

Sudhir Venkatesh's gang leader for a day



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“ Gang Leader for a Day: a rogue sociologist takes to the streets ” written by Sudhir Venkatesh demonstrates the inner workings of the Black Kings gang. He is able to see the different sides of the gang by befriending one of the leaders of the Black Kings known as JT. Through the text, Sudhir demonstrates how the gang and community work together as well as other correlations between the two. The way in which Sudhir described the Black Kings, who were located in Chicago in the 1990’s, can also be seen in gangs today. Some features include: poverty, chain of commands, and political corruption. These topics were also mentioned in *“ Confronting Gangs Crime and Community ”* by Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz as well as lecture.

In the beginning, Sudhir takes us on his desire to research political, social, and racial reasons why people in the South-side of Chicago live in such poverty. By befriending JT, Sudhir begins his research by first focusing on the gang operation. While conducting his research, Sudhir thought it was more important to get to know the people of the community instead of simply asking them research questions. Sudhir began to see and understand the way in which the community of the Robert Taylor Homes lived interconnectedly with the gang. He was also able to experience first-hand what it was like to be JT, one of the gang leaders, with his never ending obligations. Upon spending time with Ms. Bailey, the building president, Sudhir comes to realize she has great power over the Robert Taylor Homes, the tenants, and the gang. Ms. Bailey is able helps families in need due to her business arrangements with the gang, such as letting them sell crack in the lobby of the Robert Taylor Homes. Sudhir discovered the unemployment rate of the Robert Taylor Homes was at a whopping 96%. He knew this was

not true since most tenants had side hustles in order to survive such as fixing cars, prostitution, selling food, and styling hair. Sudhir is also able to uncover police corruption from the Chicago Police Department. In the end, the Robert Taylor Homes were set to soon be demolished leaving all the tenants to fend for themselves. This is also the time Sudhir accepts he must too move on from the community.

Although Sudhir's story is set in the 1990's, he is able to present numerous similarities in the way gangs were and still are operated. Sudhir begins by describing the great deal of poverty found in the Robert Taylor Homes. A majority of the tenants from the Robert Taylor Homes were unemployed, hustlers, and on welfare. During lecture it was discussed gangs and the amount of gang members would be higher in urban areas "slums". This is due to the amount of deterioration, social disorder, and the great amount of violence in these areas. As stated by (Curry, Decker, Pyrooz, 2014, p. 22) the lowest socioeconomic groups were also subsequently where most gang members came from. The issue of poverty is an issue that is still talked about today. Areas such as the Robert Taylor Homes where a plethora of poverty was situated gave room for a greater amount of gang activity to transpire. The lack of job opportunity and employment made it easy for the gang to convince individuals to sell drugs and get paid for doing so. At times individuals did not even need to sell, they were simply told to hold drugs for gang members. Even though poverty is not the only reason individuals turn to the gang, it is considered to be a high predictor.

An area Sudhir was particularly interested in learning about, was the gang structure and the way it was ran similar to a business. The chain of

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command which made up the gang included foot soldiers, lieutenants, captains, and board of directors. During lecture this type of gang was explained to be a corporate or entrepreneurial gang. In gangs like these members were persuaded with the hope of economic growth and only used violence when necessary. Corporate gangs also held a corporate-like structure, thus its name. (Curry, Decker, Pyrooz, 2014, p. 51) expressed the importance structure and leadership are to any gang. They articulated newer forming gangs held loose leadership roles which caused them not to be as successful as they could. Older gangs such as the Black Kings were well structured, this made them able to easily control multiple location around Chicago. The majority of gang members were made up of foot soldiers who were also the youngest gang members. The following include reasons as to why individuals where pushed or pulled into the gang life. "...family or peer influences, protection, money or material influences, belonging, excitement, or status, and some other reason." (Curry, Decker, Pyrooz, 2014, p. 64) Many adolescents were pulled into the Black Kings due to money, status, and protection. Their low socioeconomic living conditions left them susceptible to be attracted to making easy money by selling drugs for the gang. Teens saw it as a way to help their living conditions improve and be able to provide for themselves as well as their families. Once they were part of the gang, they felt protected when leaving their turf and going to school. Board of directors were the ones at the very top who called all the shots and made the most money. Although there was few of them, they were the members who had been in the gang the longest.

Sudhir not only discussed poverty and the gang structure, he also addressed the corruption from police officers and politicians. As Sudhir began to work with Reggie, a police officer and former Robert Taylor resident, he learned police often willingly participated in raiding gang parties. According to Sudhir, during the raids cops would beat people and force them to hand over their cash and jewels. Not only do the police raid gang parties, but when emergencies arise they do not show up. As stated by (Curry, Decker, Pyrooz, 2014, p. 151) police respond to gangs to either collect information or engage in suppressive activities. Among thousands of police officers, there are many rogue cops who abuse their authority for money, biases, or other reasons. Police officers are not the only one who participate in corrupt activities, politicians do too. Sudhir witnessed an ex-gang member show young gang members how to vote. However, what was really occurring was ballot stuffing. Instead of teaching them how to vote, they were simply told who to vote for and what to mark up. The members later went door to door and forced everyone to register to vote and made sure they voted for a specific candidate. The candidates they voted for would bribe or protect the gang. In many instances, gang leaders would pay off politicians to keep the police away in order to run a smother drug dealing business. Gang members assisted politicians in many other ways such as “ distributing campaign literature, posting signs, and assisting voters get to the polls.”(Curry, Decker, Pyrooz, 2014, p. 142) The corruption of politicians has existed since before the nineteenth century. The urge for politicians to rise in their authoritative power lead them to use manipulative strategies.

Throughout the story, Sudhir is able to guide the reader in detail upon his experiences and research. Through his experience many are able to see a gang/gang member not only as violent and criminals but as much more than that. By befriending members of the gang as well as the community Sudhir effectively demonstrates the way a gang both helps and hinders the community it serves. He is also able to accurately show the way in which the poverty plays a role in people joining the gang. The way in which Sudhir realizes he should just get to know the community members instead of asking them research questions was one of my favorite parts of the book. The way in which he humanized each member of the community was admirable, especially because it was out of his comfort zone. I appreciated this because when others write or talk about gangs they focus on the criminality and appearance rather than the struggle and corruption. Seeing gangs and the way in which they run since I was young helped me understand and follow Sudhir's perspectives. Through the text I was able to better understand housing projects and their cycle of poverty. I had previously not known about building presidents and housing authorities. Although Sudhir is able to present life in the Southside of Chicago, his story is quite biased. The story never mentions a different person's perspective or even a neutral perspective from Sudhir himself. Throughout the story it is visibly portrayed Sudhir is biased and always chooses the side of the gang. Most of his observations are also mere opinions and thoughts he holds. Although there are weaknesses to the story based on Sudhir's bias of one gang in one city, the overall story outweighs the weakness. Having a story that shows the reality of the gang in a favorable way is beneficial to learn about gangs apart from criminality.

References

- Venkatesh, S. (2008) *Gang leader for a day: a rogue sociologist takes to the streets*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Curry, D. G., Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2014). *Confronting gangs: crime and community* . New York: Oxford University Press.