

## On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City

By Alice Goffman

University of Chicago Press. 2014. 288 pp. \$15 paper, \$25 cloth.

**Reviewer:** Philip N. Cohen, *University of Maryland–College Park*

### FORTHCOMING IN SOCIAL FORCES

Alice Goffman's book *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* is one of the major events in sociology of the past few years, earning high-profile praise, criticism, and controversy. (And Goffman's TED Talk has been viewed more than a million times.) The book—originally published by the University of Chicago Press, but issued in paperback by Picador—is an ethnography of a black neighborhood in Philadelphia, exploring how the residents there are subjected to a seemingly ever-increasing level of punitive policing, from electronic surveillance to beatings and arrests to bankrupting court fees and incarceration. Goffman spent some years with a small gang of young men from the neighborhood and their families, and describes their attempts at normal life, their criminal activities, and their brutal treatment by the carceral state. She places this in the context of mass incarceration policies, painting a vivid picture of a social life constrained and corrupted by an irrational and oppressive state.

I don't really read the book as social science; I think it's much more a sociological memoir, and I don't mean that as a criticism of ethnography, to which I would not apply that label in general. In fact, the book is least persuasive when she tries to be most dispassionate. For example, Goffman addresses early on the issue of representativeness, which has raised the hackles of many critics, and she is clearly wrong when she writes:

Initially I assumed that Chuck, Mike, and their friends represented an outlying group of delinquents: the bad apples of the neighborhood. After all, some of them occasionally sold marijuana and crack cocaine to local customers, and sometimes they even got into violent gun battles. I grew to understand that many young men from 6th Street were at least intermittently earning money by selling drugs, and the criminal justice entanglements of Chuck and his friends were on a par with what many other unemployed young men in the neighborhood were experiencing. (18)

That's a non sequitur, with the typical slippery use of "many" to avoid empirically anchoring an anecdote.

Similarly, Goffman offers a meticulous counting of specific events, but they don't add up to useful information for the reader. I simply discount description like this:

In that same eighteen-month period, I watched the police break down doors, search houses, and question, arrest, or chase people through houses fifty-two times. Nine times, police helicopters circled overhead and beamed searchlights onto local streets. I noted blocks taped off and traffic redirected as police searched for evidence—or, in police language, secured a crime scene—seventeen times. Fourteen times during my first eighteen months of near daily observation, I watched the police punch, choke, kick, stomp on, or beat young men with their nightsticks. (4)

To me, this just means "a lot." First, there is no denominator. That is, there is no way to gauge how prevalent these events were compared with anything else. "A lot" is a fine metric for this kind of observation, because any insights come from the details that follow, not from the recitation of frequencies. (There also is a frustrating lack of precision in these passages. Consider: "I watched the police break down doors, search houses, and question, arrest, or chase people through houses fifty-two times." What exactly happened 52 times? It could be 52 instances of police questioning people.) What this does tell the reader is something of Goffman's evolving perspective and experience. "Wow," we think. "If I witnessed 14 police beatings firsthand, that would really affect me."

Many authors have wrestled with how to situate their ethnographies in a way that accurately reflects their representativeness. In Goffman's case, she uses a neighborhood survey, conducted with one of her research subjects, "Chuck." Unlike the recitation of event counts, the survey is potentially reproducible. Other researchers could conceivably conduct similar research in a different place or time and draw useful comparisons. However, the book contains no information on how the survey was conducted. Somehow, she and Chuck apparently collected information on 308 young men from 217 households—too many men for that number of households—based on unknown criteria, and including extremely sensitive information on outstanding warrants (reportedly issued to almost half of them in the previous three years). She writes that "Chuck and I went door to door" and "interviewed 308 men" (18), but in the earlier version published in the *American Sociology Review* (Goffman 2009), she noted that an unspecified number of

the men were actually not living there. So, how was the information collected? In the 50-page “methodological note,” there is no mention of the survey. Thus, the survey, like the detailed count of events she witnessed, provides not usable information, but rather dramatization dressed as data.<sup>1</sup>

From her own account, Goffman’s entire project was shaped not by a carefully considered research design, but by the relationship she happened to strike up as an undergraduate with a single man and his friends. This is the appealing aspect of the sociological memoir—she found herself in an interesting social situation, and activated her (at the time, untrained) investigative powers to see what she could learn. There is a great book in that, but it’s not a great book of research.

As people who engage in multiple running gun battles, her subjects clearly were an “outlying group.” Yet, Goffman would have her readers believe, on little evidence, that the neighborhood stands with these young men who commit mayhem and murder in their midst, as they would any innocent victim of oppression. Maybe—we can’t know. This is an important point, however, because as journalist [Jill Leovy \(2015\)](#) recently argued, poor black communities are both *over*-policed (as innocent people are harassed, violated, prosecuted, and incarcerated) and *under*-policed (such that murderers in black communities are much less likely to be arrested and convicted than are those who kill whites). This latter neglect by police contributes to the real problem of violence because it encourages informal (violent) means of addressing conflict in the community. By this reasoning, we might expect majorities of people in violent black neighborhoods to desire less incarceration of drug users, but more incarceration of the people like those Goffman studied. In any event, the larger research question, and the important one for policy and politics, of the increasingly intrusive reach of the police and courts into the daily lives of black communities, might have been better addressed with less extreme research subjects.

Goffman’s description of the many ways the incarceration empire impinges on the lives of poor black people in Philadelphia is sometimes insightful and useful. And I mostly agree with her political description and conclusions about the injustices here. The book is deeply flawed, but it’s worth reading. Its systematic evidence is weak, but it offers lots of food for thought for research and policy debates. It’s well written, and its topic is important. I look forward to what Goffman will do next.

## Note

1. My critique of Goffman’s survey is detailed in [Cohen \(2015\)](#).

## References

- Cohen, Philip N. 2015. “Survey and Ethnography: Comment on Goffman’s *On the Run*.” <http://www.terpconnect.umd.edu/~pnc/working/GoffmanComment-06-22-15.pdf>.
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