

# Selling crack in el barrio sociology essay



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Society sets standards for us to strive toward, and offers a limited set of accepted means through which we can reach these standards.

Unfortunately, the means accepted by society are not available to everyone.

The lack of equal opportunity in our society compels certain groups to resort to deviant behavior in order to achieve their goals, or even just to survive.

Deviance or deviant behavior is behavior that goes against accepted formal and informal social norms. Crime falls into the category of deviance that

goes against formal social norms, or written laws and regulations. Groups

that engage in deviant behavior are generally stigmatized by society, and in

turn, are subject to marginalization. One such group is the immense

subculture of drug dealers. A subculture is a group that has cultural values

and behavioral patterns distinctive of a particular group in a society. In his

account titled *In Search of Respect*, ethnographic researcher Philippe

Bourgois goes into the depths of this subculture and examines why drug

dealers live the way they do and how their occupation is a not just a personal

choice, but a product of society.

In addition to illustrating the social production of blocked opportunities for

residents in Bourgois's ground breaking book, he also provides an interesting

new insight into the street culture found in New York City by examining the

effects of illegal drugs on a minority group. Specifically, the book focuses on

the experiences and lives of Puerto Rican crack cocaine dealers and users as

well as their friends, families and girlfriends, each of whom Bourgois depicts

as victims of circumstance. In doing so, the author vividly details and

analyzes the effects of structural inequality and social marginalization in the

United States.

Bourgois, with his wife and child, moved into a tenement apartment in a small neighborhood in New York City named East Harlem in 1985. To residents, this neighborhood was simply known as “ El Barrio.” To conduct his study, Bourgois and his family spent the next five years living among the harsh realities of the ghetto streets. The purpose of this was to infiltrate, assimilate, and participate in the daily workings of the community as much as possible to gain a better understanding of the circumstances these poor and suffering Puerto Rican residents faced. As such, the ultimate goal was to gain entrance to a network of Puerto Rican crack dealers as well as their network of relatives and acquaintances.

During his five year stint in “ El Barrio,” Bourgois engaged in intensive participant observation among the informants who allowed him to penetrate the secretive culture of the underground economy. He provides the reader with verbatim narratives taken from his conversations with drug dealers, police officers (who occasionally mistook him for a drug addict), and drug users Bourgois uses the account of his subject and friend named Primo to illustrate the circumstances of drug dealers and the reasons they resort to illegal jobs. The norms of drug dealers include street sales, drug houses, violent crime, and respect associated with the status of a drug dealer. Having the identity of a drug dealer attributes a sense of power and pride to a man, even if it is just in his neighborhood. It prevents him from having to bear the humiliation of being degraded or belittled by a superior while working at a legal job.

Bourgois’ book focuses on a relatively unexamined section of the drug industry, the local

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dealers, some of whom are, or have been drug users. He notes that most of them started out in

legitimate work, often prematurely by truanting from school, not a difficult thing to do in the

inner city. However their entrepreneurial skills have not enabled them to escape from the most

vulnerable wage sector. The poorest jobs fail to satisfy them while their backgrounds make it

impossible for them to sustain contact with more promising possibilities. Still they are

unwilling to lie down to the system. They have made the most of their limited opportunities by

finding a niche in the illegal drug market. Although nobody is more aware than they are of the

ultimate hopelessness of this, nevertheless in the meantime it gives them the buzz, the status

and the income their yuppie contemporaries find a few blocks away in Wall St.

- very well-written, as the author uses a plain, easy-to-read and understand style.

- He is arguing that answers to society's most pressing issues are a lot more than mere blame-the-system or blame-the-victim approaches. It is far too common for liberals and conservatives, respectively, to blame society or to blame pathological, flawed individuals for social problems. As Bourgois shows in this book, the truth is often a combination of the two. Even his informants admit that they blame no one else but themselves for the situations they are in.

- The book starts off with Bourgois's own experience of how there is an 'apartheid' present in New York working against his subjects

The amount of poverty in this portion of our country is much higher than that in most other areas. Bourgois argues that this neighborhood, which is well known for high rates of violence, does not have widespread violence occurring amongst all of its members. The higher crime rate, argues Bourgois, occurs for the most part within the factions of the underground economy. Some insight into this economy would explain the reasons for higher rates of violence.

This book is a summary of the events that occurred during Bourgois' stay in El Barrio. The original purpose of the book was to write a first-hand account of poverty and ethnic segregation in the heart of one of the world's largest cities. Bourgois was swept into the area drug economy because of the abundance of information from the dealers and their families who all lived within the immediate area. The problem was so prevalent that the focus of th

The amount of drug dealers or crack houses is an indirect result of the lost jobs in Harlem. Bourgois states that many of the unemployed in the inner-

city are not successful in finding work because they lack the skills of working efficiently with people that they don't already have an every day relationship with, something that factory jobs provided. Factory jobs that moved out of the inner-cities left the large minority groups without a collective workplace where everybody knew their task and how to complete it. The current availability of jobs within the inner-city is mostly within the service sector. These jobs are individualized jobs where independence is required rather than a group effort. The jobs pay little and aren't generally respected. This tends to lead many people within this community to become involved in the drug economy.

Bourgois argues that, to reduce the violence within the drug community, we should consider the decriminalization of drugs. This would force small time dealers out of business, eliminating the need for them to commit violence amongst themselves, while making the s

Bourgois states that there is a strong feeling of community among the people living in El Barrio. Those people not involved in the drug market rarely encounter violence themselves because the dealers have nothing to fear from them. Bourgois states that, during the day, children are safely left to play in the streets unattended by their parents. At night, when the legitimate working force of the community is eating dinner or asleep, is when the brunt of violence takes place

Bourgois' portrayal of the dealers and their families makes it difficult for the reader not to feel sympathy and compassion towards them. His argument is well defined and persuasive due to the fact that he moved his family to the

area in which he was studying and had the courage to get in and really interact with the people of this community. The way in which he writes also compliments his argument by drawing the reader in and making him feel like he himself were there. Many may not agree with the solution that Bourgois suggests, but everyone who reads the book will re-think their own views before discussing t

This is an incredibly well written ethnography, it's very accessible and could be read by anyone. Really illustrates the problems of people in ghettoised areas, with restricted access to the job market and a stigma attached to them.

Stigma is a mark of infamy or reproach. Drug dealing is stigmatized because norms of drug dealing completely clash with the norms of society, most obviously by going against written laws. Consuming or possessing illegal drugs is a crime, but the...

The only jobs that provided enough money for the Harlemites to survive on, with out having to engage in some other illegal activity, are high risk construction jobs, which were ran by racist mafia backed unions (ch. 4 pg. 162), or entry level jobs in the F. I. R. E. (finance, insurance, or real estate) sector (ch. 4 pg. 142), where the impoverished Puerto Ricans did not have enough cultural capital or the proper ethnic background to survive in the positions being offered.

Although the world of the underground economy is very chaotic, it all seems to revolve around one thing, crack. Everyone's daily life, that is anyone who is not a member of the poor legal working class, is organized around crack,  
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whether one is fighting rival crews for a spot to sell, or just hanging out at the local crackhouse waiting for a handout. It is prevalent on both the violent and non-violent spectrums of the culture. Obviously, the dealers had the most respect of everyone, and were looked up at by youngsters.

To survive financially outside of mainstream society, one must manipulate all of ones available resources to make a livable income. So, in the underground economy this can mean any thing, from taking advantage of the welfare office, to selling drugs, or robbing people, all of which were employed by most of the subjects in this book.

The only act that stood out to me, as being a ritual was the act of getting high. While getting high served two fold, it served as a method to deal with the reality of not being able to be in control of any part of one's life, and it severed as a way of opening up the lines for communication, as most of all the testimonials occurred over liquor and some sort of drug.

What caught the eye of the youngsters were their nice shoes and the respect everyone had for the dealer. So at the earliest time possible, the young kids would try and emulate what they have seen as an acceptable, and viable way to get money and respect. Selling drugs, being violent, and robbing people, all were skills that they learned at school (ch. 4pg. 194).

Bourgois eventually found his way to a storefront called the Game Room where video games provided a cover for the sale of crack cocaine. It was the manager of this establishment, Primo, who became Bourgois's friend and primary informant about life in El Barrio. Through this intimacy, Bourgois seeks to tell us some things about the symbols and symptoms of urban



ghetto life, the Achilles heel of the richest industrialized nation in the world by documenting how it imposes racial segregation and economic marginalization on so many of its Latino/a and African-American citizens. (Bourgois: 1995a; 14) Bourgois painstakingly records and analyzes the exploits of these elements of Puerto Rican diaspora. The culmination of such fieldwork is collected in ethnography about the urban underground economy and social marginalization

Speaking fluently the minority language, he lived for five years in “ El Barrio” and also travelled to Puerto Rico to trace the connections between there and “ Amerikay”.

His analysis starts in Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island at the end of the Cuban±Dominican chain and therefore of strategic importance to the United States. Colonization by the US has

The concentration of Puerto Rican immigrants in East Harlem has access mainly to the poorest service jobs in New York City. East Harlem is a classic ghetto which no self respecting New

Yorker would think of even driving through. Yet, as Bourgois notes, the majority of East

Harlem inhabitants have nothing to do with crime, far less drugs. It is the removal of all local

industry, e. g. garment making, which has exposed a social infrastructure that is too weak to

support the present massive levels of unemployment and casual labor.