

## Survey and ethnography: Comment on Goffman's "On the Run"

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### Abstract

Since its publication, Goffman (2009) has been one of the most-cited articles published in *ASR*. In this comment I address several problems in one important component of that work, the household survey. The article erroneously describes the household survey as inclusive of all households in the neighborhood, an error Goffman has now described in a press interview, and the survey apparently includes a large number of men who are not – despite their description as “in residence” – living in the neighborhood. Further, the data and methodological reporting for the survey in *GASR* are not up to established standards in sociology. Finally, the results as reported describe an apparently anomalous social setting at odds with the textual description of the field site. As a result, the survey provides information that either is not useful for understanding the prevalence men “on the run” in the neighborhood, or that lends itself to a critique of the research as describing a highly unusual group of young men whose experience does not represent that of most poor, Black men in segregated inner city communities. Errors in the survey need to be described and acknowledged if the results are to be interpretable.

## Survey and ethnography: Comment on Goffman's "On the Run"

Alice Goffman's study, *On the Run* – results of which were first published in *ASR* (Goffman 2009; henceforth *GASR*) – was a prominent event for U.S. sociology. The dissertation on which it was based was awarded the American Sociological Association's Dissertation Award in 2011; the subsequent book (Goffman 2014) was positively reviewed in the Sunday *New York Times* (Kotlowitz 2014) and the *New York Review of Books* (Jencks 2014), and featured in a lengthy *New Yorker* article (Gladwell 2014). *GASR* has been the sixth-most cited article published since 2009 (through June 2015), according to the Web of Science database. This sequence of events suggests that *ASR* played an important role in legitimating and promoting *On the Run* to a wider audience – exactly the role one would expect for the flagship journal of our national association. However, that role carries the responsibility to ensure the high quality of the research published in *ASR*, and to acknowledge errors when they occur, especially in work of such prominence.

*GASR* describes the consequences of mass incarceration and the attendant criminal justice system practices for a small group of Black men in West Philadelphia. Because these men were engaged in a high level of violence and criminal activity (including a series of shootings), some critics have argued that Goffman's subjects were outliers offering little of value for understanding the experiences of the wider urban poor Black population (e.g., Betts 2014). However, in addition to the ethnography, *GASR* also included a household survey, which served to bolster the generalizability of the findings (see, e.g., Forman 2014). In this comment I argue that, in addition to an error Goffman has now described in a press interview (Singal 2015), the data and methodological reporting for the survey in *GASR* are not up to established standards in sociology, and expected information about data and survey materials is not provided. Further, *GASR*'s survey, as reported, describes an apparently anomalous social setting at odds with the textual description of *GASR*'s field site. Therefore, the survey provides information that either is not useful for understanding the prevalence men "on the run" in the neighborhood, or that lends itself to a critique of the research as describing a highly unusual group of young men whose experience does not represent that of most poor, Black men in segregated inner city communities. Either way,

the errors in the survey need to be described and acknowledged if the results are to be interpretable.

## Survey methods

In the first mention of the survey, *GASR* refers to it as if it should be taken as representative or exhaustive (p. 342): “The five blocks known as 6th Street are 93 percent Black, according to a survey of residents that Chuck [one of her informants -*pnC*] and I conducted in 2007.” To offer a description of her field setting, *GASR* offers this additional detail (p. 342): “Of the 217 households surveyed, roughly one fourth received housing vouchers. In all but two households, members reported receiving some type of government assistance in the past three years.”

From this we learn that the survey included 217 households in a five block area (though whether these are linear blocks or square blocks is not specified). In the next and final mention of the survey, *GASR* (p. 343) provides a vital description of the prevalence of fugitivity (people with outstanding warrants) in the field site:

In the survey that Chuck and I conducted in 2007, of the 217 households that make up the 6th Street neighborhood, we found 308 men between the ages of 18 and 30 in residence. Of these men, 144 reported that they had a warrant issued for their arrest because of either delinquencies with court fines and fees or for failure to appear for a court date within the past three years. Also within the past three years, warrants had been issued to 119 men for technical violations of their probation or parole (e.g., drinking or breaking curfew).

The published description thus describes the 217 households in the survey as the entire neighborhood, which implies that Goffman and Chuck were able to achieve a 100% response rate, with data from every household. However, in a subsequent interview (Singal 2015), Goffman has said the survey was erroneously described in *GASR*, and she should have written, “of the 217 households *that we interviewed*” (emphasis added). Those 217 households therefore represent not

the entire neighborhood, but rather an unknown fraction of the neighborhood, with selection determined by unstated factors. This is a serious error, which fundamentally alters the interpretation of the data the survey provides, transforming it from a comprehensive accounting of the neighborhood's characteristics to an opaque data source containing unidentifiable sources of bias. *ASR* should acknowledge and correct this error.

The problem of unknowable bias is only exacerbated, however, by the footnote that follows “we found 208 men...” This footnote reads:

I counted men who lived in a house for three days a week or more (by their own estimates and in some cases, my knowledge) as members of the household. I included men who were absent because they were in the military, at job training programs (like JobCorp), or away in jail, prison, drug rehab centers, or halfway houses, if they expected to return to the house and had been living in the house before they went away.

There is no information provided regarding how many of the men enumerated were inaccurately described as “in residence” when they were in fact living away from the household at the time of the survey.<sup>2</sup> Even absent such basic information, however, there are several obvious problems.

The most fundamental problem concerns the nature of the sampling. There is no information provided on how households were identified and which ones ended up being surveyed, or what the universe was from which any households or individuals were selected. Even if the sampling strategy was based completely on convenience, with no attempt at achieving a representative sample, the sampling strategy needs to be described if the data are to be

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<sup>2</sup> In another description of the same survey, Goffman [2014:18] reports that “we interviewed 308 men,” which contradicts the description in *GASR*

interpretable.<sup>3</sup> For as simple a question as the racial composition of the neighborhood, without this basic information the number provided is useless. For the more controversial question of how many men have had outstanding warrants, the problem is the same but the implications are more serious.

The second problem concerns the identification of household members. To produce a representative sample of a population with a household survey, the household roster should be defined so as to capture each person once and only once – or else the results need to be adjusted for the probability (or fact) of some individuals being counted more than once. If there is no adjustment (and none is described), three days per week would be an unfortunate cutoff for describing people who are “in residence,” since by that definition the same person could in principle be counted in more than one household. In fact, a number of the men in her narrative have unstable residential statuses, and move between households in the neighborhood, so depending on the timing of the survey they could have been counted more than once.<sup>4</sup> If, on the other hand, the purpose is to gather the most accurate information possible from a non-representative, convenience sample, there is no reason to base the survey on households at all, and no need for a residence rule – one might simply include all those available to be interviewed in any location.

More problematic than the residence rule, however, is the inclusion of men who were not in fact living in the neighborhood. As I describe below, this is probably a large portion of the men included. Some men could have been incarcerated on the day of the survey but with outstanding warrants in the past few years (in the book, e.g., Goffman [2014:104] describes “a car thief [who] typically spent only a couple of weeks in the neighborhood between stints in jail”). However, if someone had been away for three years or more (for example, in the military), what is the purpose

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<sup>3</sup> For an example from *ASR* of a large, non-representative survey of hard-to-reach respondents asked detailed questions about sensitive subjects, and described appropriately, consider Edin and Lein (1997).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Goffman (2014:185) for a man who hides out in another person’s apartment for a week; or Goffman (2014:181), for a man sometimes “spend[ing] a few nights” at an apartment across the alley.

of including them in a tally of people who have or have not had outstanding warrants in the past three years? Finally, by what method was data gathered about the men who were not present but were nonetheless considered “in residence”? Did she and Chuck contact men who were living away? Did someone else in the household provide the information about their subjective state (“if they expected to return...”) and outstanding warrant history? The accuracy and consistency of such proxy reports is an obvious concern.

Methodological information on such questions would normally be part of the survey instrument and available for scrutiny. However, the passages quoted here are the entirety of the information provided about the survey, so the veracity of the information gleaned from the survey is impossible to ascertain.

## **Standards**

On its own, such a survey report clearly is unlikely to be accepted for publication in a selective journal such as *ASR*. Although the survey here is subordinate to a larger ethnographic project, principles of survey design and execution do not depend on the nature of the larger research endeavor in which the author is engaged<sup>5</sup>; these methodological standards are to ensure that the data and results are interpretable. And there is no reason for such a survey to fall under different principles of data sharing and methodological reporting from those governing the discipline in general. The ASA Code of Ethics (section 13) requires that, “Sociologists also disclose underlying assumptions, theories, methods, measures, and research designs that might bear upon findings and interpretations of their work.” The information provided in *GASR* clearly does not meet this standard. The Code further specifies that, “Sociologists share data and pertinent documentation as a regular practice,” as long as subject anonymity can be preserved, which is certainly possible and commonly achieved with a survey of this kind. *GASR* includes no information about availability of the survey data or instrument used.

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<sup>5</sup> Goffman apparently has argued (as paraphrased in Singal 2015) that a different standard with regard to data collection applies to a survey embedded within an ethnographic project.

In sum, the deficiencies in the survey as described in *GASR*, coupled with the failure to include standard supporting information, render the survey results as reported essentially useless. One could stop analyzing the survey after reaching the above conclusion. However, given the importance of the survey for the overall implications of *GASR* it deserves substantive attention.

## Results

From the extremely high number of men identified in the number of households specified, it appears likely that the number of non-present men among those described as “in residence” is large. In general, 308 men ages 18-30 is many more than would be expected to reside in these 217 households. For comparison, I extracted population data for men ages 18-30 from the American Community Survey (ACS, via the Census FactFinder) from the 2005-2009 combined file for 44 West Philadelphia census tracts that have 75% or greater Black populations – those similar to (and presumably including) the neighborhood of *GASR*’s field setting.<sup>6</sup> By these rough estimates, the number of men ages 18-30 averages out to .60 per household.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, the *GASR* survey yielded 308 men, an average of 1.42 for each of the 217 households. If the neighborhood in *GASR* was similar to the average hypersegregated Black neighborhood in Philadelphia, we would expect to find 130 men ages 18-30 in 217 households, but *GASR* finds 2.4-times that number.<sup>8</sup> This might indicate the effects of *GASR*’s extremely expansive definition of “in residence,” or the

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<sup>6</sup> The FactFinder tables report the number of men ages 20-29 in each tract, to which I added 32.8%, based on the national age distribution of Black men, to approximate the number of men ages 18-30.

<sup>7</sup> Note the ACS also includes men who live in group quarters rather than households, if those are located in the tract.

<sup>8</sup> Only 2 of the 44 Census tracts have more than 1 man ages 18-30 per household, with the highest number being 1.14.



effects of some selection method that is not described, or it might result from some extremely unusual feature of her field site. This is impossible to determine with the information provided.<sup>9</sup>

These profound uncertainties have serious implications for the findings reported in *GASR*. Most dramatically, in the three years prior to the survey, “warrants had been issued to 119 [out of 308] men for technical violations of their probation or parole.” That amounts to 39% of the men included in the survey, an extremely high number<sup>10</sup>, especially given the likelihood that a substantial number of the 308 may not have been at risk of violating probation or parole terms, because they were already in prison or were in the military or otherwise away from the area. On the other hand, maybe the rate of warrants is *inflated* by a selection process that included men who were subsequently incarcerated as a result of their warrants, in which case the survey is describing incarceration rather than fugitivity.

Note that this 39% is not the total number of men who were *on* probation or parole, but only the subset of that number who had warrants issued for *violating* their probation or parole. *GASR* (p. 341) offers information from the Philadelphia Adult Probation and Parole Department (2006) suggesting that 20% of people on parole or probation were issued a warrant in 2006. One hundred nineteen warrants issued over three years at a rate of .20 per year for men on probation or parole implies there were between 200 (with replacement) and 244 men (without replacement) on probation or parole and therefore at risk during that time. From a base of 308 men, that is a parole and probation rate of 65% to 79%.<sup>11</sup> That is not impossible, of course, but it is startling because this result is supposed to reflect not just those individuals whose fugitivity inspired the

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<sup>9</sup> Of relevance to the number of men who may not have been living in the households surveyed, in another description of the same survey Goffman (2014:55) reports that they interviewed only 146 women, which is less than half the number of men counted as “in residence.”

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., James Forman (2014), who writes about this finding: “This is astounding; no previous researcher has reported such a high concentration of fugitives living in one community.” Recent research has attempted to identify the number and characteristics of outstanding warrants. Bierie (2014) reports that, nationally, of people with outstanding warrants on one day in 2011, 79% were male, 29% were Black, and their average age was 35. (Among male fugitives, 34% were Black.)

<sup>11</sup> However, those rates include all of the men who were absent (e.g., incarcerated or in the military) for all of those three years. If just 10% of men in the sample were thus removed from the risk pool, then the implied parole and probation rates would be between 72% and 88%.

entire ethnographic project, but the men of the neighborhood as a whole. Indeed, *GASR* (p. 342) stresses that 6th Street is not among the poorest in the city: those in another neighborhood “commonly referred to the area of 6th Street as ‘nice and quiet,’ and a place they would move if they had enough money”; and the local police did not “consider the neighborhood particularly dangerous or crime-ridden” (Goffman 2014:4). In short, the survey results imply that the 6th Street neighborhood had extremely high rates of fugitivity and/or criminal justice supervision relative to Philadelphia as a whole, which contradicts the description *GASR* offers comparing it to other neighborhoods.<sup>12</sup>

It is possible that the field site for *GASR* – the pseudonymous 6th Street – had, for whatever reason, and despite being a relatively well-off neighborhood compared with other hypersegregated areas of Philadelphia, extremely high numbers of men living there, and those men had very rates of correctional supervision. But if that is the case, what we learn from the survey is that the ethnographic study of which it was a part was built around an anomalous neighborhood. If that is true, it validates those critiques (e.g., Sharkey 2015) of Goffman’s work as too focused on an idiosyncratic group of young men rather than on the conditions of most poor Black men in segregated inner cities. On the other hand, it is possible the survey was not properly conducted or described, so that its anomalous findings are simply unreliable.

For the survey to provide any information beyond describing the specific subjects of the study – which is normally why a survey is included in an ethnographic study – then its relationship to some larger population must be established. With the paucity of information provided we know only that either the survey describes an extremely unrepresentative population or that something went wrong in the data collection, analysis, or reporting. Given the lack of information normally provided for a published survey result, we cannot adjudicate between these possibilities.

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<sup>12</sup> In the city of Philadelphia overall, according to the same ACS data, 78% of men ages 18-30 had finished high school or obtained a GED in 2007. One might expect to find very high rates of probation or parole among high school dropouts (Pettit 2012), such as those that are the focus on *GASR*, but in a less-poor neighborhood such as 6th Street presumably a large portion of the men had at least finished high school, which implies lower rates of criminal justice entanglement.

## Conclusion

High rates of imprisonment are extremely concentrated, with 3% of all White men, but 60% of Black male high school dropouts experiencing imprisonment during young adulthood (Petit and Western 2004). Beyond the direct time spent behind bars, mass incarceration affects many other aspects of social life (see, e.g., Pager 2009; Uggen and Manza 2002; Western and Wildeman 2009). *GASR* contributes to the understanding that fugitive status is part of this wider array of consequences, but that contribution is weakened by the survey data it presents, which in its published form adds, at best, confusing and unsubstantiated numbers containing little or no useful information. Given the importance of *ASR* to social scientists and to the public – in general, and in the case of this research in particular – and the importance of the substantive issues it addresses, it is unfortunate that *GASR* was not held to a standard sufficient to ensure that its reported findings can be relied upon. Unless more information is provided to support the survey data and illuminate its methods, I recommend the survey results be disregarded.

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