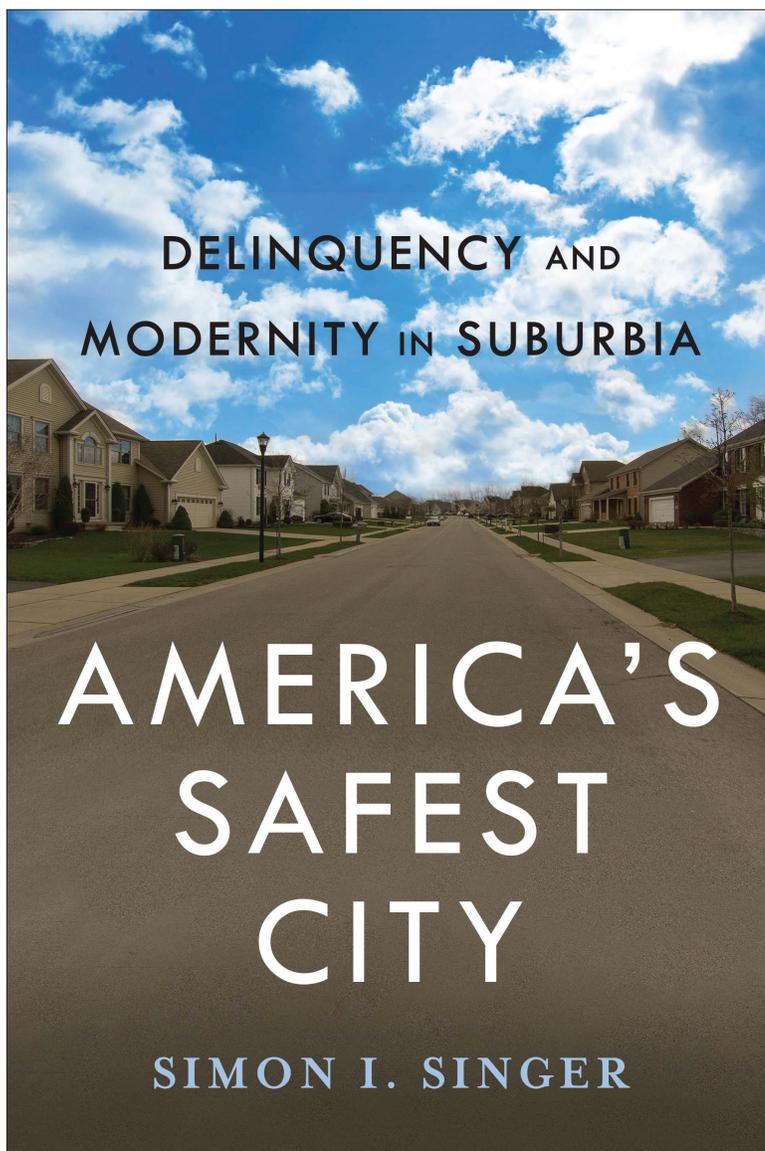


AMERICA'S SAFEST CITY

Delinquency and Modernity in Suburbia

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



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Since the mid-1990s, the fast-growing suburb of Amherst, NY has been voted by numerous publications as one of the safest places to live in America. Yet, like many of America's seemingly idyllic suburbs, Amherst is by no means without crime—especially when it comes to adolescents. In *America's Safest City*, noted juvenile justice scholar Simon I. Singer uses the types of delinquency seen in Amherst as a case study illuminating the roots of juvenile offending and deviance in modern society. If we are to understand delinquency, Singer argues, we must understand it not just in impoverished areas, but in affluent ones as well.

Drawing on ethnographic work, interviews with troubled youth, parents and service providers, and extensive surveys of teenage residents in Amherst, the book illustrates how a suburban environment is able to provide its youth with opportunities to avoid frequent delinquencies. Singer compares the most delinquent teens he surveys with the least delinquent, analyzing the circumstances that did or did not lead them to deviance and the ways in which they confront their personal difficulties, societal discontents, and serious troubles. Adolescents, parents, teachers, coaches and officials are able in this suburban setting to recognize teens' need for ongoing sources of trust, empathy, and identity. Singer shows how in a multitude of social settings ongoing sources of support enable adolescents to become 'relationally modern,' individuals better equipped to deal with the trials and tribulations of modern life. A unique and comprehensive study, *America's Safest City* is a major new addition to scholarship on juveniles and crime in America.

Pages 1-13

SUMMARY

The author introduces himself and his motivation for writing a book about America's Safest City. He tells about his own childhood in the South Bronx and the tragic murder of his childhood friend, Chester Solinsky. He wonders how his friend's life might have been less troubled if he happened to have been raised in a safe city. Or perhaps Chester might have been just as troubled, because there is a considerable amount of offending even in the safest of cities. Still few suburban youth become high offending adult criminals. The thesis of the book is that safe city youth are able to avoid becoming high offending criminals because of resources that enable them to become relationally modern.

The introduction highlights several important themes of the book, including:

- Conceptions of delinquency, safety, and modernity.
- Disparity between impoverished inner cities and affluent suburban cities in levels of adolescent offending and punishment.
- Suburbanization of America and its consequences on generations of youth.
- A treatment oriented juvenile justice system as enabling middle-class youth.

PHOTOGRAPH

- An example of modernity is the fact that the University of Buffalo's main campus is no longer in the city of Buffalo, New York. It has moved to suburban Amherst, New York. In the post-industrial world, the urbanized cities have been surpassed by newly built suburban cities.

WHY CONSIDER THIS BOOK FOR YOUR CLASS?

- Some students will be able to identify with its focus on the middle-class suburban youth. A number of students were likely raised in a suburban town similar to America's Safest City.
- It combines original observations, detailed personal interviews, and surveys to tell the struggles of youth and their parents.
- It draws on stories of adolescent troubles, including those of Bill Gates and Barack Obama.
- It presents a more modern-day theory of delinquency and its control. In doing so, it moves criminology beyond its early 20th century inner-city (street-corner) focus. It captures the lives of today's 21st century world of suburban youth.
- It explains why youth in safe cities are more likely than those in dangerous cities to draw on a wide range of social supports—from parents, peers, schools, and juvenile justice professionals, enabling them to transition successfully into young adulthood.

America's Safest Cities

Pages 15-45

SUMMARY

Focusing mainly on conceptions of safety, this chapter begins by introducing Amherst, New York as America's Safest City. In 1996 *Money Magazine* created its safest city and listed Amherst as America's safest and Newark, New Jersey as its most dangerous city. It based its assessment on police-recorded crimes, but safety can also refer to the quality of schools, housing, air, workplaces, and recreational programs. These forms of safety explain why many families prefer to live in suburban cities. This chapter also introduces the concept of regulative and relational safety to explain why safe city youth are less likely to be arrested and adjudicated delinquent. The author suggests that Amherst youth benefit from the inclusionary, relational forms of safety that prepares them to transition into adulthood.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Are the definitions of safety presented in this chapter adequate? Are there other ways to think about safety besides those that the author mentions?
- Why did *Money Magazine* rely on serious categories of police reported crime? Are officially recorded crime an accurate measure of offending?
- Which is more important for youth: regulative safety or relational safety?
- If there is no difference in self-reported delinquency among suburban and urban youth, are the suburbs actually safer?
- Do the benefits of suburban living outweigh the risks of isolation?
- What urban neighborhood qualities are lost as more of the population migrates away from large cities?
- How is affluence related to safety?

PHOTOGRAPHS:

- Amherst, New York's Boulevard Mall could be located in any car-dependent suburb.
- This Amherst, New York office building is part of an office park and is representative of the newly built businesses in suburban cities.
- Amherst, New York was not only named the safest city in America by *Money Magazine* in 1996, but also as one of the fifty best places to live in 2012.

Confronting Modernity and Adolescence

Pages 47-83

SUMMARY

Meeting societal demands can be quite challenging for many adolescents. The newly built suburban cities of today are deindustrialized and decentered places of activity lacking the industries and centrally located downtowns of an earlier era. The youth of today must navigate less centrally organized ways of living. This chapter explores the struggles that many youth face in adapting to modernity's many demands. Youth who had considerable support from their parents like Terribly Young, Bill Gates and Barak Obama were able to overcome their difficulties and achieve considerable success. Other youth like David O and Willie Bosket were not as lucky. Not all suburban youth receive the social support they need, as the case of David O illustrates. Those who become high offending youth have considerable trouble adjusting to society's demands. They have trouble buying into a complex society that requires them to think rationally for themselves in one place of activity after another. Many youth must confront conflicting rationalities, such as those encountered in the school, family and peers. In an earlier era, parents tended to emphasize obedience and conformity over autonomy, but today that is no longer the case. There is more of a negotiated order whereby today's youth must learn to balance the moral, social, and legal rules in their various places of activities.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The author tells about the emerging 19th century middle-class norm of privacy. He describes a parent reading an adolescent diary during that period. Should parents have the right to monitor their children's emails and social media activities?
- Is it harder today for teenagers to find their place than in an earlier pre-industrial era?
- Do you buy the author's point that society is more complex than in previous generations?
- How should youth today learn to navigate conflicting moral, social, and legal rules?
- Is autonomy compatible with strong social bonding?

PHOTOGRAPHS

- One of Amherst, New York's modern looking high schools.
- This wooded Amherst, New York subdivision provides its residents plenty of opportunities to be on their own.

Relational Modernity

Pages 85-107

SUMMARY

The concept of relational modernity is introduced to explain why most safe city youth desist from offending. The chapter begins by discussing the serious crimes of a small segment of affluent youth. These include school shootings, the rape of vulnerable classmates, and burglarizing school offices to cheat on exams. In each of these cases, the students' lacked the empathy that could have prevented their criminal behavior. Parents are often blamed for their adolescent's criminality. But parents cannot be expected to be the only ones to enable their adolescents to transition successfully into adulthood. Adolescents need the support of neighbors, teachers, guidance counselors and a range of other youth service professionals. The recommended parenting style to support relational modernity is authoritative (non-authoritarian), which would instill mutual respect and recognition. The author suggests that it is most often located among the educated, resource-rich middle-class, residing in affluent suburbs like Amherst.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Is there still a place for juvenile justice when adolescents commit serious acts of crime?
- Should the New Hampshire youth who burglarized their school have been charged in criminal court for their act of burglary?
- Is the authoritative style truly the best way to parent? What makes a parenting style better than others?
- Should treatment of juvenile delinquents depend on local resources? Would it be more just to have a national system of juvenile justice where both inner city and suburban youth were treated and punished equally?
- Which is most important in the lives of juveniles – identity, empathy, or trust? Why?
- Is the theory of relational modernity too complex?

PHOTOGRAPHS

- A child has the helping hand of an adult when entering one of Amherst, New York's public libraries.
- One of Amherst, New York's older suburban subdivisions

Beyond a Street Corner View of Delinquency

Pages 109-137

SUMMARY

The public street corners of car dependent suburbs like Amherst are the least desirable places for adolescents to hang out. Yet for years, the street-corner metaphor has been critical to criminological theory and research. It frames the criminological literature on delinquent gangs in impoverished inner city neighborhoods. However, most youth today do not live in the inner city. The fact that most adolescents reside in car-dependent suburbs where there are few street-corners leads the author to revisit several classic ethnographies. Several are discussed in detail. For instance, Whyte's corner boys strive to please others, live for the moment, and focus on group relationships over independent success. In contrast, Liebow's African-American street-corner men are less organized, and unable to compete for minimum wage jobs. Last but not least, Anderson's street youth lack role models and appear incapable of pursuing middle-class values. The author moves beyond a street-corner view of delinquency by suggesting that middle-class youth are "code-switchers" who can fit into more than one social setting. He offers an alternative metaphor of the suburban roadway that is filled with various signs and pathways warning youth of all sorts of risks.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Is a street corner view of delinquency outdated for all communities?
- What is useful and/or problematic about moving beyond a street-corner vision of delinquency?
- Are the "potholes" faced by suburban youth equally dangerous as those faced by urban youth?
- Which theory best applies to the community of the students in this class?
- Why are some impoverished adolescents more delinquent than others?
- Are the labels "corner" and "college boys" useful?

PHOTOGRAPH

- Not everyone in an affluent suburb is affluent. This is one of Amherst, New York's low-income, subsidized-housing subdivisions. It is located close to a shopping mall.

The Trouble with Youth in America's Safest City

Pages 139-177

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

The youth of a safe city are able to share their difficulties, discontents, and serious troubles. In comparison to the youth of impoverished inner cities, they are more likely to be relationally modern because of the competent adults in their lives. By analyzing data from the youth in Amherst, this chapter presents a picture of their troubles and delinquencies. Youth surveys taken at various points in time are coupled with lengthy personal interviews. The chapter compares high-offending and low-offending youth. Luke, the most delinquent, was bullied and had a difficult relationship with his parents. He experimented with drugs and engaged in other delinquent behavior. Still, when he was arrested for DUI, his parents helped him out and prevented the conviction from appearing on his permanent record. Christine, the least delinquent, had strong levels of attachment to her parents and to school. She kept busy with extracurricular activities and felt trust and empathy from her parents. Still, she struggled with pressure to succeed, anorexia, and parental disapproval of her boyfriend. Similar struggles and successes are reflected in the lives of the other children. Amherst youth struggle with parental attachment, abuse, mental illness, isolation and more. They cheat, drink, do drugs, shoplift, and fight. Despite their troubles, most of these youth had the support of relationally modern suburbia and were able to be successful.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Are Christine and Luke very different? Why or why not?
- How much does parenting impact delinquency?
- Are the problems faced by Amherst's youth common? What other troubles might juveniles struggle with?
- How might the outcomes differ for the youth in this chapter if they grew up in an inner city?
- How did Christine and other successful juveniles use relational modernity to navigate the world?

PHOTOGRAPH

- Amherst Central High School is located in an older neighborhood close to the city of Buffalo, New York. It was built when cities were more centralized than they are today.

Suburbia's Discontents

Pages 179-201

SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on a middle category of offending adolescents. The remaining young adults discussed in this chapter reflected on their adolescent drift into and out of delinquency. Despite *Money Magazine's* ranking, many Amherst youth were discontented with the community, their parents, their schools, or their peers. The author draws on the concept of subterranean convergence to explain how adolescent norms facilitate offending. Many of the interviewed youth related that Amherst is too wealthy, boring, and isolated. Several indicated that it lacked community. They criticized their parents for not trusting them, lying to them, and, in some cases, abusing them. While girls complained more often about their authoritarian parents, boys wished for more support and guidance from their more permissive parents. Public and private high schools were seen as too oriented to success. Some complained about their peers—one particular related how they were not religious enough. A few teachers were described as abusive. Although peers are a crucial part in the lives, several youth felt they were too cliquey, snobby, and obsessed with partying. Despite these discontents, Amherst offered support for many of its troubled youth and allowed them to successfully navigate these troubles.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Which source of discontent is the most troublesome or hardest to remedy?
- When should parents step in to help their children with their problems?
- How can parents balance regulation and freedom in the modern world?
- What could communities do to help adolescents feel less discontented or isolated?
- Are there any sources of discontent not mentioned in this chapter that effect youth today?
- Is the pressure to succeed in suburban communities too great?
Is the definition of success too narrow?

PHOTOGRAPH

- This signage from an Amherst, New York, roadway symbolizes several possible pathways.

SUMMARY

This chapter examined the incidence of self-reported offending in Amherst. It reports that 71% of surveyed youth could have been arrested and adjudicated delinquent. Nearly all youth reported either a delinquent act or emotional trouble, such as thoughts or attempts at running away/suicide. Still the most common self-reported offenses were cheating, theft of something under \$5, property destruction, and fighting. Boys committed more delinquent acts and they were more common for youth around 15-16 years of age. About two-thirds of adolescents reported using substances like alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. Although parent's perceptions of substance use were accurate regarding alcohol, parents thought drug use was much more prevalent than it was in reality. Emotional troubles were also common in Amherst youth; 43% of adolescents thought about committing suicide and 67% thought about running away. A multivariate analysis of reasons for offending found that higher rates of parental attachment and knowledge were negatively correlated. School frustration, lack of educational attachment, and delinquent peers were positively correlated with offending. Finally, community attachment generally was associated with less offending, but team sport participation was correlated with more offending for boys. In spite of these troubles, most Amherst youth avoided arrests or adjudications and became upstanding citizens.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Are the levels of delinquency and other troubles higher than expected?
- Are there any other factors that would be important to consider for inclusion when designing questions for the self-report survey?
- What correlations or lack of correlations were surprising?
- Why may sports be correlated with more offending for boys?
- What kind of programs would reduce problems, other than those mentioned in the chapter?
- Since most Amherst youth did well in the end, does adolescent delinquency matter?
- Do you think a survey of delinquency, drug and alcohol use, and emotional troubles would produce similar results in your own high school?

PHOTOGRAPH

- This Amherst, New York youth center is located near an athletic field, ice rink, and swimming pool.

Safe Cities and the Struggle to Be Relationally Modern

Pages 245-269

SUMMARY

The safe city's subdivisions are many. In each of a safe city's familial, social, or legal systems, opportunities to respond to adolescent offending were related to relational controls that include rather than exclude. To be relationally attuned to adolescents means to recognize modernity's enabling places. But not all is well in a safe city. The story of David O and other acts of violence illustrate the point that no city is entirely safe. This chapter began by recapping the notion of safety in the modern era. Like the definition of safety, the theory of relational modernity is complex because society is complex. The modern world requires its youth to adjust to a less locally identifiable world. Some adolescents struggle more than others. Safe city youth have more opportunities than inner city youths to grasp society's many requirements. For its struggling youths, safe cities provided the extended communities of support that enable a more inclusionary form of juvenile justice. All youth struggle to some extent, and all youth need the resources that will enable them to avoid becoming high offending delinquents.

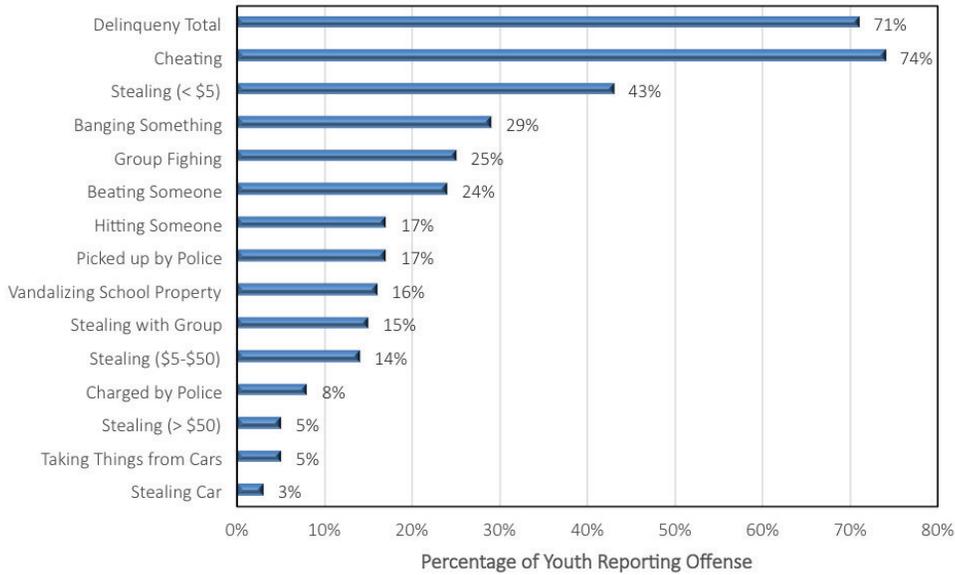
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Overall, is relational modernity useful to an explanation of delinquency? Is it too vague?
- When should communities use exclusionary controls to deal with problematic youth?
- Can the support advocated in this book be offered to all children? How?
- How important are modern parents in fostering a successful transition to adulthood?
- How can youth develop their own autonomy without breaking bonds to society and families?
- Did different rationalities always exist? Why are they so troublesome now?
- What is the role of juvenile justice in an increasingly zero-tolerance and punitive world?
- How could the suicide of Jamie Rodeymeyer have been prevented?

PHOTOGRAPH

- As proudly displayed on a pool and recreational center gate, Amherst, New York has been rated as one of America's best communities for young people.

Self-Reported Juvenile Delinquency in Amherst, New York



Self-Reported Victimization of Juveniles in Amherst, New York

