

What *America's Safest City* might tell us about a changing America

John Hagan^{1,2}

Published online: 3 May 2017

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2017

Abstract America's Safest City is an essential addition to the classics of criminological control theory, namely Travis Hirschi's *Causes of Delinquency* and Robert Sampson's *Great American City*. It provides new ideas about empathy and trust, and how social control is layered across institutions of family, schools, and community. America's Safest City is also about the American Dream of home ownership in advantageous suburban communities. But the American Dream is no longer as accessible to under-employed college graduates; their student debt is at all-time highs, with the return on educational investments increasingly in doubt. Instead of suburbia being a roadway to a good adult life, this paper suggests that it may increasingly look like a suburban "cul de sac."

Simon Singer's new book [1] is an essential addition to the classics of criminological control theory, namely Travis Hirschi's *Causes of Delinquency* [2] and Robert Sampson's *Great American City* [3]. This book ranks with and extends the contributions of these classic works. To Hirschi's essential concepts of attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs, Singer adds new ideas about empathy and trust – or more specifically, relational identity. To Sampson's essential concepts of collective efficacy and social trust, Singer adds new ideas about the layering of social control – across the institutions of family, schools, and community.

Singer's theory of "modernity in suburbia" provides an especially persuasive account of how relational identity and youthful conformity are successfully established through families and schools in advantaged communities – such as in suburban Amherst, New York where this study was undertaken. And it is even more importantly an account - in advantaged circumstances when conformity fails and delinquency

✉ John Hagan
j-hagan@northwestern.edu

¹ Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

² American Bar Foundation, 750 N. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, IL 60611, USA

ensues - of how relational identity and conformity are reinforced through backup, additional layers of external, community based social controls. This is a story of how America's most affluent communities succeed for young people who have had the good fortune to be born and raised in places like suburban Amherst.

There is a backstory to this volume that is worthy of a Phillip Roth novel. Simon Singer did not have these advantages when he was growing up. Simon lived and raised his own young children in suburban Amherst, but this safe city is far from the place where he himself grew up. Singer is the son of Holocaust surviving parents and he spent his childhood across the state of New York in a public housing project in the Bronx. He spent his later teenage years in a rising middle class part of Queens. Singer's careful rendering of the conformity inducing contours of the "suburban roadmap" of Amherst is based on intergenerational insights that are backgrounded in his youth in the mean streets of the Bronx and described by Tom Wolfe in the ominous opening plot lines of *The Bonfires of the Vanities* [4].

The move of the Singer family to rising middle class Queens was an up close and personal experience of the unfolding of the American Dream, the forerunner of what Singer calls "relational modernity." That is, Singer is a product of the post-World War II economic boom that in the 1950s and 1960s lifted generations of Americans into a rapidly rising and expanding middle class. Singer is himself an American success story, and so is suburban Amherst – *America's Safest City*.

This background is important because I read this book as an important portrayal and theoretical account of how *one part* of America thrived, while offering an implicit contrast to how "another America" was and continues to be denied the opportunities to find the same "road maps" to success. Every introductory American criminology course could benefit from reading Alice Goffman's "fugitive city" [5] or Victor Rios' *Punished* [6] alongside Singer's "Safest City." Singer himself usefully contrasts how these very differently located American cities experienced crack and powder cocaine. While crack left its lasting mark on Goffman's 6th street neighbourhood in Philadelphia, powder cocaine hardly caused a ripple in advantaged Amherst. The layered modernity of Amherst's structures of relational control explain why.

Thus Simon's book is a classic contribution in part because it so clearly lays out how prosperously resourced and governed American communities like Amherst can organize themselves to provide the preventive and protective benefits of relational and layered social controls across the intersecting and coordinated levels of family, schools, and community. I read the hopeful message of this book as being that with a more equitable distribution of resources, America's "fugitive cities" could become at least and at last "safer cities" too.

I share this hope, but I also worry that this picture is today at risk of being too optimistically understood. Control theory has often included a dark as well as a bright side. It is a theory of "social pathology" as well as of social conformity. In the hands of Robert Sampson, it includes a dark side of legal cynicism as well as a bright side of collective efficacy. Singer concentrates heavily on Amherst's bright side, disaggregating collective efficacy into subcomponents of empathy, trust, and identity – together with his central concept - relational modernity. The force of relational modernity is so strong that in suburban Amherst it seems to virtually eliminate the prospect of delinquent much less criminal careers.

Yet there are ominous signs of a darker time, even – or even especially - in settings like America's Amherst. We may at last, as Paul Goodman worried more than a half century ago, finally and fully have succeeded in creating a society in which youth are truly *Growing Up Absurd* [7]. Rather than providing a “suburban road map,” Amherst may increasingly look like a suburban “cul de sac.” After the recent Great Recession, a large share of college graduates who have transitioned from America's suburbs report being under-employed. Student debt is at all-time highs, with the return on these educational investments increasingly in doubt. There is growing concern about drug use among suburban youth. Goffman's youth are “on the run” in the streets of the “fugitive city,” while youth “across town” in the previously “safest city” may increasingly be “running on empty.”

Simon has delivered a classic portrayal of the success of the American Dream in creating a suburban tranquillity that is little threatened by criminal deviance or political dissent. He brilliantly articulates how this was accomplished in the post-World War II era. But is this accomplishment more of our past than our future? Control theory has always been an explanation of conformity as much or more than of crime. It may now be time to ask whether the hopefulness of the American Dream that is the backdrop of Simon Singer's book is transforming before our eyes into a cascade of cynical despair - for suburban as well as urban American youth - foretelling a post-conformity and disillusioned cry for change.

References

1. Singer, S. I. (2014). *America's safest city: Delinquency and modernity in suburbia*. New York: New York University Press.
2. Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
3. Sampson, R. J. (2012). *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. Wolfe, T. (1987). *The bonfire of the vanities*. New York: Picador.
5. Goffman, A. (2014). *On the run: Fugitive life in an American city*. New York: Picador.
6. Rios, V. M. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of black and Latino boys*. New York: New York University Press.
7. Goodman, P. (1960). *Growing up absurd: Problems of youth in the organized system*. New York: Vintage.