Dr. Sudhir Venkatesh is a sociology professor at Columbia University. He has a history of studying poverty in America. This book details his work as a graduate student at the University of Chicago where he studied gang life from a new perspective of sociologist in training and adjunct gang friend.

The development of Venkatesh’s questions began with William Julius Wilson’s study of how young blacks were affected by poverty. As he moves about the city in areas he is warned against, he wonders what the benefits of gang membership are. He begins wanting to survey gang members and befriends a local leader of the Black Kings, J.T., in the Oakland neighborhood of Chicago. When the gang leader gets moved to a new territory, he does research as a welcome observer in the Robert Taylor Homes for four years until they are demolished. Venkatesh shadows J.T. and learns about the intricate nature of gang management and governmental structure, gang-community relationships, sub-bureaucratic politics, and housing project economies.

As a middle class Indian, Venkatesh is schooled on how much the urban poor are not part of the mainstream community and do not benefit from the municipal services to the same degree, or how following the same traditional educational track through high school and college do not guarantee success and middle-income lifestyles. J.T. is actually a college graduate frustrated with workplace racism who chose the alternative gang life to make money. J.T.’s ambition is to move up in the leadership ranks so that he earns a six-figure salary, and eventually he does.

One of the ways a gang can thrive in a community is to provide services that the city, though obligated, does not fulfill or takes too long to fulfill. The police and ambulance rarely responded to calls in the Robert Taylor Homes, so the gang investigates robberies, assaults, rapes, etc., and enacts vigilante justice. Tenant building presidents and residents pay taxes to the gang, and the gang maintains order (or moderate order) within the
subcommunity. The gang had a deep relationship with the building tenant association president, Ms. Bailey.

This strategy helps gang-community relationships, but there are other ways that gangs “play nice” with the community. Sometimes this has altruistic motives, and sometimes it is to protect and increase profits. Gang members looking for promotion provided security, escorts for elderly in the neighborhood, and cleanup for the projects. In this story, the Black Kings provided money for basketball tournaments and back-to-school school supply drives, and participated in voter registration drives. Donations were given to churches to host meetings or clean up money. Often, the voter registration drives were a part of the political manipulation to keep aldermen and leaders who were on the gang payroll in office. Yet, it looked as if the youth were giving back to the community.

Venkatesh eventually gets freedom from J.T. to investigate how the urban poor survive and make money. There is an underground housing project economy that is successful in a large part because of geographic location. Within the hundreds of residents in neighboring buildings, one can find pimps, prostitutes, daycare apartments, tax preparers, candy stores, mechanics, carpenters, brothels, shelters, hair salons, and liquor stores. J.T. and Mrs. Bailey collected taxes on these illegal businesses in exchange for security and referrals. Since J.T. and Mrs. Bailey have connections with the housing authority officials and local leaders, they become advocates for the residents, but that comes at a cost. Single mothers create networks for childcare, food stamps, and utilities, so when the housing projects get demolished these mothers lose their support system. This is what began to happen when the demolition process began. The protection that the housing project offers is now replaced with competition in a system that is corrupt and strained for resources.

Venkatesh challenges J.T. by saying that it doesn’t look like he does anything but patrol the area all day, so J.T. gives up some of his control and makes Venkatesh the gang leader for a day. This is when Venkatesh begins to understand the economic and social decisions that must be made and the fact that all decisions have consequences. Venkatesh learns from this experience that nothing is as simple as it appears, and that poor
people have often been blamed for being poor when there are many factors that help them remain in their economic class.

QUOTATIONS

Just another day as an outsider looking at life from the inside. That’s what this book is about. (xiv)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION
1. Are you aware of the gang culture in your local community?
2. Does the community, schools, or churches have programs responding to gangs or does the community solely police gangs?
3. Does your political leadership and bureaucratic structure in the city create a space for gangs to flourish? How so? Why not?
4. What are the economic factors that contribute to gangs in your area?

IMPLICATIONS
When academics, politicians, and teachers think they know what life is like for poor or minority people to live in or compete with the mainstream population, and they use this knowledge to make decisions about what should happen in those communities, people are not served as well as they could or should be. We must be careful that we do not become experts about things we do not actually experience. People work within their power and in response to circumstances. If we give them a voice and listen to it, they could be empowered to make changes for themselves. It is possible to work together as equals, but only after we form authentic relationships.

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