

Singer: America's Safest City

Takeaway thoughts

COLLEAGUES THINK THIS IS AN IMPORTANT NEW BOOK

Let's start with the most important acknowledgment. This acknowledgment must be borne in mind as it sets the context for all of the points that follow. Scholars in the American Society of Criminology decided a year ago that this was the best new book in the field. Period. So clearly there's a lot that's enormously valuable in here. The Hindelang Award has been given by the American Society of Criminology to scholars who are widely recognized as top in the field. If you look at the list of recent award-winning books ¹ you will see names like Daly, Chesney-Lind, Thornberry, Hagan, Sampson, Tittle, Steffensmeier, Western, Maruna, and Warr. Are males overrepresented? Yes. Are whites overrepresented? Undoubtedly. Do academic politics play a role in deciding which book gets the award? Undoubtedly. Nevertheless, such an imprimatur puts the overall quality and contribution of a volume basically beyond question.

That said, one can still offer grounded and cogent comments on shortcomings in an award-winning volume.

WHAT DOES IT INTEND TO CONTRIBUTE?

The volume seeks to refocus how scholars and practitioners think about delinquency and juvenile justice. It is important that the book is in essence talking about both of these not just the one in isolation from the other, which in itself is an important contribution. In my view the refocusing has two parts.

Suburbs

The first part is the refocusing on suburbs. But do we know what suburbs are?

We are hampered here because although the Census defines many different types of geographies including cities and metropolitan areas and jurisdictions and counties and boroughs and so on, it does not define suburbs. ²

¹ <http://www.asc41.com/awards/awardWinners.html#michael>

² "Official government data obscures how suburban America really is. There's no definition of "suburb" or "suburban" in the census's [otherwise exhaustive list of geographic terms and concepts](#). The census definition of urban areas amounts to the 81 percent of the U.S. population that is not rural, but this definition, as we'll see below, lumps together urban and suburban neighborhoods ... Researchers and official data sources sometimes treat the portion of a metropolitan area outside its largest city or cities as the suburbs, but this gets many neighborhoods wrong in both directions. Just as big cities contain neighborhoods that feel suburban, some areas outside big-city boundaries — such as Hoboken, New Jersey, and West Hollywood, California — feel more urban than parts of their neighboring big cities."

When researchers at Trulia asked people what kind of community they think they live in “Nationally, 26 percent of Americans described where they live as urban, 53 percent said suburban and 21 percent said rural.”³

And in 2000 the census reported for the first time that commutes from non-central city origins to non-central city destinations and vice versa now surpassed commutes including a central city in the metropolitan region [not reffed yet].

So the main point is that suburbs are really important.

And, Singer suggests, they have been overlooked by delinquency and juvenile justice scholars.

He establishes for us that there are many types and varieties of delinquency in Amherst, New York, “America’s Safest City.” Adolescents are fighting and taking drugs and drinking alcohol and shoplifting and damaging property just like they do elsewhere.

All of which sets us up with the question: if this place is so safe, how come there is so much juvenile crime going on?

Which leads us to his second contribution.

Persons Beyond Home and School

Singer is making the case that today's adolescents to succeed need support from and the ability to adapt to **relational modernity**. He is in essence describing a new socio-spatial-temporal ecology in which adolescents need to learn how to function effectively to cope with the stresses in their lives.

Key to this ecology are juvenile services and programs, not the least of which are the mechanisms by which adolescents "in trouble" can avoid going to court. There are two pieces to this puzzle.

The first is middle-class parents with money and professional expertise who know how to get resources and advocate for their progeny with officials and organizations. This also includes parents getting the professional help their children need when they need it. But one can ask: although professionals really can help many troubles adolescents, are some adolescents being prevented from learning from their mistakes?

The second piece is the unwillingness of officials to officially label lawbreaking adolescents as delinquents. Different jurisdictions have different "catch and release" rates.⁴ Singer is telling us about "catch and release" as well as "catch and divert" rates.

So readily available diversion programs, understanding police officers and family court officials as well as available professionals are part of this broader idea of relational modernity.

Kolko, Jed (May 21, 2015). How Suburban are big American Cities? *FiveThirtyEight: Boundaries*. [ONLINE: <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-suburban-are-big-american-cities/>]

³ Op cit

⁴ Monahan, T. P. (1960-1961). On the Incidence of delinquency. *Social Forces*, 39(1), 66-72.;

Monahan, T. P. (1961). On the Trend in delinquency. *Social Forces*, 40(2), 158-158.

Singer really makes a strong case for the relevance of this broader ecology. But does that line up with his data?

Two Types of Evidence

Singer presents both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data presented are quite persuasive. IMHO, however, the quantitative data are less convincing. Here's why.

Recall that any author of a new theory has a three-part job.

1. **Here is the problem with the theories that are out there.** Singer sets us up for this with his extensive critique of a number of urban ethnographies. The urban ethnographies that he is speaking about are well-known and important. One of his main critiques is that all these ethnographies overlook the fact that adolescence is a transitional period.
2. **Let me explain my theory.** My new theory needs to be both **interesting** and **new**. What is interesting must be new and what is new must be interesting. Singer's idea of relational modernity and how it plays out in a widely acclaimed and safe suburban location represents the core of his new and interesting argument.
3. **Let me show you the data support my theory.** Again, the qualitative data make a persuasive case. The quantitative data I am less sure about.

Here is my main point about the quantitative data. Singer does not make the case that the elements of relational modernity, which show up as predictors in his "community attachment" model **make a net addition** to our understanding of delinquency that **goes beyond** what we can already predict about delinquency from the models we already know. The "parental relationships" model and the "school relationships" model and the "peer relationships" model are all telling us about things that emerge from Hirschi's bonding theory.

It's not clear that the features of relational modernity discussed by Singer offer us **additional power in explaining delinquency**.

Too Sympathetic?

Another question that can be raised – and I am not sure about this and need to think more deeply about it so I'm just raising it here is a possibility – is that some points of his findings strongly support Hagan's power control theory of delinquency.⁵ This is an important class and gender-based theory. Hagan's takeaway was this:

Nonetheless, at the top of the class structure, males in the employer class are more delinquent than females, not because they have a higher taste for risk but simply because they are less controlled by their parents and believe that they are less likely to be punished for their delinquencies (p. 1175).

I do not yet fully understand power-control theory, so cannot say clearly the extent to which Singer's insights go beyond Hagan's model.

⁵ Hagan, J., Gillis, A. R., & Simpson, J. (1985). The Class Structure of Gender and Delinquency: Toward a Power-Control Theory of Common Delinquent Behavior. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90(6), 1151-1178.