

# Introduction

Only when a man can already perform an act of standing straight does he know what it is like to have a right posture and only then can he summon the idea required for proper execution.

—JOHN DEWEY, *Human Nature and Conduct*, [1922] 1988

Isaac's grandmother remembers that her daughter was "handcuffed to the bed" when she picked up her newborn grandson from the hospital. When Isaac was born in March 1994 his mother was incarcerated. Two years later the State of Pennsylvania passed a law allowing the transfer of juveniles as young as fifteen to the adult criminal justice system. "Act 33" ensures that teenagers who committed violent crimes (for example, robbery, aggravated indecent assault, or murder) can automatically be sentenced as if they were adults.

Isaac was "a good kid," his grandmother recalls, quieter than the other four grandchildren she raised in a mid-sized town in eastern Pennsylvania. Now in her sixties she may never see her grandson again outside of prison walls. Isaac is serving a sentence of twenty to forty years for two counts of manslaughter. Since 2012 he is one of approximately three hundred inmates in a unit specifically designed for youths who are "doing adult time" for crimes they committed when they were younger than eighteen.

Isaac and the twenty-nine other youths I interviewed for this book had grown up long before they arrived at SCI Pine Grove, the remote prison in central Pennsylvania where I met them. Many saw their mothers or fathers succumbing to drugs or alcohol. They witnessed police raiding their homes and watched their fathers, uncles, and older brothers being whisked away to prison. As young children they faced eviction, gun violence, and hunger. They were born during the early to mid-1990s, a decade that saw an unprecedented expansion of the criminal justice system coupled with the disappearance of a robust welfare state.

Criminological theories offer many possible explanations for criminal behavior. Most, at least implicitly, acknowledge the role of rising inequality and concentrated disadvantage. Anomie theory argues that criminal behavior arises because conventional pathways to economic success are blocked

(Merton 1938). Labeling theorists, in contrast, see deviance as a social construct serving those who are already in power (Erikson 1996). Recent work suggests disadvantaged areas offer more opportunities for criminal behavior. Poor neighborhoods lack resources, such as opportunities for legal employment and access to high-quality schools (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 2009; Graif, Gladfelter, and Matthews 2014). Growing up poor may also create a level of stress that leads to crime as a coping mechanism (Agnew 1992). Finally, developmental psychologists argue that cognitive deficits related to criminal behavior are more prevalent and less likely to be counteracted in socioeconomically disadvantaged situations than in middle-class families (Moffitt 1993).

Even though research affirms the connection between socioeconomic disadvantage and crime, the individual processes that connect living in poverty and criminal behavior are rarely accounted for in detailed and systematic ways. Criminologists tend to focus on the social processes that mediate the connection between poverty and criminal behavior; for example, peer networks or the absence of collective efficacy on the neighborhood level (Sharkey, Besbris, and Friedson 2016). Sociologists shy away from explicitly addressing self-destructive behaviors of the poor, fearing it may be constructed as victim-blaming (Bourgeois 2002).

Proponents of control theory could argue that the young men in this book lack “self-control” in every aspect of their lives (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). It is also possible to identify a “culture of poverty” that has been transmitted within families across multiple generations (Lewis 1975).

In *Lost Childhoods* I set aside the ambivalent concept of “culture” and the equally malleable term “self-control.” Instead I approach the data from a structural perspective. By embedding the narratives in the structural and institutional changes that swept through the United States during the 1990s, the cases I present become a symbol for three decades of misguided welfare and criminal justice policies.

In the following pages I show how extreme deprivation shapes criminal trajectories. In the absence of a robust welfare state, the juvenile and criminal justice systems are the only centralized state bureaucracies offering social services. Zimring (2005) and others (e.g., Hayne 2010) have long argued that criminal justice institutions are ill-equipped to fulfill the dual function of punishment and welfare. It is almost impossible to provide consistent social support to marginalized populations from within a punitive organizational framework (Sufrin 2017; Soyer 2016; Comfort 2008; Platt 1977, Stuart 2016).

The young men’s extreme deprivation was rarely visible to anyone outside of their families. They had learned to mistrust government agencies.<sup>1</sup>

During the mid-1980s President Ronald Reagan infamously claimed that “I’m from the government and I’m here to help” were the nine most terrifying words in the English language.<sup>2</sup> More than thirty years later this statement rings true not to the farmers Reagan addressed, but to those families who need government support the most.<sup>3</sup> The young men recall that having someone “from the government” at your doorstep usually means bad news: Children are taken out of their homes and placed into foster care; apartments are raided and family members arrested (Goffman 2014). The absence of a welfare state, in combination with a ballooning criminal justice system, alienates disadvantaged families and makes it even more difficult for them to move out of poverty.

More than any other legislation, the Social Security Act of 1935 affirmed the collective responsibility of the United States for its most vulnerable members—the elderly and children.<sup>4</sup> The Great Depression accelerated the establishment of a comprehensive welfare bureaucracy, but even before the economic meltdown in 1929, public discourse had shifted toward an expansion of the social safety net (Garland 2001). Already in 1922 John Dewey published his foundational work, *Human Nature and Conduct*, where he argued that the individual and society are inseparably intertwined. According to Dewey individual shortcomings originate in malformed habits that develop in relation to a dysfunctional social environment. Today, Dewey’s “Of Human Conduct” offers a philosophical alternative to the current hyperindividualistic and increasingly chauvinistic political discourse.

The data I present in this book calls for revisiting some of the ideas that emerged in the early twentieth century and became institutionalized during the decades of postwar prosperity (Garland 2001). Even though the contemporary United States could not be ideologically further removed from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Great Society,” finding ways of increasing access to social services beyond the criminal justice system is necessary for fiscal and humanitarian reasons (Sufrin 2017).

Aspiring to make the case for expanding nonpunitive welfare provisions, *Lost Childhoods* develops two different lines of argumentation. The first part of the book focuses on the brutalizing force that unmitigated poverty has had on the young men I interviewed. The final chapters emphasize the flawed ways in which the juvenile and criminal justice systems address the respondents’ social welfare needs.

The staggering extent of traumatic events the young men experienced during their childhoods is the common denominator of the data I collected. Most families I visited were entangled in a web of hardship and tragedy that often accompanies the very poor (Desmond 2016). The young men

therefore suffered from a double disadvantage: Their traumatic experiences were closely related to their families' abject poverty. At the same time their parents' severe disadvantage made it highly unlikely that any of the trauma the young men lived through was therapeutically addressed in its aftermath. The life-course narratives show how aggregated trauma and hardship have shaped the respondents' criminal trajectories. The interventions of the juvenile justice system often happened too late, and even if the system provided important social services, juvenile justice institutions still victimized the young men.

#### LIMITATIONS

Before diving into the details of the theoretical arguments and empirical analysis, it is necessary to briefly address the limitations of this project.<sup>5</sup> There are so many contingent, interconnected variables that shaped the young men's choices that it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions about what would have happened if the teenagers had grown up in a society that prioritizes social support for its poorest citizens. Because of these uncertainties, I cannot satisfyingly answer the "chicken and egg" question of what ultimately caused the young men's violent offending (LeBel et al. 2008). I can, however, draw comparisons between the different cases and point out the important similarities that emerge over the course of the analysis.

The lack of a counterfactual group—for example, young men who grew up poor but did not commit crimes—is another conceptual weakness. Being born into extreme poverty does not inevitably lead to a life of crime. Research has shown that children have different levels of resilience depending on, for example, cognitive abilities, self-esteem, and parenting competence (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw 2008; Masten 2001; Masten and Coatsworth 1998). The young men I interviewed are undoubtedly extreme cases. I treat the thirty original respondents as a Weberian ideal type. It is their outlier status that allows me to focus on how criminal behavior and extreme poverty interrelate (Weber 1949).

#### RESEARCH SETTING

The main protagonists of *Lost Childhoods* are thirty young men adjudicated as adults for crimes they committed while they were still underage. All of them were held at the State Correctional Institution (SCI) Pine Grove in a unit specifically designed for what the state terms Young Adult Offenders (YAO). I was able to interview them over the course of three

months beginning in April 2014. I met with twenty-nine participants three times during this time frame. One respondent was sent to the restricted housing unit and could only complete one interview. The interviews focused on different aspects of their life-course, from early childhood until their current life situation. At the end of our final interview I asked the respondents for the phone numbers and addresses of family members and friends potentially willing to be interviewed. I was not allowed to compensate the young men for their time. Outside respondents received a thirty-dollar gift card for their participation.

Geographically, the young men's families and friends clustered around the urban areas of Pennsylvania: Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. I was able to interview thirty-one family members and friends. I could not track down family or friends for seven of the original respondents. The missing data is related to geographical location, unavailability of current contact information, and in one case to language barriers. When phone numbers provided by the young men proved to be disconnected, I usually stopped by families' homes for recruitment visits. Many of these visits directly led to an interview. For families that lived more than four hours' driving distance from where I was located, this strategy became logistically and economically infeasible. Some families did not keep in touch with their sons. In these cases the original respondents did not have current phone numbers or addresses for potential interview partners on the outside. I also refrained from recruiting one relative because her grandson indicated that she only speaks Spanish. In total I conducted 120 interviews for this study.

In addition to narrative data, I had access to so-called "integrated case summary files" assembled by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC). These files contain the inmates' social, educational, and work histories, as well as several risk measures collected by PADOC. They also cover both narratives of the juveniles recalling their crime and official police reports.<sup>6</sup> Table 1 summarizes the respondents' basic demographic information. It includes the offense that led to their incarceration at SCI Pine Grove and the sentence they received, as well as the approximate time they had already served at the prison when I first interviewed them.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

*Lost Childhoods* contextualizes the personal narratives of the so-called "Young Adult Offenders" within the larger structural developments that defined U.S. society over the past three decades. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the historical and theoretical framework for this study. The empirical

TABLE 1: Research Participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Year of Birth</i>	<i>Conviction</i>	<i>Min–Max Sentence*</i>	<i>Time at SCI Pine Grove*</i>	<i>Friend/Relative Interviewed</i>
Alexander	Latino	1993	Theft	2–4 years	2 years	1
Andrew	Mixed	1993	Burglary	2–6 years	2 years	2
Austin	Black	1994	Arson	1–5 years	6 months	1
Blake	Black	1992	Drug Manufacture/Sale/Delivery	1–5 years	3½ years	1
Bryan	Black	1993	Carrying Firearm w/o License	2–5 years	2 years	None
Connor	Mixed	1994	Robbery	3–10 years	2 years	None
Dylan	Black	1993	Murder 3rd Degree	25–50 years	2 years	1
Elijah	Black	1992	Drug Manufacture/Sale/Delivery	3–7 years	3 years	1
Gabriel	Black	1993	Robbery	4–8 years	2 years	1
Henry	White	1994	Theft	2–4 years	1 year	1
Isaac	Black	1994	Murder 3rd Degree	20–40 years	1 year	1
Jaxon	Black	1994	Robbery	2–8 years	3 years	1
Jeremiah	Black	1993	Aggravated Assault	4–8 years	4 years	2
Jesus	Latino	1994	Aggravated Harassment	2–4 years	1 year	None
John	Mixed	1994	Robbery	2–3 years	1½ years	1
Jordan	Black	1993	Robbery	4–8 years	3 years	1
Joshua	Black	1993	Robbery	2–5 years	2 years	1
Josiah	Black	1993	Burglary	3–6 years	1 year	1

Julian	White	1992	Aggravated Assault	4-17 years	3 years	2
Kayden	Black	1994	Aggravated Assault	2-4 years	1 year	2
Luke	White	1994	Robbery	3-10 years	1½ years	1
Marc	Black	1994	Aggravated Assault	9-20 years	4 years	2
Mateo	Latino	1993	Aggravated Assault	2-5 years	2 years	2
Miguel	Latino	1992	Robbery	5-10 years	3 years	None
Nate	Asian	1993	Robbery of Motor Vehicles	4-8 years	2 years	None
Oliver	White	1994	Receiving Stolen Property	9 months-3 years	1 year	1
Robert	White	1993	Sale or Transfer of Firearms	15-30 years	3 years	2
Samuel	Black	1994	Robbery	2-4 years	1 year	None
Tyler	Black	1992	Robbery	5-12 years	3 years	None
William	White	1994	Aggravated Assault	4-8 years	1 year	2

NOTE: Names are altered to protect the identity of the research participants.

\* Numbers are rounded up.

chapters 3 and 4 cover the different traumatic events that in the aggregate hastened the young men's descent into criminal behavior. Chapters 5 and 6 emphasize the ambivalent role the criminal justice system plays in the lives of extremely disadvantaged families. These final two chapters focus on how the teenagers' incarceration has simultaneously provided a form of relief while also traumatizing the young men and their families further.

Chapter 1, "Punishment and the Welfare State," reviews the parallel dismantling of the welfare state and the expansion of the criminal and juvenile justice systems during the mid-1990s. I briefly summarize how welfare reform has impacted the poorest strata of America society and provide a detailed accounting of the nationwide criminalization of teenagers. I describe the pains of incarceration the young men experienced at SCI Pine Grove and conclude the chapter by pointing to the long-term social implications of ending welfare and expanding the criminal justice system.

Chapter 2, "The Making of Life-Course-Persistent Offenders," summarizes prior work on the effects of childhood trauma on the life-course of children. I focus in particular on the relationship between childhood trauma and later criminal behavior. This chapter provides a general overview of the different types of traumatic experience that have shaped the life-course of the young men. I maintain that the respondents often faced a combination of what Terr (1991) calls Type I (a singular event) and Type II (prolonged suffering) trauma that can significantly alter someone's perception of risk, decision-making abilities, and the capacity to regulate emotions. This chapter shows that childhood trauma was able to inflict its full impact on the young men's life-course because most families did not have access to mental health services that could have intervened proactively.

The young men I interviewed came of age years after crack consumption peaked in American inner cities. Their lives were nevertheless significantly impacted by their parents' drug consumption. Chapter 3, "The End of Childhood: Parental Drug Addiction and Violence," focuses on four African American men whose criminal behavior was closely connected to their parents' drug addiction. I show that these four young men suffered from a reverse "maturity gap." Adolescence-limited offenders, Moffitt (1993) argues, become involved in criminal behavior because they want to close the gap between inhabiting an adult body and still being considered a child socially. The young men I portray in this chapter experienced the exact opposite. They were forced to make independent decisions when they were still children. At that time they were neither physically nor cognitively ready to take care of themselves, or to foresee the consequences of their behavioral choices. Experiencing an unusual autonomy at a young age

made it even more difficult for the respondents to be receptive to juvenile justice interventions. The young men in this chapter may never have consumed crack, but the destructive force of the drug shaped their life-course nonetheless.

Chapter 4, "The Weakness of Strong Ties: Extreme Poverty and the Fracture of Close Kinship Ties," focuses on the destabilizing effect poverty has on strong familial ties between children and caregivers. While middle-class children remain financially connected to their parents at least until they finish college in their mid-twenties, the families I met tend to sever emotional and financial ties to children during the early years of adolescence. The young men I interviewed experienced repeatedly that the ties to adults in their lives are fragile. Being able to stay in the parental home could not be taken for granted, nor could financial or emotional support. Aside from the traumatic impact of losing a caregiver, lacking parental supervision generates opportunities for crime and encourages the respondents to engage in criminal behavior to fulfill their basic needs (Felson and Cohen 1979; Agnew 1992).

Chapter 5, "Masculinity and Violence: Physical and Emotional Abuse at Home and in the Juvenile Justice System," shows how the juvenile justice system perpetuates traumatic experiences the respondents lived through in their homes. I describe how a kind of "outsider masculinity" (Reich 2010) fulfilled multiple functions by allowing the young men to rationalize the violence they committed as well as the abuse and neglect they experienced at the hands of others. I reveal that the Glen Mills Schools, an institution conceived to reform and support struggling teenagers, continued to feed into an outdated concept of masculinity that fosters abuse and violence. This chapter focuses on the young men's unacknowledged abuse that took place before they were transferred to the adult criminal justice system, and serves as an important reminder that even as the juvenile justice system provides urgently needed social services, it further victimizes children.

Chapter 6, "Losing Children," switches perspectives from the young men to their immediate social circle. I show how incarceration of their sons, nephews, or grandsons impacts families. I specifically focus on the ambivalence some parents feel toward the criminal and juvenile justice systems. Mothers may recognize that the systems offer immediate support but also that incarceration continues to leave their sons ill-equipped to lead productive lives.

I portray mothers' disappointment in their sons, as well as their regret and shame over what they perceive as having failed as a parent. I also juxtapose different coping mechanisms, from disconnection and disappointment to regular visits and daily contact with inmates. Finally, I argue that financial resources are strongly related to the ability of families to maintain

a connection to the incarcerated young men. Being too poor to pay for a bus ticket or to accept a collect call from prison thus is often the final blow to already fragile ties (Comfort 2008). Expending resources on someone who is facing decades in prison is a luxury for families who have to worry about having enough money to pay rent or to put food on the table.

The young men I introduce in this book grew up in families who have been trapped in poverty for generations. Almost twenty years ago Duncan et al. (1998: 421) argued that “the elimination of deep and persistent poverty during a child’s early years” is crucial for raising achievement levels of children coming from disadvantaged families. When the young men were born, a centralized social support system for struggling families had been almost completely eliminated. The respondents’ early childhoods were shaped by the fallout of welfare reform—a bill Senator Edward Kennedy famously referred to as “legislative child abuse.” When welfare “as we know it” ended, poverty unleashed its full force on already extremely disadvantaged families (Edin and Shaefer 2015).

As young children the Pine Grove inmates had already confronted housing and food insecurity, parental drug addiction, domestic violence, and untreated mental illness. Over the course of this book I shed light on the different ways childhood trauma and abject poverty connect to the chronic criminal behavior that landed the respondents in the Young Adult Offender program.

I maintain that sentencing reform and addressing the racial bias of the U.S. criminal justice system are insufficient to improve the lives of justice-involved youths. The social problems of mass incarceration and criminalization of disadvantaged youths will not be solved unless we take seriously the damage that severe economic pressure inflicts on poor families. Like the young men I interviewed, many prisoners have not only lost significant years behind prison walls, but will continue to hover at the very bottom of the socioeconomic strata after their release (Pager 2003; Loopo and Western 2005; Massoglia 2008; Western et al 2015). Rebuilding a strong welfare state is therefore indispensable for those who reenter society without any meaningful social, economic, or cultural capital (Bourdieu 2001).