely aware of the problematic and often dangerous environment in which they reside, decent parents tend to be strict in their child-rearing practices, encouraging children to respect authority and walk a straight moral line. They have an almost obsessive concern about trouble of any kind and remind their children to be on the lookout for people and situations that might lead to it. At the same time, they are themselves polite and considerate of others, and teach their children to



Ray Nance Jr

I think the code of silence, to students means never snitch. Students see that the people that "snitch" loss all respect in the streets, causing them to be killed or degraded from a man. The cause of silence mean to never say anything to the cops that will cause someone else to be behind bars.

I think that it is fear-based and on principle. I think that because it could be fear because most people go against snitching. People say they hate snitches, snitches get stitches, and some people want to fit in. I think it's on principle because some people grew up by a non-snitching life style, see in people going to jail for a snitch.



be the same way. At home, at work, and in church, they strive hard to maintain a positive mental attitude and a spirit of cooperation.

So-called street parents, in contrast, often show a lack of consideration for other people and have a rather superficial sense of family and community. Though they may love their children, many of them are unable to cope with the physical and emotional demands of parenthood, and find it difficult to reconcile their needs with those of their children. These families, who are more fully invested in the code of the streets than the decent people are, may aggressively socialize their children into it in a normative way. They believe in the code and judge themselves and others according to its values.

In fact the overwhelming majority of families in the inner-city community try to approximate the decent-family model, but there are many others who clearly represent the worst fears of the decent family. Not only are their financial resources extremely limited, but what little they have may easily be misused. The lives of the street-oriented are often marked by disorganization. In the most desperate circumstances people frequently have a limited understanding of priorities and consequences, and so frustrations mount over bills, food, and, at times, drink, cigarettes, and drugs. Some tend toward self-destructive behavior; many street-oriented women are crack-addicted ("on the pipe"), alcoholic, or involved in complicated relationships with men who abuse them. In addition, the seeming intractability of their situation, caused in large part by the lack of well-paying jobs and the persistence of racial discrimination, has engendered deep-seated bitterness and anger in many of the most desperate and poorest blacks, especially young people. The need both to exercise a measure of control and to lash out at somebody is often reflected in the adults' relations with their children. At the least, the frustrations of persistent poverty shorten the fuse in such people-- contributing to a lack of patience with anyone, child or adult, who irritates them.

In these circumstances a woman--or a man, although men are less consistently present in children's lives--can be quite aggressive with children, yelling at and striking them for the least little infraction of the rules she has set down. Often little if any serious explanation follows the verbal and physical punishment. This response teaches children a particular lesson. They learn that to solve any kind of interpersonal problem one must quickly resort to hitting or other violent behavior. Actual peace and quiet, and also the appearance of calm, respectful children conveyed to her neighbors and friends, are often what the young mother most desires, but at times she will be very aggressive in trying to get them. Thus she may be

Stop Snitching is a principal for me because where I'm from, snitching can get you murdered, or in more trouble.

*-Rocky*

Stop Snitching means if you see something happen to another person, look away, or don't tell. If you snitch, people think less of you. They make you feel bad about yourself.

*-Dajon*

That's how I feel  
Aint no breaking my plans.  
I'm no snitch,  
You'll never see me take the stand  
It would be stupid  
To put my fate in their hands.

*-Sly*

Stop Snitching means whatever you see, if something happens, keep you mouth closed, and you won't get into nothing. Its fear based because people are scared to even go to court to testify or they just don't say anything cause they scared of what might happen.

*-Khief*

quick to beat her children, especially if they defy her law, not because she hates them but because this is the way she knows to control them. In fact, many street-oriented women love their children dearly. Many mothers in the community subscribe to the notion that there is a "devil in the boy" that must be beaten out of him or that socially "fast girls need to be whipped." Thus much of what borders on child abuse in the view of social authorities is acceptable parental punishment in the view of these mothers.

Many street-oriented women are sporadic mothers whose children learn to fend for themselves when necessary, foraging for food and money any way they can get it. The children are sometimes employed by drug dealers or become addicted themselves. These children of the street, growing up with little supervision, are said to "come up hard." They often learn to fight at an early age, sometimes using short-tempered adults around them as role models. The street-oriented home may be fraught with anger, verbal disputes, physical aggression, and even mayhem. The children observe these goings-on, learning the lesson that might makes right. They quickly learn to hit those who cross them, and the dog-eat-dog mentality prevails. In order to survive, to protect oneself, it is necessary to marshal inner resources and be ready to deal with adversity in a hands-on way. In these circumstances physical prowess takes on great significance.

In some of the most desperate cases, a street-oriented mother may simply leave her young children alone and unattended while she goes out. The most irresponsible women can be found at local bars and crack houses, getting high and socializing with other adults. Sometimes a troubled woman will leave very young children alone for days at a time. Reports of crack addicts abandoning their children have become common in drug infested inner-city communities. Neighbors or relatives discover the abandoned children, often hungry and distraught over the absence of their mother. After repeated absences, a friend or relative, particularly a grandmother, will often step in to care for the young children, sometimes petitioning the authorities to send her, as guardian of the children, the mother's welfare check, if the mother gets one. By this time, however, the children may well have learned the first lesson of the streets: survival itself, let alone respect, cannot be taken for granted; you have to fight for your place in the world.

Heski2

March 13, 2008

The code of silence to me means that if something happens and you have nothing to do with it you should keep your trap shut. The only way the code of silence is broken in my opinion is when you don't deal with the street, or if you live life the legit way. In Philadelphia the code of silence is very weak, most people in Philly are snitchin, so that code is not really nothing in Philly to most inner city youth or adults. The code of silence to me is principal because that's the way I was raised. I think most of the city don't snitch,

Because they are scared that someone will come after them, and they, life and close family and friends will be in danger.

## CAMPAIGNING FOR RESPECT

THESE realities of inner-city life are largely absorbed on the streets. At an early age, often even before they start school, children from street oriented homes gravitate to the streets, where they "hang"--socialize with their peers. Children from these generally permissive homes have a great deal of latitude and are allowed to "rip and run" up and down the street. They often come home from school, put their books down, and go right back out the door. On school nights eight- and nine-year-olds remain out until nine or ten o'clock (and teenagers typically come in whenever they want to). On the streets they play in groups that often become the source of their primary social bonds. Children from decent homes tend to be more carefully supervised and are thus likely to have curfews and to be taught how to stay out of trouble.

When decent and street kids come together, a kind of social shuffle occurs in which children have a chance to go either way. Tension builds as a child comes to realize that he must choose an orientation. The kind of home he comes from influences but does not determine the way he will ultimately turn out--although it is unlikely that a child from a thoroughly street oriented family will easily absorb decent values on the streets. Youths who emerge from street-oriented families but develop a decency orientation almost always learn those values in another setting--in school, in a youth group, in church. Often it is the result of their involvement with a caring "old head" (adult role model).

In the street, through their play, children pour their individual life experiences into a common knowledge pool, affirming, confirming, and elaborating on what they have observed in the home and matching their skills against those of others. And they learn to fight. Even small children test one another, pushing and shoving, and are ready to hit other children over circumstances not to their liking. In turn, they are readily hit by other children, and the child who is toughest prevails. Thus the violent resolution of disputes, the hitting and cursing, gains social reinforcement. The child in effect is initiated into a system that is really a way of campaigning for respect.

In addition, younger children witness the disputes of older children, which are often resolved through cursing and abusive talk, if not aggression or outright violence. They see that one child succumbs to the greater physical and mental abilities of the other. They are also alert and attentive witnesses to the verbal and physical fights of adults, after which they compare notes and share their interpretations of the event. In almost every case the victor is the person who physically won the altercation,

Leveel

May 1, 2008

What would need to happen for you to have more trust in the police?

For me to trust the police there are a lot of things that must happen. One is some cops need not to hold back records all the time on us. If they keep dwelling on the past we can't work on the ~~past~~ present ect. Not saying people that constantly do the same crime forget about it. Another is the constant aggressive attitudes with the world. They act like I did something to them. I say if your going to be a cop do the job right. Do not half way do the job. Don't get the job because it pays good, get it for ~~something~~ something your interested in or would like to go into it.

Justin

I don't like cops because they jump out on ~~me~~ for no reason and searched ~~me~~. And they beat me up when they caught me. And put they gun in my face

They are viewed as positive when they don't harass me and negative when they harass me and through me on the hood and beat me up. And pull the gun out for no reason.



and this person often enjoys the esteem and respect of onlookers. These experiences reinforce the lessons the children have learned at home: might makes right, and toughness is a virtue, while humility is not. In effect they learn the social meaning of fighting. When it is left virtually unchallenged, this understanding becomes an ever more important part of the child's working conception of the world. Over time the code of the streets becomes refined.

Those street-oriented adults with whom children come in contact-- including mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, boyfriends, cousins, neighbors, and friends--help them along in forming this understanding by verbalizing the messages they are getting through experience: "Watch your back." "Protect yourself." "Don't punk out." "If somebody messes with you, you got to pay them back." "If someone disses you, you got to straighten them out." Many parents actually impose sanctions if a child is not sufficiently aggressive. For example, if a child loses a fight and comes home upset, the parent might respond, "Don't you come in here crying that somebody beat you up; you better get back out there and whup his ass. I didn't raise no punks! Get back out there and whup his ass. If you don't whup his ass, I'll whup your ass when you come home." Thus the child obtains reinforcement for being tough and showing nerve.

While fighting, some children cry as though they are doing something they are ambivalent about. The fight may be against their wishes, yet they may feel constrained to fight or face the consequences--not just from peers but also from caretakers or parents, who may administer another beating if they back down. Some adults recall receiving such lessons from their own parents and justify repeating them to their children as a way to toughen them up. Looking capable of taking care of oneself as a form of self-defense is a dominant theme among both street-oriented and decent adults who worry about the safety of their children. There is thus at times a convergence in their child-rearing practices, although the rationales behind them may differ.

### **SELF-IMAGE BASED ON "JUICE"**

By the time they are teenagers, most youths have either internalized the code of the streets or at least learned the need to comport themselves in accordance with its rules, which chiefly have to do with interpersonal communication. The code revolves around the presentation of self. Its basic requirement is the display of a certain

Bashawn

5/1/08

What would need to happen for you to have more trust in the police?

I think the cops would have to trust us more as men or young black males and not just snapping on us every time we look suspicious and what I mean about snapping is just step hope out the car and throw us on the wall or ground then they read us our rights. Or not just that we might just be coming from the store or anywhere else and say some body just got shot around the ~~area~~ and the cops identify the person and all they know is that he has on a hoodie they did not say what color they just said he had on a hoodie. And you are walking through the alley way or walking up or down the block and you got on a hoodie anyway they stop you and they tell you to get down on the ground and you say oh I've got down and say hold up let me move my brush and when you get to move it the light you up meaning that you. Now ~~use~~ we suppose to trust that. They shooting us over little stuff and nobody going to pull out a gun in front of a whole bunch of police officers while they are on the ground.

predisposition to violence. Accordingly, one's bearing must send the unmistakable if sometimes subtle message to "the next person" in public that one is capable of violence and mayhem when the situation requires it, that one can take care of oneself. The nature of this communication is largely determined by the demands of the circumstances but can include facial expressions, gait, and verbal expressions--all of which are geared mainly to deterring aggression. Physical appearance, including clothes, jewelry, and grooming, also plays an important part in how a person is viewed; to be respected, it is important to have the right look.

Even so, there are no guarantees against challenges, because there are always people around looking for a fight to increase their share of respect--or "juice," as it is sometimes called on the street. Moreover, if a person is assaulted, it is important, not only in the eyes of his opponent but also in the eyes of his "running buddies," for him to avenge himself. Otherwise he risks being "tried" (challenged) or "moved on" by any number of others. To maintain his honor he must show he is not someone to be "messed with" or "dissed." In general, the person must "keep himself straight" by managing his position of respect among others; this involves in part his self-image, which is shaped by what he thinks others are thinking of him in relation to his peers.

Objects play an important and complicated role in establishing self image. Jackets, sneakers, gold jewelry, reflect not just a person's taste, which tends to be tightly regulated among adolescents of all social classes, but also a willingness to possess things that may require defending. A boy wearing a fashionable, expensive jacket, for example, is vulnerable to attack by another who covets the jacket and either cannot afford to buy one or wants the added satisfaction of depriving someone else of his. However, if the boy forgoes the desirable jacket and wears one that isn't "hip," he runs the risk of being teased and possibly even assaulted as an unworthy person. To be allowed to hang with certain prestigious crowds, a boy must wear a different set of expensive clothes -- sneakers and athletic suit--every day. Not to be able to do so might make him appear socially deficient. The youth comes to covet such items-- especially when he sees easy prey wearing them.

In acquiring valued things, therefore, a person shores up his identity--but since it is an identity based on having things, it is highly precarious. This very precariousness gives a heightened sense of urgency to staying even with peers, with whom the person is actually competing. Young men and women who are able to command respect through their presentation of self--by allowing their possessions and their body language to speak for them--may not have to campaign for regard but may, rather,

Krishna

I feel that the police is not doing their job right because they stop some people and beat them like it is nothing. I don't think people appreciate that because at times they do the dumbest things. Some people don't like police because they say that they are there to help and protect you but then they turn on you. I also feel that police at times do their job correctly but they can over do it to. I respect police how they respect me. Police think that they have the upper hand but they do that don't have to now because at the end of the after their shift they are the same regular, ordinary people like us. So I feel at times they are good and at times they can be wrong. We need police in the world but in a positive way, not to be nasty and mean but being well-respected.

Positive, Protect

O

Law

Enforcement

Calm

Eager

{ Cooperative  
{ Outstanding  
{ People  
{ Self-minded

gain it by the force of their manner. Those who are unable to command respect in this way must actively campaign for it--and are thus particularly alive to slights.

One way of campaigning for status is by taking the possessions of others. In this context, seemingly ordinary objects can become trophies imbued with symbolic value that far exceeds their monetary worth. Possession of the trophy can symbolize the ability to violate somebody--to "get in his face," to take something of value from him, to "dis" him, and thus to enhance one's own worth by stealing someone else's. The trophy does not have to be something material. It can be another person's sense of honor, snatched away with a derogatory remark. It can be the outcome of a fight. It can be the imposition of a certain standard, such as a girl's getting herself recognized as the most beautiful. Material things, however, fit easily into the pattern. Sneakers, a pistol, even somebody else's girlfriend, can become a trophy. When a person can take something from another and then flaunt it, he gains a certain regard by being the owner, or the controller, of that thing. But this display of ownership can then provoke other people to challenge him. This game of who controls what is thus constantly being played out on inner-city streets, and the trophy-- extrinsic or intrinsic, tangible or intangible--identifies the current winner.

An important aspect of this often violent give-and-take is its zero-sum quality. That is, the extent to which one person can raise himself up depends on his ability to put another person down. This underscores the alienation that permeates the inner-city ghetto community. There is a generalized sense that very little respect is to be had, and therefore everyone competes to get what affirmation he can of the little that is available. The craving for respect that results gives people thin skins. Shows of deference by others can be highly soothing, contributing to a sense of security, comfort, self-confidence, and self-respect. Transgressions by others which go unanswered diminish these feelings and are believed to encourage further transgressions. Hence one must be ever vigilant against the transgressions of others or even appearing as if transgressions will be tolerated. Among young people, whose sense of self-esteem is particularly vulnerable, there is an especially heightened concern with being disrespected. Many inner-city young men in particular crave respect to such a degree that they will risk their lives to attain and maintain it.

The issue of respect is thus closely tied to whether a person has an inclination to be violent, even as a victim. In the wider society people may not feel required to retaliate physically after an attack, even though they are aware that they have been degraded or taken advantage of. They



“I think cops are important because if you’re in danger, they can help us.”

*-Anonymous*

“I really don’t have a problem with the police. They never did anything to me for me not to like them.”

*-Devon*

“Police need to stop doing Stop and Frisk, and start doing Stop and Think. If we get into any type of confrontation, we might end up in the hospital, or dead. All I can say is try saving peoples life instead of trying to give it to them.”

*-David*

“Police are viewed positive when they talk to kids, and try to keep them out of trouble. They are negative when they’re just looking for someone to lock up.”

*-Troy*

“Cops need to be honest to citizens and to ask questions before taking actions. I have been beaten up by cops because I was outside on my block after 12 AM, because I was looking like a suspect. One cop asked me to get down on the ground, so I refused. So one cop punched me in my face. Then I got on the ground, and another cop kicked me in my head. When I go to the police station, they didn’t call my mom, they read me my rights then had me in the box for 8 hours.”

*- Quasaun*



may feel a great need to defend themselves during an attack, or to behave in such a way as to deter aggression (middle-class people certainly can and do become victims of street-oriented youths), but they are much more likely than street-oriented people to feel that they can walk away from a possible altercation with their self-esteem intact. Some people may even have the strength of character to flee, without any thought that their self-respect or esteem will be diminished.

In impoverished inner-city black communities, however, particularly among young males and perhaps increasingly among females, such flight would be extremely difficult. To run away would likely leave one's self esteem in tatters. Hence people often feel constrained not only to stand up and at least attempt to resist during an assault but also to "pay back"--to seek revenge--after a successful assault on their person. This may include going to get a weapon or even getting relatives involved. Their very identity and self-respect, their honor, is often intricately tied up with the way they perform on the streets during and after such encounters. This outlook reflects the circumscribed opportunities of the inner-city poor. Generally people outside the ghetto have other ways of gaining status and regard, and thus do not feel so dependent on such physical displays.

#### **BY TRIAL OF MANHOOD**

ON the street, among males these concerns about things and identity have come to be expressed in the concept of "manhood." Manhood in the inner city means taking the prerogatives of men with respect to strangers, other men, and women--being distinguished as a man. It implies physicality and a certain ruthlessness. Regard and respect are associated with this concept in large part because of its practical application: if others have little or no regard for a person's manhood, his very life and those of his loved ones could be in jeopardy. But there is a chicken-and egg aspect to this situation: one's physical safety is more likely to be jeopardized in public because manhood is associated with respect. In other words, an existential link has been created between the idea of manhood and one's self-esteem, so that it has become hard to say which is primary. For many inner-city youths, manhood and respect are flip sides of the same coin; physical and psychological well-being are inseparable, and both require a sense of control, of being in charge.

The operating assumption is that a man, especially a real man, knows what other men know--the code of the streets. And if one is not a real man, one is somehow diminished as a person, and there are certain valued things one simply does not deserve. There is thus believed to be a certain justice to the code, since it is considered that everyone has the

Why do the cops try to target our young dudes?  
Because they dirty

And they thirsty  
And they starving for some food?  
Then they are subliminal criminals  
When they are walking through the hood  
You say 'what's up?' when its bad  
Its so bad they say 'good.'

*-Jalil*

It's wrong to snitch and it's not a good idea to do it. If you do snitch you can get killed. See, everybody has to understand, it's not a black thing or a racial thing. It is a mater of life or death. Life is too short and nobody wants to risk that.

Even if somebody sees you talking to the cops you can get killed, even if you're just asking for directions. It's just not worth it to snitch. Yeah, you may feel good to have put a criminal away. But, is it worth the health and well-being of your loved ones and even yourself? Some people say they are not afraid to do the right thing. But one thing you have to consider is the Consequences.

Even if you snitch on somebody for a minor offence like a robbery, you can die. I say this because you never know it might be the person's last strike. You testify against them and that can be your you-know-what. Also, you don't know to what length a person's family and friends would go, to see them not put away for a year, a month, or a week. "YOU JUST DON'T KNOW".

*-Nahfis*

opportunity to know it. Implicit in this is that everybody is held responsible for being familiar with the code. If the victim of a mugging, for example, does not know the code and so responds "wrong," the perpetrator may feel justified even in killing him and may feel no remorse. He may think, "Too bad, but it's his fault. He should have known better."

So when a person ventures outside, he must adopt the code--a kind of shield, really--to prevent others from "messing with" him. In these circumstances it is easy for people to think they are being tried or tested by others even when this is not the case. For it is sensed that something extremely valuable is at stake in every interaction, and people are encouraged to rise to the occasion, particularly with strangers. For people who are unfamiliar with the code--generally people who live outside the inner city--the concern with respect in the most ordinary interactions can be frightening and incomprehensible. But for those who are invested in the code, the clear object of their demeanor is to discourage strangers from even thinking about testing their manhood. And the sense of power that attends the ability to deter others can be alluring even to those who know the code without being heavily invested in it--the decent inner-city youths. Thus a boy who has been leading a basically decent life can, in trying circumstances, suddenly resort to deadly force.

Central to the issue of manhood is the widespread belief that one of the most effective ways of gaining respect is to manifest "nerve." Nerve is shown when one takes another person's possessions (the more valuable the better), "messes with" someone's woman, throws the first punch, "gets in someone's face," or pulls a trigger. Its proper display helps on the spot to check others who would violate one's person and also helps to build a reputation that works to prevent future challenges. But since such a show of nerve is a forceful expression of disrespect toward the person on the receiving end, the victim may be greatly offended and seek to retaliate with equal or greater force. A display of nerve, therefore, can easily provoke a life-threatening response, and the background knowledge of that possibility has often been incorporated into the concept of nerve.

True nerve exposes a lack of fear of dying. Many feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over the principle of respect. In fact, among the hard-core street-oriented, the clear risk of violent death may be preferable to being "dissed" by another. The youths who have internalized this attitude and convincingly display it in their public bearing are among the most threatening people of all, for it is commonly assumed that they fear no man. As the people of the community say, "They are the baddest dudes on the street." They often lead an existential life that may acquire meaning only when they are faced with the possibility of imminent death.

David

Mar 13, 08

② The Code of Silence means stop  
Shitching. ~~people get~~ It's a difference  
between snitching and speaking up.  
People get them mixed up some times.  
Snitching is when you tell ~~someone~~ on someone  
to get your self out of trouble. Speaking  
is when you let someone know ahead of  
time. ~~For me~~ For me it's a  
Principal because That's the way  
I was raised ~~to not~~ not to  
snitch. One time when I was a young  
boy me and my young boy was doing  
some bad sh. and he ratted and  
I got in trouble but ~~he~~ he didn't.  
So ~~ever~~ every since then I didn't want  
to snitch.

else's life--for the right reasons, if the situation demands it. When others believe this is one's position, it gives one a real sense of power on the streets. Such credibility is what many inner-city youths strive to achieve, whether they are decent or street-oriented, both because of its practical defensive value and because of the positive way it makes them feel about themselves. The difference between the decent and the street-oriented youth is often that the decent youth makes a conscious decision to appear tough and manly; in another setting--with teachers, say, or at his part-time job--he can be polite and deferential. The street-oriented youth, on the other hand, has made the concept of manhood a part of his very identity; he has difficulty manipulating it--it often controls him.

## **GIRLS AND BOYS**

INCREASINGLY, teenage girls are mimicking the boys and trying to have their own version of "manhood." Their goal is the same--to get respect, to be recognized as capable of setting or maintaining a certain standard. They try to achieve this end in the ways that have been established by the boys, including posturing, abusive language, and the use of violence to resolve disputes, but the issues for the girls are different. Although conflicts over turf and status exist among the girls, the majority of disputes seem rooted in assessments of beauty (which girl in a group is "the cutest"), competition over boyfriends, and attempts to regulate other people's knowledge of and opinions about a girl's behavior or that of someone close to her, especially her mother.

A major cause of conflicts among girls is "he say, she say." This practice begins in the early school years and continues through high school. It occurs when "people," particularly girls, talk about others, thus putting their "business in the streets." Usually one girl will say something negative about another in the group, most often behind the person's back. The remark will then get back to the person talked about. She may retaliate or her friends may feel required to "take up for" her. In essence this is a form of group gossiping in which individuals are negatively assessed and evaluated. As with much gossip, the things said may or may not be true, but the point is that such imputations can cast aspersions on a person's good name. The accused is required to defend herself against the slander, which can result in

It seems like every time someone gets shot  
Or someone sets up shop  
The cops expect you to talk and walk  
The nutty snitch walk

When nobody walks their walk  
Or talks their talk  
They want to harass them  
Until they pressure them  
Into being one of their kind

And after all that talking  
And walking  
That person did  
Here comes homicide  
Bringing the chalk  
Out for the people who  
Walked that walk  
And talked that talk  
And now all their family members  
Are remembering them  
By is chalk.

*-Khadijah*



arguments and fights, often over little of real substance. Here again is the problem of low self-esteem, which encourages youngsters to be highly sensitive to slights and to be vulnerable to feeling easily "dissed." To avenge the dissing, a fight is usually necessary.

Because boys are believed to control violence, girls tend to defer to them in situations of conflict. Often if a girl is attacked or feels slighted, she will get a brother, uncle, or cousin to do her fighting for her. Increasingly, however, girls are doing their own fighting and are even asking their male relatives to teach them how to fight. Some girls form groups that attack other girls or take things from them. A hard-core segment of inner-city girls inclined toward violence seems to be developing. As one thirteen year-old girl in a detention center for youths who have committed violent acts told me, "To get people to leave you alone, you gotta fight. Talking don't always get you out of stuff." One major difference between girls and boys: girls rarely use guns. Their fights are therefore not life-or-death struggles. Girls are not often willing to put their lives on the line for "manhood." The ultimate form of respect on the male-dominated inner-city street is thus reserved for men.

## **"GOING FOR BAD"**

**I**N the most fearsome youths such a cavalier attitude toward death grows out of a very limited view of life. Many are uncertain about how long they are going to live and believe they could die violently at any time. They accept this fate; they live on the edge. Their manner conveys the message that nothing intimidates them; whatever turn the encounter takes, they maintain their attack--rather like a pit bull, whose spirit many such boys admire. The demonstration of such tenacity "shows heart" and earns their respect.

This fearlessness has implications for law enforcement. Many street oriented boys are much more concerned about the threat of "justice" at the hands of a peer than at the hands of the police. Moreover, many feel not only that they have little to lose by going to prison but that they have something to gain. The toughening-up one experiences in prison can actually enhance one's reputation on the streets. Hence the system loses influence over the hard core who are without jobs, with little perceptible stake in the system. If mainstream society has done nothing for them, they counter by making sure it can do nothing to them.

mainstream society may strongly encourage them to express contempt for the more conventional society in turn. In dealing with this contempt At the same time, however, a competing view maintains that true nerve consists in backing down, walking away from a fight, and going on with one's business. One fights only in self-defense. This view emerges from the decent philosophy that life is precious, and it is an important part of

the socialization process common in decent homes. It discourages violence as the primary means of resolving disputes and encourages youngsters to accept nonviolence and talk as confrontational strategies. But "if the deal goes down," self-defense is greatly encouraged. When there is enough positive support for this orientation, either in the home or among one's peers, then nonviolence has a chance to prevail. But it prevails at the cost of relinquishing a claim to being bad and tough, and therefore sets a young person up as at the very least alienated from street-oriented peers and quite possibly a target of derision or even violence.

Although the nonviolent orientation rarely overcomes the impulse to strike back in an encounter, it does introduce a certain confusion and so can prompt a measure of soul-searching, or even profound ambivalence. Did the person back down with his respect intact or did he back down only to be judged a "punk"--a person lacking manhood? Should he or she have acted? Should he or she have hit the other person in the mouth? These questions beset many young men and women during public confrontations. What is the "right" thing to do? In the quest for honor, respect, and local status--which few young people are uninterested in--common sense most often prevails, which leads many to opt for the tough approach, enacting their own particular versions of the display of nerve. The presentation of oneself as rough and tough is very often quite acceptable until one is tested. And then that presentation may help the person pass the test, because it will cause fewer questions to be asked about what he did and why. It is hard for a person to explain why he lost the fight or why he backed down. Hence many will strive to appear to "go for bad," while hoping they will never be tested. But when they are tested, the outcome of the situation may quickly be out of their hands, as they become wrapped up in the circumstances of the moment.

## **AN OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE**

THE attitudes of the wider society are deeply implicated in the code of the streets. Most people in inner-city communities are not totally invested in the code, but the significant minority of hard-core street youths who have to maintain the code in order to establish reputations, because they have--or feel they have--few other ways to assert themselves. For these young people the standards of the street code are the only game in town. The extent to which some children--particularly those who through upbringing have become most alienated and those lacking in strong and conventional social support--experience, feel, and internalize racist rejection and contempt from and rejection, some youngsters will consciously invest themselves and their considerable mental resources in what amounts to an oppositional culture to preserve themselves and their self-respect. Once they do, any respect they might be able to garner in the wider system pales in comparison with the respect available in the local system; thus they often lose interest in even attempting to negotiate the mainstream system.

At the same time, many less alienated young blacks have assumed a street-oriented demeanor as a way of expressing their blackness while really embracing a much more moderate way of life; they, too, want a nonviolent setting in which to live and raise a family. These decent people are trying hard to be part of the mainstream culture, but the racism, real and perceived, that they encounter helps to legitimate the oppositional culture. And so on occasion they adopt street behavior. In fact, depending on the demands of the situation, many people in the community slip back and forth between decent and street behavior.

A vicious cycle has thus been formed. The hopelessness and alienation many young inner-city black men and women feel, largely as a result of endemic joblessness and persistent racism, fuels the violence they engage in. This violence serves to confirm the negative feelings many whites and some middle-class blacks harbor toward the ghetto poor, further legitimating the oppositional culture and the code of the streets in the eyes of many poor young blacks. Unless this cycle is broken, attitudes on both sides will become increasingly entrenched, and the violence, which claims victims black and white, poor and affluent, will only escalate.

-Elijah Anderson is currently working on his next book, entitled, *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male*. "Code of the Street" was originally published in the May 1994 edition of *The Atlantic*.

**SOCIETY NEEDS A LITTLE CHANGE  
SO CAN'T YOU PLEASE TELL US WHY  
BUT PLEASE DON'T LIE  
LOOK OVER THE HILLS  
AND OUR TEARS MIGHT DRY  
MAYBE OUR WOUNDS MIGHT HEAL  
BUT LISTEN TO OUR SOULS CRY  
-CHORUS, LISTEN TO OUR SOUL CRY**

Somebody's grandma  
Is getting robbed right now  
By someone who has his head in the clouds

He doesn't care if she gets hurt or not  
He just pulls the trigger  
And takes off down the block

-JR

I thought (cops) were  
Here to protect.  
So I'm here to protest  
For the way they treat  
(Puerto) Ricans  
-Zero

Answer me this,  
How do you have  
The nerve to hit the stand?  
Raise your hand  
Put it all in vain  
Mention his name

When my assistance is needed  
I'd rather speak to Jesus  
Respect my fears,  
It's what you're feeding

-Kash Fate

Without a badge,  
How does a good man  
Survive?

I know my rights  
Innocent and sweet  
I have the right  
To freedom of speech

A simple question  
I got simple rights  
I'll exercise my right  
To remain silent  
But not my right  
To be a victim of cop  
violence.

- Jar-1



JR

Zero

Leasy

Kash Fate

Jar- 1