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# Crime and Control at the Chess Park

Elizabeth A. Bonomo

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## ABSTRACT

### CRIME AND CONTROL AT THE CHESS PARK

By:

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DECEMBER 2016

Committee Chair: Dr. Scott Jacques

Major Department: Criminal Justice and Criminology

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of a public chess park located in the heart of downtown Atlanta. The chess park brings together persons from all backgrounds, although most are African American, poor (often homeless), unemployed, and male. The chess park is nestled among office buildings, college classrooms, various shops and restaurants, and, perhaps not coincidentally, directly across from a police precinct. Despite this visibility, however, the chess players regularly engage in public illicit behavior. This includes, but not limited to, a pervasive and wholly self-regulated underground economy, illicit drug use, and public drinking. Drawing on extensive field observations and interviews, this study examines why the chess players go to the park, how they avoid formal sanction when committing prohibited acts, and, when that fails, how they are sanctioned and to what effect. The chess players go to the park to play chess, for its central location, for community, and to hustle and engage in vice. When engaged in the latter, they try to prevent sanction through passing as normal by playing chess, using props, using blockades, being on the lookout, and showing respect. Such measures are not always executed or successful, though. Thus, sometimes the chess players are caught violating a prohibition by ambassadors or police officers. These

authority figures handle such acts by giving warnings, asking the individual to leave, and making an arrest. Though these sanctions deter misbehavior in the short-term, they appear to have no long-term effect. The dissertation concludes by discussing how the findings inform larger debates in criminology and criminal justice.

CRIME AND CONTROL AT THE CHESS PARK

By:

ELIZABETH A. BONOMO

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the  
Andrew Young School of Policy Studies  
of  
Georgia State University

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
DECEMBER 2016

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2016

## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Committee. It has been approved and accepted by all members of that committee, and it has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Criminal Justice and Criminology in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies of Georgia State University.

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December, 2016

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to the men of Ruffwood Park who made this research possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my family: Thank you for the love, support, and encouragement you have provided me over the years.

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## CHAPTER I: THE CHESS PARK AND ITS PLAYERS

During my first year in the doctoral program at Georgia State University (GSU), I enrolled in a qualitative methods course. The course offered an introduction to qualitative methods and provided students with the tools to design and carry out their own study. Using the concepts and theory found in Goffman's *Stigma*, students were instructed to pick a kind of stigma to study and a person or group with that stigma. Throughout the semester, we were required to observe and communicate with that person or group and explore their awareness of their stigma and how, if at all, they managed it. For my course project, I decided to study the individuals who hung around the chess tables at Ruffwood Park, located near campus.

I had walked by the chess park a countless number of times and was always curious about who the people were and what exactly they were doing day after day. I knew the chess park was a fixture of downtown Atlanta but, beyond that, I knew little about who the people were and their place in society. The majority of the individuals who spent time at the park were black men who appeared to be unemployed, poor, and homeless. University students often referred to the park as "the homeless park" and viewed it as a rough area.

Although the park is located in a downtown business district, nestled among various shops and restaurants, office buildings, college classrooms, and directly across from a police precinct, it was as if the individuals who spent time at the park were deliberately not seen by passersby. I was aware of this invisible line between the chess players and the "normal people" who passed through the park. Day after day, hundreds of

“normals,” as Goffman (1963) would call them, walked alongside the park but seldom, if ever, did I see them spending time at the chess park interacting with the men.

It was evident that a stigma was attached the chess park and the men who occupied it. I felt strongly that these individuals had a story to tell.

### **Getting In**

Wanting to study the men at the chess park was one thing; actually “getting in” was quite another (for a discussion regarding gaining access doing fieldwork, see Burgess, 1984). I knew this would require work because I was an outsider in visibly distinct ways. I was an educated white woman from a middle-class background trying to gain access to a group of poor, minority men. The first time I went to do fieldwork, I felt quite intimidated by the prospect of entering the chess court. I felt this way not because I was scared of the men, but because I felt the chess park belonged to them and I would be trespassing. I knew it was a public park and the chess players did not have ownership over the space, but it was informally designated as theirs. This boundary was reinforced by the lack of outsiders who entered the chess court.

My first field visit occurred in February 2013. It was early afternoon and I situated myself along the central pathway across from the chess court. I had a decent visual of the scene but was not close enough to hear what was said. I sat at the base of a light post ledge and took out a notebook and pretended to do work while I observed from a distance. There was the usual foot traffic as passersby cut through the park en route to their destination. As I was sitting there, a man and a woman set up a small card table next to the chess court in front of the gazebo. They had several small stacks of books on the table and were giving them away for free. A few passersby stopped at the table as they

were walking through the park. About 10 men were playing and talking around the chess tables and a few sitting at the base of the gazebo.

As I was sitting observing, I noticed a man was at the bottom of the pathway looking through the trash. He had a large blanket tied around his waist, his clothing was dirty and had holes, and he was dragging a black trash bag. As he got closer to me, I noticed his sandal strap was broken and he was using a sock as a strap. He saw I was working and commented to me how nice it was to be working outside. We small talked about for a little bit and then I continued to pretend I was working.

A little later, I accidentally dropped my pen and another man who was walking by, and appeared to be homeless, picked it up and handed it to me. He started to ask me what I was working on, and I explained I was doing homework and reading my textbook. He continued to talk about reading and showed me some mystery novels he had on him. We talked briefly and then he went on his way.

I sat and observed the chess court for a little longer before leaving. I had originally planned to sit and observe and then slowly make my way to the chess court, but I was unable to muster up the confidence. I felt frustrated with myself for not entering the chess court.

After my initial visit, I spoke to my advisor about my hesitancy to enter the field and we discussed ideas for how I might deal with my dilemma. He asked me if I knew how to play chess and I responded that I did not. He suggested I could go to the park to get chess lessons, and this would provide a way for me to enter the field. Little did I know at the time that this advice would not only prove to be instrumental to me gaining access, but also to my identity in the field as the months progressed.

I went to the park a week later with the intention of going to get a chess lesson. I stood to the side of the chess court, leaning awkwardly against a tree as I tried to build up my confidence to approach the men and ask for a lesson. After about 30 minutes, I noticed the book vendors from the previous week were back again setting up the table and books in front of the gazebo. I thought I would venture over to their table and speak with them about what they were doing. I felt comfortable approaching the book vendors and by doing so, I was slowly inching my way closer to the chess park. I approached their table and inquired about what they were doing with the books. The couple informed me that they come every Tuesday and offer free books to anyone interested. As I was talking, passersby would occasionally stop at the table and look at the books. I spoke with them for about 10 to 15 minutes and then decided I need to just “suck it up” and enter the park.

I left the book vendors and walked over to the chess court. I threw my hands up just blurted out “So who’s going to teach me how to play?” The next thing I know, all the guys in my immediate area were shouting “Oh Alvin! Alvin!” They continued to tell me he was the best, and he needed to be the one to teach me. They got his attention and he walked over to where I was standing and told me it would be five dollars. I explained to him that I did not have cash on me but asked if it was okay if I got cash after the lesson and then paid him. He instantly said no and it caught me off guard. I did not anticipate having to pay for a lesson and I consequently did not have any cash on me. At this point, I knew I needed to get cash so I could get my lesson. It had taken me long enough to build up the courage to approach the chess court, and I did not want to delay this process by having to come back another day to get my lesson. I left the chess court and walked to

the local convenience shop about a block away. I used the ATM they had in the store and eventually I made my way back over to the park and gave him the \$5.

We sat down at a table and he was serious about teaching me chess. He named all the pieces, went over how they each move, and discussed which piece has the most “power,” what a checkmate is, and so on. He explained to me how chess is not only good for your mind but that it would also help me with school, to which I replied I could use all the help I could get. As he was instructing me, I would occasionally ask him questions both about the chess park and himself. One of the things I asked him was what he did in the morning before coming to the park, and if he worked. He seemed a little embarrassed when I asked him; he just smiled and did not say anything. I remember feeling a bit awkward because it seemed I made him uncomfortable by asking him if he worked.

We continued playing and having side conversations about the chess park. I learned that he had been coming to the park since the early 2000s, and he told me how the park had changed over the years. The most notable change was the movement of the chess players to the currently designated space. He implied this relocation was so the chess players would be closer to the cameras, which I noticed were visibly situated around the park, and nearer to the police precinct, which was across the street. Alvin went on to talk about how they put up large flower boxes on the walls and this reduced space for the men to sit and play chess.

In addition to the physical changes to the space, there was also an individual employed by the park department to “watch” them. Alvin referred to this person as the ambassador. I later looked up what an “ambassador” is. I learned that the city of Atlanta established an “Ambassador Force” around the time of the 1996 Olympics, hosted by the

city. The ambassadors were considered a public safety entity “trained to provide residents, tourists, conventioners, employees, and business owners with a variety of information and assistance” (Central Atlanta Progress, 2016). The intention was “to provide a safer and cleaner environment” for the various individuals who spend time in the downtown area (Central Atlanta Progress, 2016). They patrol the streets and common areas throughout downtown and provide public safety services. Their role and relationship with the chess players will be explored in greater detail later. Suffice to say, it was clear from my initial conversation with Alvin that he did not enjoy their services.

After about a half hour of playing and talking, Alvin made a comment that he usually only does a lesson for 20 to 30 minutes, but he was going to give me a longer lesson. He went on to make a comment about my physical appearance and implied that was why he was giving me a longer lesson. I smiled and ignored his comment. As we were nearing the end of the lesson, Alvin noticed my research methods textbook on the table and he asked me about it. I told him I was currently teaching research methods to undergraduates and explained to him I was in “grad” school. When the lesson ended, we agreed I would come back next week.

I returned to the park the following week to get another lesson. As I approached the chess court, I felt more confident than I did my previous visit. I felt I now had a reason to be there, and my presence was justified by getting chess lessons. As I entered the chess court, two men started speaking to me saying how they thought I was “brave” for coming by myself given I am “Caucasian.” We talked for a bit about race and more about what they thought about me being at the park. They were surprised I was spending



time at the park, but I did not want to draw too much attention to my race as it made me stand out more. I tried to downplay things and act like it was not a big deal.

Eventually, I saw Alvin and we started my lesson. Alvin went over the chess moves we discussed the previous lesson; when I forgot something he had already taught me, he would make a comment such as, “I told you this last time.” He seemed to get frustrated that I did not remember certain moves he had explained.

As he was instructing me, a man came up to park to play with him so I took a break from my lesson so they could play – and gamble over who would win. This was the first time I learned that gambling over chess was a common occurrence at the park. As I was watching the game, Alvin would show me certain moves and explain what was happening on the board.

After they were done, I sat down to finish my lesson. The temperature started to drop and Alvin noticed I was getting cold and said we would stop soon. Although I was cold, I acted as though I was not because I wanted to continue playing and making observations. We played a little longer and then we ended the lesson and he went to a nearby shopping area to get warm. I stayed a little longer on my own after Alvin left, during which I observed and small talked with some of the other guys. By the time I left, I was surprised to realize I had been there for three hours when just a week prior, I was standing awkwardly by a tree mustering up the confidence to enter the field.

I went again a week later and had my third lesson. Throughout it, I casually asked Alvin questions to learn more about his past, including how it related to his present chess playing and gambling. Alvin explained that he started playing the game when he was 11 years old and was a member of the US Chess Federation. He participated in official

tournaments until the age of 30 when he got banned from the Federation for sandbagging, which is when you deliberately drop your chess rating in order to play in a lower rated section of a tournament, typically in the hopes of monetary gain. In the 20 years since, he had participated in private, underground games that took place in pool halls or the basement of bars. Wealthy individuals arranged these tournaments and would place large bets on Alvin. He could take home upwards of \$1,000 a game, but he mentioned that it could sometimes get dangerous with the individuals involved because, in his words, they were “gangstas” who had become violent in the past over the outcome of games. For Alvin, chess was a source of income and a way of life. I would later learn that he had never held a conventional job.

As I was talking to Alvin and asking him questions, I had to make sure I did not ask too many as this could raise suspicion as to my motives. Asking questions was something that I had to continually learn how to balance throughout the course of my fieldwork. Learning how to walk the line between casual conversation and appearing nosy was a delicate dance, as I suppose it always is in social life. On the one hand, I was trying to understand what was happening at the park, but on the other, I was attempting to make it seem as though I was just there to learn how to play chess. Thus, I could not always immediately ask questions about something I observed in the field, though I often wanted to. I had to read the situation, including how well I knew the person or people around me, when deciding whether to ask questions about something I saw versus just observe and inquire about it at a later time.

The next week when I went to get my fourth lesson, I walked up to see Alvin on the phone. He gave me a hug, which caught me off guard, and said he would be a minute.

As I waited for him to finish his phone call, I watched some of the other chess games that were taking place. Once he finished his phone call, we went and sat at one of the small café tables and he set up his board.

There were a few other guys who were close by and they were trying to talk to me. I did not have an issue talking to them, but this did not please Alvin. He was upset that they were attempting to make conversation with me when I was getting my lesson, and he told them not to “bother me.”

Shortly after, Alvin wanted to get coffee and he asked me to go with him. This was the first time I had ever left the park with one of the men. I did not think much about it at the moment but would later realize this was the beginning of Alvin becoming possessive of me. In my mind, I knew Alvin and I would be in a public place and I did not see any problem with me leaving the park to run an errand with him. A part of me also felt as though I could not say no because I did not want to upset him and jeopardize the relationship we were building.

As the next few months went on, I continued to go to the park for chess lessons. Over this time, Alvin became increasingly possessive and continued to get frustrated when other guys would talk to me. He often suggested we go to the coffee shop down the street to do our chess lessons so I would not be interrupted. I would tell him I liked playing at the park and it did not bother me. When he ran errands to get coffee or a snack, he would ask me to go along with him. On other occasions, he would get upset when I would talk to other guys. For example, one time I was walking up to the park and I stopped and talked with one of the guys. When Alvin noticed this, he turned and stated emphatically, “Hey, why you talking to him?” Another time one of the guys had stopped

by the table I was sitting at to say hi. I said a quick hello and then the guy looked at Alvin and said, “What, am I not allowed to say hi to her?”

I wanted to talk to other people and get to know other men at the park. I was trying to understand the social scene at the chess park and it was imperative that I get to know other men besides Alvin. It was frustrating that Alvin did not like me to talk to them, but, at the same time, I wanted to respect his wishes. I did not want to offend him because I worried it would jeopardize my involvement at the park.

There were other unwanted things that Alvin did to me, such as call me “baby,” kiss my hand, hug me, and frequently make comments regarding my physical appearance. It would make me uncomfortable because I did not want him to get the wrong impression and think we were something we were not. I struggled to tell him when something he did bothered me because I was not confident enough in my standing at the park. I felt I needed to let certain things slide to maintain my access (for a discussion about dilemmas ethnographers have in regards to maintaining access, see Ferrell & Hamm, 1988).

As time went on, another major issue I encountered with Alvin revolved around money (for similar money related issues when doing fieldwork on poorer research subjects, see Duneier, 1999; Liebow, 1967). Alvin would frequently ask me for more money aside from the five dollars I routinely gave him for my lesson. When at the park, he would often take me aside and ask me if I could give him more money; also, he would walk with me as I left the park and ask me the same once we were not in front of everyone. I did not have the extra money to be giving him on top of the money I was already giving him for the weekly lessons; I was a graduate student, after all.

I started to get annoyed that he was asking me for more money. When I would tell him I did not have the extra money to give him, he would beg me for more money and tell me I was better off than him. I would occasionally cave and give him the extra cash I had on me. Although it bothered me, I felt as though I did not have an option because I was trying to maintain a good rapport with him. I had yet to get to a point where I could fully stand up for myself without jeopardizing my standing.

To try and solve the money issue, I became more aware of the cash I was bringing with me to the park. At first, I would just bring the \$5 bill and a debit card with me in case I needed to buy something for myself such as a snack or drink. I thought by not having extra cash it would solve the problem when he cornered me for more money. Instead, he started asking me to go to the store and buy him something with my card. After this occurred a few times, I finally told him he cannot keep asking me for money. He said it was just nice to have a little extra. I explained that I don't mind giving him a little extra every once in a while, but it was not okay to ask me all the time. I was beginning to feel like he only wanted to see me because he knew I would give him money. I started to bring snack foods with me to the park in anticipation that he would be hungry and ask me to buy him something. By packing granola bars and other snacks, I was able to offer the items to him and avoid him asking me to buy him something with my card.

I continued to go for chess lessons well into the summer months. Throughout this time, I was beginning to see and learn more about what goes on in the park, the various types of hustling and vice the men engage in, the interpersonal dynamic between the men, and how the police and ambassadors control the chess area. Although I had limited

conversations with the other men, I was beginning to recognize some of them and learn a few of their names. The men all knew who I was and whenever I would walk up to the park they would point toward where Alvin was sitting. They knew I was there to see Alvin and get my chess lesson.

### **Coming Out**

I continued to go for chess lessons through July, but I had yet to go public about my research. There were several occasions I thought about telling Alvin, but I was afraid of what he would say. It bothered me that I was still deceptive about my research after six months, in part because I was worried about being “discredited,” to use another of Goffman’s (1963) terms, as a researcher. I had rehearsed in my head what I would say and was waiting for the right time.

I had planned to go public with Alvin as the summer was nearing an end, but my plan came to an abrupt halt when Alvin “disappeared.” It was the beginning of August and I went to the park in the early evening to get a chess lesson from him, but he was nowhere to be seen. I asked one of the guys if he had seen Alvin that day and he responded he had not. I figured Alvin would be back by the next time I visited, so I went again a few days later. When I could not find him again, I asked someone else at the park if they had seen him and they mentioned he was out of town. I asked if he thought Alvin would be back later this week; he did not know.

I went again a week later and Alvin was still missing. I was not sure what to make of this new situation because Alvin was my primary contact at the park and now he had disappeared. The other men kept asking if I was going to play, and I was beginning to think I needed to start playing chess because that was why I was at the park in the first

place. The men did not know I was doing research, and it was odd for me to show up continually and not play chess. Up to this point, I had only been getting lessons from Alvin and had not played chess with anyone else. I decided to ask Ralph, one of the men I had informally talked to during the past few months, if he would be able to find someone who was at my “level” that I could play against. He agreed and said he would set up a chess game for me the following day.

As scheduled, I went to the park and looked for Ralph. He caught my eyes and remembered our conversation from yesterday and said he was going to find someone. I waited by one of the tables and he came by after a few minutes and said, “I got you, I didn’t go nowhere.” A short while after, I started to play a game against Norris, a man I had not met before. I let him know I was a beginner and he was nice and explained chess moves to me as the game was progressing.

Although I was unsure about playing chess with other men, I knew I needed to continue to play and engage with the other men because it was unclear if or when Alvin would return. I was worried because my primary contact was gone and, although I had been coming to the park for six months, I did not know the other men well for the reason I explained above. To be fair to him, Alvin played an instrumental role in shaping the process of me getting in, but I needed to branch out and get to know the other men at the park to continue my project.

With still no sign of Alvin, over the next few months I began to build rapport with the other men. I would continue to go to the park multiple times a week, play and watch chess games, and engage in informal conversations. As time went on, the men would ask me questions about myself and I would explain to them that I was a graduate student at

GSU and was studying Criminal Justice. This would frequently raise suspicion, but I would repeatedly assure them I was not a cop nor was I working with them.

I got to know more of the men by name and started to learn more about their backgrounds. One of these individuals was Damien. We discovered we were both from California, albeit drastically different areas, and we bonded over our home state pride. He was one of the men who would frequently help arrange a game for me if I wanted to play, and he would let me know which of the men I should “watch out for” and not trust.

Another chess player, Ralph, had taken me under his wing after Alvin left. He did not have the best reputation among the men, as he was seen as less trustworthy and I was warned to watch out for him. Nonetheless, he was one of the men with whom I grew close. He would give me a “fist bump” when I would walk up to the park, help me find a game if I wanted, and would let people know I was “cool.”

Yet another individual I had started to build a relationship with was Rolland. He was one of the guys I would talk to even when Alvin was still around. He would sometimes call me “Chess Queen” and would frequently mention he would be willing to teach me lessons since Alvin was gone.

I got to know other players, as well, on a less close basis. Julian, for instance, was always respectful and would make sure I was safe during my time at the park. There was Nolan, a young man in his early 20s who worked at a local pizza shop. And Landon, a quiet man in his late 20s who worked at a local university as a janitor.

I was learning more and more about the social dynamics between the men and the different roles they took on in the park. For example, I learned two men regularly sold single cigarettes and that there was one man everyone knew was “crazy” and to ignore



him. The men began to trust me more as time went on, in part because they became less suspicious that I was working for the police. For example, in October 2013, I went to the park in the early evening and was sitting at a table observing a chess game. Ralph started to roll a “blunt” and made a comment out loud to the table stating, “She don’t smoke, but she ain’t lame.” This comment affirmed to me that Ralph trusted me enough to know that I would not report his crime to the authorities, be it the police or the ambassadors.

Nonetheless, and nine months in to going to the chess park, I was still trying to pass as a mere chess player rather than admit to my research interests. I did not like feeling as though I had a secret to hide, plus I wanted to go public so I could move forward with my study by conducting interviews. My main concern with going public was that the players would not be receptive toward the project, which could effectively ruin my acceptance at the park.

Toward the end of October, a moment to “come clean” arose. I had stopped by the park one evening and was getting ready to leave when Damien pulled me aside and asked if he could talk to me. We moved to the fringe of the chess area and he said, “I know you probably get this a lot, but do you have any spare change?” He said he did not get paid until Friday and he needed money for the bus fare. I was reluctant because I had made a point of not giving money out to the guys at the park. Up until this point, very few men had asked me for money, and aside from Alvin, I only gave a few dollars to two or so other men.

I felt that Damien and I had built a rapport and I appreciated him looking out after me. I asked him how much he needed for the bus fare and he said whatever I could give him would be helpful. I pulled out my wallet and gave him my public transit fare card,

but I told him I was not sure if there was any credit on the card. I continued shuffling through my wallet and found a \$10 bill. I gave him the \$10 bill and I told him I do not want people thinking I do this and I made it clear that he should not tell anyone. He said he would pay me back after he got paid the following week.

Since we were off to the side having a private conversation, and also because I had just done something for him, it struck me that this was the moment to broach the interview idea. I said to him, “Hey, I wanted to ask you something. You can say no or yes, but I have this thing I have to do for school, this assignment, and I want to do it on the chess park, but I would need to ask you questions, would that be chill?” He said, “Yeah, whatever you need.” I said, “Will the other guys be cool?” He said, “Yeah, we know you’re cool. Just tell me what you need.” I felt a sense of relief that I had come out as a researcher to one of them and that he was willing to help. Of course, he did not realize that the “assignment” was my dissertation, but I do not think that would have mattered to him.

### **Interviewing the Men**

I went back to the park a few days after having gone public with Damien. I ran into him and he said he would have my money in a few days. I reminded him of my project and asked him when we could set up a time to talk. He implied his schedule was open so I told him, “Let’s do it this coming Wednesday.” We made plans to talk that day and I was feeling excited about my first interview. These feelings were short lived as I went to the park on Wednesday and Damien was nowhere to be found. I was disappointed because I trusted he would be there and was looking forward to interviewing him. I went the following day again, but Damien was still not at the park. I

was frustrated and wanted to start conducting interviews, so I made the decision to go public with the other guys at the park.

I walked up to a table where I knew a few of the men. I told them I had a school project to do and Damien was going to help me but he was not here. I mentioned I would like their help, too, and explained the project to them. I told them I wanted to speak to them individually about their perspectives and perceptions about particular issues and the chess park. One man at the table, Jerold, asked me when. I had my audio recorder and my interview guide with me and was ready to do an interview on the spot. I told him if he had time now I could conduct an interview today. After he agreed, I suggested we could go to Starbucks where I could buy him a coffee and conduct the interview.

I remember being taken aback by his willingness to participate. We had only had two prior interactions and I did not even know his name. Regardless, I was eager to conduct my first interview. We walked over to Starbucks and ordered a coffee and then sat outside at a small café table. I went through the consent process and got his permission to record the interview, as, of course, I also did with every interviewee thereafter.

Being that this was my first interview, I was relying heavily on the interview guide. We made it about halfway through the interview guide when I realized two and a half hours had passed. Unfortunately, I did not anticipate the interview lasting that long and I had a prior engagement that prevented me from finishing the interview. I asked him if it would be okay if we finished the rest of my questions tomorrow and he said that was fine. Before I left, I asked him if he thought the other guys would be interested in participating in an interview. I voiced my concern to him that the other men might feel I

was using them. He responded by saying I was accepted and people were cool with me. Overall, the interview process was fairly conversational and I was excited by how much I learned.

I returned to the park the following day, expecting to finish the interview with Jerold. It was around 11 am when I arrived. As I waited for Jerold to pass through, I talked with some of the other guys and casually mentioned the project. I wanted to continue to talk about it with the men at the park in hopes that they would want to participate. One of the men agreed to an interview the following week.

Eventually, I saw Jerold walk up and I caught his attention. I asked if we could finish the interview and he said he needed to run an errand, but he would be back in about 30 minutes. I decided to wait and figured I would just talk to the other men in the meantime. I ended up staying at the park until close to 3 pm and Jerold had still not returned. I decided he was not going to and I would have to catch him another day. I was disappointed he did not show up but there was not much I could do about it. One of the things I had learned over the past few months was that fieldwork was unpredictable and required me to be flexible.

Jerold and I ended up finishing his interview a few days later. I happened to be at the park when he passed through because I was planning on interviewing someone else who, coincidentally, had not shown up. Jerold agreed to finish the interview, but he had plans to go to Pancake Café. He had just received his check and he wanted to treat some friends to food. I wanted to finish the interview and did not want to wait for him to return because I did not trust that he would, given his actions the previous day. I went with him

and his friends to Pancake Café and we sat in a separate booth and completed his interview.

At the time, I did not think anything of me going to Starbucks with him or Pancake Café. In my mind, buying him Starbucks was the least I could do for his help. I was being friendly and wanted to show my appreciation but was quickly informed that this was not okay. While at park the day after the Pancake Café interview, Wilson, one of the men who I had only interacted with once or twice, approached me. He pulled me aside to sit at an empty table. He warned me to be careful and implied that I could not come to the park asking for a particular man. He explained that the men would get the wrong idea if I came to the park asking for one of them and then left the park with them. He suggested I just buy them cigarettes, instead, and do the interviews at the park.

Wilson's concern, I learned, stemmed from an incident he had with Jerold the previous day. After Jerold and I had finished the interview, he went back to the park and told Wilson to stay away and that he had it "under control." This took me aback, and I told Wilson that my intention was to interview as many men as I could. I was worried if Jerold saw me talking to Wilson he would get upset. I asked Wilson if it was okay if we were talking and he said he was not worried about Jerold because he could take care of himself.

We continued to talk and as the conversation went on, I asked him if it was okay if I interviewed him. He agreed but was reluctant to allow me to record it. After a few minutes of conversation, I asked again if I could record it and he agreed. The conversation was going very well and I was concerned if I did not record it I would not remember it, nor be able to do it justice with hand-written notes. Just as with Jerold, I had

little rapport with Wilson before the interview, but he was willing to participate. This surprised me and made me feel that the men at the park trusted me more than I thought. I had been reluctant to go public and ask the men to participate in interviews, but was comforted by the fact that my first two participants were so willing.

Through the rest of November and into January, I conducted an additional six interviews, which each lasted about 1 to 3 hours. Sometimes, the men would not show up as planned for an interview and I would have a difficult time tracking them down. Occasionally, they would have to leave mid-interview and then I would have to relocate them to complete it. Other times, I would broach the idea to a potential interviewee and they would agree to an interview on the spot. The process of asking for and conducting interviews could be spontaneous, so I always made sure to have my recorder and interview guide with me just in case.

As January 2014 neared an end, I was feeling good about my progress but I was beginning to have difficulty getting more people to agree to an interview. More and more people knew I was there to do research and I was beginning to feel my identity changing from that of a chess player to that of a researcher, which in this social circle was not one of status. I decided to take a break from interviewing and simply go back to playing chess and “hanging out,” though continue to take field notes incognito.

### **One of the Guys**

Once the spring 2014 semester ended, I had finished my doctoral coursework and made the decision to focus solely on fieldwork for the summer. I spent the months of May through August immersed in fieldwork. I went in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings, on the weekends, and on several occasions, stayed until the park closed. I went

with them to dinner at local soup kitchens, ran errands, saw some of their sleeping spots, gave them rides, helped them with their personal affairs, and tagged along for other outings around the city.

The goal of the non-park activities was to learn more about the men and their lives – the identities and activities that brought them to the park in the first place. Indeed, when I showed an interest in their lives beyond the park, it brought me closer to them and strengthened our bond. In turn, the men became more open and forthcoming, providing me with information that I otherwise would not have been able to collect. I conducted a handful of more interviews during this period, and was able to improve my fieldnotes by openly recording informal conversations that occurred at the park.

As summer 2014 progressed, my outsider status became less and less salient and I felt as though I was “one of the guys.” There were a few moments over the summer that solidified my standing at the park and secured my position among the men. One event occurred on a Friday evening in June. I had arrived at the park around 6 pm and had made arrangements to stay until the park closed at 11 pm. It was getting close to 11 pm and the ambassador was starting to set up barricade gates around the chess park, as they did every night. I was getting ready to leave when Rolland noticed I was still at the park, and he shouted, “Look at Liz, hanging with the homeboys in the cut!” This comment made me feel as though I was part of the group and he considered me a “homie.”

Another evening after sunset, I was sitting at a table when I noticed one of the guys, Darin, had brought back some food. He sat down at a separate table and started to eat with another man, Hank. I looked over in their direction and Hank asked if I was hungry and told me to come over and have some food with them. I walked over to their

table and they offered me some of their chicken wings. As we were talking, Hank made a comment stating, “You part of the family now, Liz.” This comment made me feel confident in my position at the park and I felt like I was a member of their group.

As we continued to talk, a man whom nobody knew walked up to the chess area and stopped by our table. He was staring at me but not saying anything. He then walked away and the men commented about how odd he was and how he seemed high. Shortly after, the same man came back to the park and sat across from me and just stared. Hank became annoyed by this man and told him I was his fiancé and to leave me alone. The man left and Hank turned to me and said that he did that for my “GP” – general protection. I appreciated his concern and willingness to protect me. Over time, there was an assortment of other instances where the men treated me as part of the crew, watching out for me and making sure I was safe while I was at the park. I would never truly be one of them, but I came to know enough about them – and they enough about me – to tell their story.

### **Writing it Up**

Recording my experiences and observations in the field was an integral part of the research process. Not only was it important for me to record what I was observing, but also, for me to reflect upon my own experiences in the field (Burgess, 1984).

My main method for taking jottings while I was in the field was through the use of my cell phone. Because it is common in almost any setting to see someone texting or surfing the web on their phone, I figured I could take notes on it without appearing suspicious. Using my phone allowed me to record detailed jottings as events occurred or soon thereafter. When I left the field and walked back to my car or office, I would add to



the jottings as other things came to mind. Because texting on your phone is illegal in Georgia, if driving, I would often scribble notes on a receipt or scratch piece of paper so as not to forget little things that would come to mind, though that probably is not much safer. On a few occasions, I would make an audio recording of my observations after I left the field.

I expanded on the jottings by making detailed fieldnotes. If I recorded any audio notes, I would replay those as I was writing up my fieldnotes. My frequent presence in the scene meant that I was constantly reflecting on my experiences and observations. As such, it was common for other incidents to come to mind in the days following my visit to the field. When this occurred, I would return to my fieldnotes and add the supplemental information.

The quality of my fieldnotes improved as I spent more time at the chess park. I was exposed to more things at the park and became more attentive to detail. My field observations became more descriptive and rich. Additionally, and as already mentioned, toward the later part of my fieldwork I was able to audio record informal conversations in the field. These recordings, along with formal interview recordings, allowed me to capture verbatim details about certain events or experiences in the field or in the men's lives outside the park. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, which, along with my fieldnotes, were analyzed in NVivo 10. With the help of this qualitative software package, I analyzed my qualitative data by "tagging," or labeling it, with identification tags corresponding to relevant research issues. This analysis process allowed me, at first, to group observation notes and audio into broad topics, and, subsequently, further categorize subtopics according to what the men did, or did not do, and why.

In the chapters to come, I focus, respectively, on three broad topics: why the men come to the chess park; while there, how they avoid getting in trouble with the police and ambassadors; and, when they do get in trouble, how they are sanctioned, and to what effect. The concluding chapter explores how these issues in the men's lives relate to general criminological issues, and, finally, describes a series of events that resulted in the end of the chess park as a matter of social control.

## CHAPTER II: GOING TO THE PARK

There are numerous other public spaces where the men I came to study could spend their days, yet they choose the chess park. What was it about the park that kept them coming? Among their reasons, chess is the most obvious draw. As Rolland stated:

It's entertainment, you know, it's something to do in your leisure time. It's a sport ... It's like, you know, you, you do your crossword puzzles, or you know, maybe you like to read books, or whatever you do in your spare time as a hobby, okay, that's what you do so that's what these people do too.

In other words, the men come to the park to play chess because it is a form of enjoyment and a way for them to spend their spare time. They are passionate about the game of chess and, for some, it is a part of their identity. As Johnny summed it up, "Chess is what we do."

Though chess is competitive, many of the men use it to relieve stress. It offers a break and a relief from whatever is bothering them. As Jerold said, "Yea, takes your mind off ... the world for a minute, if you have a situation, you forget about that when you play that chess." Another chess player, Steven, further emphasized the stress-relieving benefits of the game:

Playing chess and studying chess is a temporary reprieve from the peculiarities of time and circumstance ... It's a reprieve because when you play and study you forget about time and circumstance ... everyone wants a reprieve from time and circumstance.

And Julian put it, "It's sort of like a medicine if you got something to do like chess. It can take you away from your problems."

Yet that begs the question of why play chess at Ruffwood Park rather than somewhere else? The park is an ideal arena for several reasons. One, there are multiple tables with inlay chessboards. Two, a player is guaranteed to find an opponent, as there are always individuals passing through the park to get in a quick game, such as on their lunch break, or to spend hours on end at the park taking in the competition. And a third unique feature of this place is that many of the players that frequent it are quite good, at least by amateur standards. As Julien noted, “It’s a great place to play chess, some great players have been out here, came through here.”

Because knowledgeable players frequent the park, it also is a place of mentoring, which is another attractive feature. Novices, like myself, go there to learn from the stronger players. For example, Drew commented on the quality of players at the park stating, “The guys are ... knowledgeable about the game of chess, so you know it’s fun to actually watch them play chess and then you hear why they did certain moves and, you know, learning.” Drew went on discuss that the chess park is unique in that people are willing to teach others who are weaker than them. This was one of the reasons he chose the chess park over other places:

You know, it’s to the fact like, and that’s [the] chess park alone, they’re so loose handed with knowledge to an extent. Like, you go to a lot of places or go to a lot of different other types of scenarios, a lot of people, if you don’t know something, a lot of people will let you stay not knowing ... But in chess, like, you can sit there and play chess and after your game you got 3 or 4 people who saw different moves that you could’ve made and there will be moves that you didn’t even realize like, okay, that just taught me something, next time I’m in that situation,

I'll look for that and do that instead of what I did the first time which got me, you know, in checkmate, or whatever the case may be.

On numerous occasions, the men gave me advice on a move I made or could have made, questioning and challenging me to teach me more about the game of chess.

Sometimes they would ask me to set the chess pieces back up into a prior arrangement so they could show me how I could have played the game differently. For example, when I was playing a game against Duncan, Rolland and Norris were sitting at the table watching me play and they were trying to help me. At one point, Rolland turned to Duncan and stated, "You're obviously a stronger player than she is so maybe I could show her while you play." Rolland went on to say to me, "I'd rather you learn something than just play the game." He then asked Duncan, "Can you set it back up?" He wanted to make sure it was okay with Duncan.

At that point in the game, it was clear that Duncan was going to beat me but Rolland was adamant about me taking something away from the match. We set the board back up and Rolland spent some time explaining to me how to identify the weak squares after my opponent makes a move. He then suggested I spend some time watching master level chess games on YouTube. It was clear from this interaction that Rolland loved the game of chess and, moreover, imparted his knowledge on me so that I could love the game, too. This is just one example of how he and many of the other men shared their knowledge with others and, in doing so, made the chess park a unique space and one where people wanted to come to watch, learn, teach, and play chess.

While chess is the obvious reason to go to the park, there were other reasons, not all of which were exactly legal. For the men I studied, three other features made the park attractive: central location; community; and, hustle and vice.

### **Central Location**

The park is centrally located in the heart of downtown. As such, the park is walking distance from the only transit station that provides access to all MARTA rail lines, a subway of sorts (minus the subterranean part), and bus lines. This centrality is particularly important for the men because the vast majority of them rely on public transit.

Located a few blocks from the park is also the public library, where many of the men regularly go to charge their phones and escape from exceedingly hot, cold, or rainy conditions. Fast food chains and convenience stores are close by, as well. Furthermore, the park is walking distance to many of the social service providers and local outreach ministries the men visit, which distribute clothing, provide showers and feedings, offer job related resource help, and provide mailboxes to individuals without a permanent mailing address.

In short, the central location of the park offers a convenience to the men that others places may not. Johnny elaborated on the convenience of the location, stating:

Out here, the places that feed – the places you eat at takes up the most important part of your day. You see what I’m saying? So, from the park, it’s a good location. Right downtown. To get anywhere I need to go take care of any business that I need to take care of – even like my mail over at New Hope is just a couple

blocks that way. You see what I'm saying? It's really convenient for me to be at the park.

The centrality of the park means it can provide a temporary base as the men go about their day and attend to their errands. As Johnny noted, it is only a couple of blocks away from all the places he needs to go to take care of his personal affairs. Rolland also explained, albeit in fewer words, that the accessibility of the location is why he goes to the chess park over someplace else: "It's closer, you know, I just get on the bus, it's convenient."

In somewhat of a self-fulfilling manner, part of the reason why the park is near service providers, and thus attractive to the men, is that its central location makes its inhabitants highly visible to outreach services and volunteers. As such, persons associated with such organizations will frequently pass through the park and offer free food and drinks to the men. This is an added benefit that the chess park offers over other public spaces.

There were several individuals that would regularly give out food and drinks at the park. One lady, known as the "Cookie Lady," came once a week to the park and provided homemade cookies and bottled water to the men. She was a petite, middle-aged, white woman who had spent the past three years providing this weekly service to the men at the park.

There were also individuals who would sometimes pull up alongside the park perimeter and distribute food, such as McDonald's burgers or Wendy's sandwiches, directly from their car. When this would occur, one of the guys would alert the others and those who were interested would quickly rush over to the car.

It was also common to see church groups and local nonprofits distribute sack lunches and waters to the men at the park. One group in particular, Helping Hand, set up a table every Sunday and provided free vegetarian and vegan food options to anyone who was interested.

The weekends were particularly popular for food distribution and were referred to by some of the men as “feeding days.” On feeding days, it was common to see several groups come to the park to distribute food and drinks. For example, one Sunday in late October I arrived at the park around 3:45 pm and there was a group of people passing out sack lunches, juice boxes, and packaged cookies. Johnny was being rather obnoxious and was waving his hand and shouting “Hey! Hey!” He was trying to get the attention of the individuals passing out food. He already had cookies but he wanted more. He turned to one of the people passing out food and said, “I need one of those. Cookie! Cookie!” I turned to Johnny and said, “No manners. So bossy.” To which he replied, “I never had any.” Johnny was able to get more cookies and juice and seemed pleased with himself. It was common for some of the guys to stock up on snacks, as Johnny did, for later on in the day. I looked around and noticed Helping Hand had set up their table and were stationed toward the front end of the chess park. They were passing out soup and a few of their members were playing music. They continued to pass out soup and play music until after 5 pm. I sat down at Johnny’s table and was talking with some of the guys and watching them play chess. Later on during my field visit, a separate group of individuals, dressed up in costumes for the upcoming Halloween holiday, came walking through the park and handed out more food. They socialized briefly with the guys, took some



pictures, and went on their way. Other than the Halloween costumes and pictures, this was all typical on feeding day.

### **Community**

The chess park brings together persons from all walks of life, and it is the game of chess that binds them. The vast majority of players are disadvantaged by conventional standards, but what matters the most at the park is not one's job, education or family life, but rather passion for chess. No matter who you are or where you come from, when you sit down at the table and begin a game of chess, you are simply a player – and judged on that basis. Yet, at the same, you are more than an individual; you are part of a group. Community is a further reason that the men come to the park to be involved with chess.

The chess park community is shaped in ways not directly related to chess, as well. Being in the heart of downtown also meant the park is couched within a lively street life. Thousands of people visit the park daily. Most of them pass through it on their way to nearby places, but some, like the men I studied, went there to obtain nourishment, be involved with chess, and engage in other social activities. For instance, the men made it clear that they enjoy this park partly because there they are able to see beautiful ladies walk by. But there was more to it than just looking. The men would occasionally make a comment to a lady they found pretty, such as “Hey Beautiful” and “Love your hair baby girl, you rock it!” More often, though, the men would only make comments to one another at the tables, like “Look at that red dress” and “She my ideal woman, big breasts and bottom.” Checking the women out as they walk by, “hollering” at them, and talking about them with one another were ways that the men enjoyed themselves and bonded.

Not all of the non-chess activities were antifeminist. For example, I walked up to the park one evening and Lenard, Johnny, and Amy were standing around one of the chess tables forming a small circle. They were singing Gospel songs, clapping their hands, and appeared to be in high spirits. Their genuine happiness was contagious as I found myself smiling as I stood and listened. Amy saw me and she turned and gave me a hug. I jokingly said to her, “You guys starting a band?” She responded, “Yeah, want to join?” I smiled and told her I would listen for a little bit. I stepped to the side of the table and listened for a few more minutes. I had not seen individuals singing and “jamming” at the park like this before. I remember thinking how sweet this moment was that they all shared and how it represented an important element present at the park: community and fellowship.

The friendly association and companionship present at the park helps create a space where individuals feel comfortable and “at home.” This was demonstrated by a conversation I had with a chess player named Sean. I was speaking to him about the game of chess and asking him when and how he started playing. The conversation transitioned into other places where they play chess in Atlanta. I asked Sean if he plays chess at any of these other places and he mentioned they are mostly indoors and are not as accepting as out here. He tugged lightly on his shirt – which was slightly soiled and wrinkly – and went on to say how players, including himself, do not feel comfortable going to those other places because they are not dressed nicely. He emphasized that at the chess park, people do not really judge you.

This conversation I had with Sean illustrated the inviting environment present at the park. There, they are not judged by what they wear or how they look or the fact that

they might be homeless, whereas at other indoor places, which presumably serve more “normal” people, they feel out of place. The park is a welcoming space where they do not have to feel embarrassed about how they are dressed nor worry about fitting in.

The individuals at the park have developed a community enveloped in a physical and social space, a point touched on by Julian:

I realize it's one of the only place of refuge, for some people ... There's nowhere else they could go ... I mean what you going do, you going to spend all day in McDonald's, you know, go to Underground, you can go to the library, you can always stay in there for so long, before you become sleepy, you know, I've been through all of that. I kinda understand what's happening at a level like that. You know some people it's like an escape to them. Like that little crew over there sitting over there, nothing else they could do today, all that just going up and down the street aimlessly you know, life gotta have some purpose, you gotta have some goals or somewhere you can go and have fellowship with other peoples so a lot of us come out here for fellowship, besides chess.

The men at the park are marginalized and face exclusion in most spaces in society.

However, at the park, they are able to come and feel they are a part of something that matters. The park gives them meaning and allows them to find a place in society. Similar to what Anderson (1976) found in his ethnography of Jelly's bar, the park gives these men a sense that they belong and are cared for by others.

Consider, as an example, what occurred one evening when Hank went on a “food run.” A place nearby was handing out food and Hank went to go get some of the offerings. When he returned he had about 9 Styrofoam to-go food boxes he was carrying

in plastic bags. He set them down on a table and started to pass them out to others. I made eye contact with Hank and he said, “You didn’t want anything, right?” He had passed out most of the food but offered me a hot dog. I said I would just have one of the bags of popcorn instead. I took the bag of popcorn and sat at the table. I kept probing Hank regarding how he was able to get all this food and where it came from. He was not answering me and instead he kept saying, “I have my ways.”

The aforementioned event illustrates how the men look out and care for one another. Hank did not need to bring back extra food but he knew that others were hungry and he was in a position where he could lend a helping hand. This caring behavior is part of what makes the chess park a place of community. There are many other little moments that may not seem like much, but taken as a whole, show – and make – the chess park to be the community that it is. Moments such as when the men share half their cigarette with someone who is unable to buy their own; when they keep a watchful eye on one another’s belongings piled at the base of the tree; when they carefully watch someone who is drunk and sleeping on the bench to make sure they do not roll off; or, when they alert each other when someone nearby is passing out food. Together, these moments foster a sense of community and are one of the reasons the men come to the park.

To outsiders, the park is often perceived as “rough,” messy, disorderly, or chaotic. It is not a space where outsiders would go to feel secure but rather one that makes them feel uneasy or out of place. The occasional loud yelling and play fighting, plus the overall stigma attached to the men who hang out at the park, makes it a space that outsiders are inclined to avoid (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). However, for the chess players, this perceived chaos is actually an important part of the sociability of the park. Although this

was not clear at first, the more time I spent in the field, the more I realized their so-called “aggressive” interaction – whether it be verbal play or mock physical fighting – helped give these men a sense of belonging and foster a homey feel (see Anderson, 1976).

One such example of these playful interactions occurred during a chess game between Wilson and Jacob. Both of these men were “heavy hitters” in that they only played chess games for money. One day when they were playing a game, Jacob became very animated and was being quite the character. He was making faces and exaggerating each move he made on the board by slamming his pieces down loudly. He seemed to be overly confident and perhaps a bit “buzzed” on alcohol. Wilson, who was typically a quiet man, started to trash talk and engage in friendly banter with Jacob. I was surprised that Wilson was engaging in this verbal play, as it was atypical for him. When Wilson was doing well and made a successful move, he would be more talkative and tell Jacob to “just give up” and ask him why he was still trying to play. The back and forth talk was entertaining to those of us sitting at the table watching the game. I would occasionally glance at Peter, one of the guys sitting near me, and we would exchange smiles as we found the antics between Jacob and Wilson humorous. This verbal play was all done in good fun and Wilson and Jacob were smiling and laughing as they continued on with their jabs.

The “trash talking” and slamming of chess pieces may appear off-putting, chaotic, and aggressive. However, this type of behavior is playful to the men, a way for them to connect with one another in a friendly manner. To them, what outsiders may perceive as disorder is actually camaraderie, and, as such, it is part of what makes the park feel like a place a refuge. Drew, a chess player, spoke to this sentiment:

It's like it's chaotic when you look at it but also it's peaceful. Like it's to an extent like you can actually go to the chess park and think, you know, even though, with all the chaos but it's, it's, I don't know, it's just it's a warm feeling, for me, it's a warm feeling there. It's, it's comfortable, it's not, you're not pressed, you're not, you don't have to play anybody and even when you lose, it's to a point where the person across from you might tell you, you know, where you screwed up at. You know, how to get better. You know, what moves to look at, like, it's, you can go up there and you can learn, it's, it's unique, it's just, on all the – since we've been talking about it, it's gotten me to actually realize, like how unique the chess park is and how special it is and how when I come out during the day, I'll say – I ask myself, "I wonder if I'm going to have time to make it to the chess park today."

### **Hustle and Vice**

Men also came to park to "hustle" and engage in vice. This includes, but is not limited to, a pervasive underground economy, illicit drug use, public drinking (a crime in Atlanta), and gambling. The chess park is a space where people know they can come to sell various items, make bets, drink alcohol, and smoke weed. As Lenard, a chess player and active participant in the park's underground economy stated in conversation, "The chess park is one big hustle." The more time I spent in the field, the more I understood what he meant.

The daily hustling and illicit behavior that occurs at the park is a part of its culture. It is not something anyone "bats an eye at," but rather is "normal" there. One afternoon, Hank helped me understand and see this with my own eyes. He turned to me

and said, "Look around right now." He pointed to the table we were at and said, "This table, you have gambling." He pointed to another table and said, "This table right here, everyone is drinking." He then pointed to a third table and said, "And then over that table, he is trying to sell that guy shoes." With my eyes open, I came to see that all this was typical at the park. At any given time, it was highly likely you could look around and find at least one person engaging in some form of hustle or vice.

The ability to engage in hustle and vice attracts many individuals to the park. For example, one individual, Jordan, informed me he mainly comes to the park to "get really high." He lives about 40 minutes outside Atlanta and comes down to the park about once a month and will stay for a few days at a time. He knows how to play chess but his main motivation for coming to the park is to smoke weed. I asked him if he smokes weed when he is at home, but he said he typically only smokes when he is at the park. He went on to say how there is more freedom at the park compared to where he lives. Although Jordan will occasionally play a game of chess, his main priority when he is at the park is to smoke weed.

Jordan, along with many of the other men, enjoyed smoking and drinking. As another chess player, Steven said, "We not being disrespectful but we like to smoke pot, drink, and smoke cigarettes." It was normal to see people rolling and smoking a blunt at a chess table, drinking beer or liquor, or smoking cigarettes which is against the public ordinance.

For example, one summer evening I was scheduled to have a chess lesson from Alvin. He asked me for the \$5 for the chess lesson upfront. Usually, I would give him the money after we had finished the lesson, but today, he wanted it before we started. He

explained to me that his weed dealer was at the park and he needed the money for him. I gave him the money and he took care of his business with a man who was standing nearby. Later on during my lesson, Alvin and I were playing a game and he began rolling a blunt. Once he was finished rolling it, he and a few other men who were sitting at the table started to smoke. This type of behavior was commonplace; there were multiple occasions where Alvin would smoke weed during one of our lessons. Alvin was among several men who regularly smoked weed at the park.

Drinking beer or liquor at the park was a common occurrence, too. An example comes from a summer night that I was hanging out at the park. Hank was drinking a beer in his blue reusable sports bottle, and I noticed Hector quickly drank a miniature bottle of liquor. Later, Dan walked up to the park with a small black plastic bag from the convenience store. He proceeded to take out a can of beer he had just purchased up the street. He then poured the beer in a separate cup, quickly drank what was leftover in the can before walking over to the trashcan to throw it away, and then continued to drink from the cup. Also, I noticed he consumed a miniature bottle of liquor during this time.

Later on that night, Amy and Sean stumbled up to the park very intoxicated. They sat down at a table near where I was sitting talking to some of the men. Sean drank a miniature Jack Daniels bottle and set it on the table. He placed his arms on the table, making a quasi-pillow for himself, and quickly fell asleep. As the evening progressed, more liquor was consumed and I overheard the men discuss who was going to buy the next beer.

Another type of deviant behavior that attracts individuals to the park is the ability to engage in illegal vending. There were numerous items individuals would sell including



clothing, shoes, electronics, raw meat, alcohol, hygiene kits, and knock off designer perfume, among other things. Jerold was one individual who participated in illegal vending selling clothing items. Jerold was a regular chess player but he also came to the park to make money. His familiarity with the men helped him be more successful. He said:

Yea, yea, I sell underwear, boxers, all types, especially out here, cause they looking for them sales ... I can get the stuff, I know a lady from there [used clothing store], so she give me an even better price on it right and I come down here and sell it, I know what they need since I been around them so long.

He knew what the men wanted and needed and this allowed him to better serve them. In turn, this allowed him to make more money.

Another well-known vendor at the park, Toby, referred to his hustle as an “open flea market.” Toby sold an assortment of items, mainly shoes and clothing, but occasionally, electronics or kitchenware. He would often display his items on the steps by the park’s entrance, hence the name, open flea market. Other times, he would carry items around in a large black trash bag and periodically set it down and pull items out to show people. Toby did not know how to play chess, nor was it something he had any interest in learning. He came to the park to sell items and make money. Although he did not play chess, he was a regular figure at the park and known by all the players.

There were several other hustlers that came to the park to make money. For example, there were two individuals, Wilson and Jason, who sold single cigarettes or “loosies” on a daily basis. The majority of the men at the park smoked cigarettes, but most of them did not have the money to buy an entire pack at a time. As such, they were

a steady clientele for Wilson and Jason. On occasion, passersby would stop by the park to buy a loosie, offering more business to Wilson and Jason. Although both of them played chess daily, they were also attracted to the park because they saw it as an opportunity to make money by illegally selling single cigarettes.

Selling alcohol, sodas, and snacks was yet another entrepreneurial venture that brought people to the park. As alluded to above, many of the men at the park enjoyed drinking the small individual bottles of liquor, similar to what you would find in a hotel mini-bar or on a plane. These miniature bottles were roughly 50ml in size and referred to as “dollar shots” by the men at the park. Since many of the men at the park enjoyed drinking dollar shots, several people took advantage of this opportunity and illegally sold liquor at the park.

There was also a man who came through the park daily to sell soft drinks and snacks. He carried two plastic grocery bags, one in each hand. One was filled with ice to keep the drinks cool and the other was filled to the brim with chips, candy, cookies, and other junk food. He would pass through once a day and walk around the chess tables asking if anyone wanted to buy anything. I would occasionally buy a drink or snack, as would several of the chess players. This man was never around long enough to have much of a conversation, as he was strictly passing through the park with the intent to sell his items and continue on to the next destination. Despite his limited interactions, he was a known figure of the park and recognized by everyone.

For a select few other men, part of their reason for coming to the chess park was to engage in the drug trade. The park is walking distance to several known drug spots. Those knowledgeable of the drug scene are able to make money by assisting others, often

tourists, in acquiring drugs. One way this is done is by being “hired” to serve as a liaison of sorts between the dealer and the customer. Occasionally, people less familiar with downtown or unwilling to purchase their own drugs directly will “hire” someone from the park to make a run for them. The hired individual may purchase the drugs directly and then bring it back to the customer in exchange for a fee. For example, Ralph explained that this is one of the ways he is able to make money at the park. He stated:

Some people, uhm, might come through here, they might want some weed or somethin’... I might make a run for them cuz they don't want to go downtown. So people come through here and they say, “Man, you know where this at?” or “You know where that at?” And, uhm, I could make money like that.

Another way men at the park facilitate drug trade was by walking customers over to where the dealers are located. Ralph described a specific instance, stating, “I met a dude yesterday came through here. They wanted some heroin. They’s from California ... the dude gave me \$10 just to walk him from this park to over where the McDonald’s at.” Ralph was able to make a decent amount of money, at least by his standards, for simply walking the individual over to where the dealer was located and helping him identify from whom he could buy his heroin. For individuals who are familiar with the downtown drug scene, coming to the park provides an opportunity to make money.

Perhaps the most prevalent form of hustling and vice that attracted individuals to the park was gambling. Making money off playing chess was relatively easy for some of the men. Better yet, chess was not really “work” because they were going to be playing chess regardless.

There were some men who would only play for money and refused “free games.” Alvin was one of these men. He was notorious for gambling, and some even said he was the one who first brought gambling to the park when he arrived years earlier. Gambling was his main source of income. There were several instances when I would arrive for a lesson and he would be in the middle of a game. I knew he was playing for money so I would wait until he and his opponent were done playing. Other times, I would be in the middle of a lesson and someone would come up to the park to play Alvin, so I would take a break while they played for money. Alvin would often play multiple games consecutively, meaning I would have to wait for an hour or more.

Although not everyone gambled regularly, most everyone dabbled in it. The men would gamble for as little as a dollar to upwards of \$20 or more a game. Gambling was a part of the chess park culture and something that occurred regularly. On any given day, there would tables that were “free” and others that required you to “pay to play.” Drew explained this:

If you believe you’re good enough, you’ll sit down and gamble with that person, but if you don’t, they’ll respect that and, you know, tell you, you know, it’s a dollar for this table, and you might have to walk around until you find a place to play for free but, you know, it’s free tables and gambling tables.

There was always the option to play for free, but many of the men preferred to gamble. Ralph was one chess player who was an active participant in the gambling scene. He realized he could do relatively well for himself with minimal effort. He stated:

I could sit here and, uh, make some good money, especially if some – a couple dudes come through that, uhm, play big money. I could bring in some good

money: 80, \$100, maybe \$100 out here or better playing chess ... \$20, \$30, \$40 real easy. I got a lot of guys that come through here.

The ability to make money at the park playing chess was fairly easy for Ralph. For many, this added benefit of being able to gamble at the chess park made it more attractive than other places where the men could spend their time.

Some men enjoyed gambling not necessarily to make money, but because they wanted to intensify the game. Rolland explained this stating, "People gamble because they want a stronger game, they want to improve their game. Okay, it's not like they actually, you know, trying to get their grind on, or trying to get their weight up." He continued to tell me it was less about making a profit and more about respecting someone who is sharing their knowledge with you. He stated:

The people that only play for money do that because they put a lot of time and energy into studying a developing their game, and for them to sit down and play for free means that now I'm sharing my knowledge and resources with you, you getting something out of it, but I'm not getting anything out of it, so to keep it fair, you know, show some homage, okay, put some money on the table. You want to learn from me, put some money on the table, and not money like I'm asking you for a large donation, dollar, you know, dollar, maybe even uh, if, if, if they, if we feel like they're getting a little better, we'll charge them two, two dollars, but we'll not charge them, but we'll pay to play for two dollars or a dollar, but the objective is, I'm going, I'm going to beat, I'm going to win, right, you known depending on the player, but at the same time this individual is going to win as well.

Regardless of whether the men gambled to make money or to preserve their self-respect, the option to gamble was a benefit the park offered over other places and it further attracted individuals to the park.

### CHAPTER III: AVOIDING TROUBLE

At first, I was surprised by the level of hustling and vice that went on at the chess park. After all, it is a *public* park with eyes everywhere, including those of the police – who, recall, are directly across the street – and ambassadors. Despite this surveillance, a pervasive amount of prohibited activity occurred at the chess park. How could this be? The answer is that the men took precautions to limit the likelihood of being caught. As Julian explained, “Generally, you know they [chess players] operate within and around the rules ... That means you know what’s right and you better be careful if you doing wrong.”

For example, when engaged in a prohibited behavior, the men would use their involvement in chess to pass as normal. “I keep a low profile. That’s why I always set a chessboard in front of me,” said Wilson of how he sells loosies. He went on: “See what, I use that as a front ... Even though I’m selling cigarettes I got my chessboard up, if I didn’t have my chessboard up then I’ll just be selling cigarettes, it would kinda look obvious, right?” For Wilson, setting a chessboard up was a way to fool others from seeing what he was really doing. Having a chessboard set up was a normal part of the scene so it was easy to make it appear as though you were engaged in a game.

Chess was also used to divert attention away when someone was rolling a blunt or joint. When chessboards were set up with men sitting around them socializing, it easily appeared as though they were engaged in games. Unless one was close enough, they would not know otherwise. Ralph was one such person who regularly rolled blunts at the tables while successfully avoiding trouble from authorities. On one instance, Ralph was sitting at a table with a few other men and the chess pieces were set up. I was sitting at a

separate table nearby and it appeared Ralph and the others were playing chess. As I was getting ready to leave the park, I walked by say hello to Ralph and it was then I realized he was rolling a blunt. There was an ambassador close by but it did not faze Ralph. He continued to roll as I stood there and talked to him. By integrating the appearance of the chess game with his deviant behavior, Ralph was able to successfully use the chessboard as a prop.

This notion of “being careful” when “doing wrong” is the focus of this current chapter. In adding to passing as normal by playing chess, I detail the men’s four other main methods of preventing trouble while engaging in prohibited behavior: using props; using blockades; being on the lookout; and, showing respect.

### **Using Props**

It was a weekend night in September and I was sitting at a table with several of the men. Toward the end of table sat an older heavysset man with a rolling utility cart, similar to the foldable pushcarts people used to transport their groceries. He had his belongings stacked inside the cart, and sitting on the top of his pile was a small plastic lunch box. I noticed other men would occasionally stop by and stand in front of him as he handed something to them in return for money. It appeared he was selling something from his lunch box, but it was difficult to make out exactly what it was from where I was sitting.

After watching him for a few minutes, I realized he was selling dollar shots. This was the first time I had seen someone sell dollar shots out of a lunch box, and I thought it was a rather effective way to hide illegal vending. I looked down the table in his direction and caught his attention, saying, “You keep your dollar shots in there? That is smart!”



Hank, who was currently sitting at the table drinking a dollar shot of vodka, turned to me and said, “See! I told you it’s how you do it!” Hank was alluding to a previous conversation we had regarding how people avoid getting caught. He implied that getting away with drinking and other illicit behaviors was easy as long as you did it in the right way.

As this example illustrated, one of the “right ways” to avoid detection was to use props, such as a lunch box, to mask the illicit behavior (for a similar usage of props to mask illicit behavior, see Jacobs, 1999). There were various types of props the men used, but the objective with all of them was the same – to simply blend in with the surroundings in a way that allowed them to continue engaging in deviant behavior regardless of the surveillance they were under. Props were mainly used under two conditions: to avoid detection while consuming alcohol; and, to conceal items for sale.

To hide alcohol for consumption, men would transfer it from its original container to a cup, plastic bottle, or coffee tumbler. Using these props to hide alcohol was a relatively straightforward process. For those using something with a lid or cap, the men would pour the alcohol into the repurposed container, secure the top back into place, and carry on sipping their drink. For those who used cups, they would sip their alcohol through a straw, which was a prop added to make the drink be perceived as soda. The men were able to transition seamlessly from pouring to drinking their alcohol, all while playing a game of chess or socializing at the table.

For example, one summer evening I arrived at the park around 5:30 pm while it was still light out. I noticed an ambassador present, standing off to the side. I walked up to one of the tables and started to watch a game. I stood to the side of the table, chatting

with Justin, who was also observing the men playing. As we were standing there, I noticed Andrew, one of the participants involved in the game, was sipping on a drink from a Styrofoam cup. He would take sips in between moves and in the moment, I just assumed he was drinking a soft drink as I was still fairly new to the park.

However, a short while later, Andrew reached his hand under the table and I heard glass clinking. I knew immediately Andrew was not drinking soda, but rather, beer. Justin also recognized the glass clinking was from a 6-pack of beer, jokingly stating, “That sounds like what I like.” Justin was indicating his favorable preference toward beer and I smiled at his comment. Andrew proceeded to open a bottle of beer and pour it out into his cup. He then placed the lid back on top the cup, placed the empty bottle back into the cardboard carrier under the table, and resumed sipping on his beer throughout the remainder of his game.

On a different occasion, one of the men, Malik, walked up the park carrying a black plastic bag from a convenience store. He set it under the table and I noticed there was a 6-pack of Corona inside the bag. Johnny was sitting nearby and he proceeded to take one of Malik’s Coronas out from under the table, pour it into his Styrofoam cup, and begin sipping on it through his straw. He did not seem bothered that it was broad daylight and we were sitting at the table situated directly across from the police station.

Other men, such as Hank, chose to hide beer using a reusable bottle, seeing it as the safer option because in his opinion, “everybody puts it in a Styrofoam cup.” He could regularly be seen walking around with his plastic bottle as if it were attached to him in some way. I would call it his “blue cup” and regularly tease him as to what he was drinking, knowing full well it was beer. Hank would refill his bottle throughout the day,

running up the street to the convenience store to purchase the same 24oz can of cheap beer and then returning to the park with the black plastic bag in tote. Typically, he would find a seat at one of the tables, open the can, pour it into his cup, and then secure the lid. Once the beer was concealed in the bottle, Hank would walk around, socialize, and play chess while sipping on his beer.

As alluded to by Hank, the choice of container is important because not all props are equally useful at presenting a liquid as legitimate. This distinction was especially apparent among men who chose between plain Styrofoam cups from a non-chain eatery versus soda fountain cups that came from a fast food chain, such as McDonald's or Chick-Fil-A. Some men preferred to use a fast food cup over the plain Styrofoam cup because they felt the plain cup had become less discrete and more synonymous with alcohol.

Gerald explained the above distinction to me during an interview. He noted that while people will use plain Styrofoam cups, he found it more risky, stating, "Yea, but see they up on that, see that's dangerous. I'll get a McDonald's cup. Yea, because then it looks more, but just a plain Styrofoam, everybody know what that is." On the whole, most people assumed you were drinking alcohol if you had a plain Styrofoam cup sitting in front of you. Some men would even get upset when someone else placed a Styrofoam cup down too close to them. If the cup did not belong to them, they did not want any association with it because they did not want to risk others, particularly the authority, thinking it belonged to them.

No matter the choice of container, the process of disguising alcohol strongly resembled the iconic brown bag method, whereby people drinking on street corners have

traditionally placed their bottle of alcohol inside a brown bag. Since alcohol consumption is illegal in public places, the brown bag serves to camouflage what the person is drinking. Similarly, at the park, the men used disguises to make it less obvious what was being consumed thereby reducing the chances of getting caught for an open container and facing trouble.

As I spent more time in the field, I became more attentive to the cups and bottles that were being used by the men and more familiar with whom the regular drinkers were. However, for those I was less familiar with, I often did not know for certain if they were drinking alcohol. Unless I was close enough to where I could smell the alcohol or see them pouring it, generally speaking, it would be difficult to discern what the individual was drinking. Although I would occasionally ask, this speaks to the ability of this method to camouflage alcohol.

In addition to using props to hide alcohol consumption, vendors used them to conceal items for sale. Although not all vendors chose to conceal their wares, such as Toby with his open flea market, others, particularly those who sold alcohol, made efforts to hide their items. The most common types of props for this purpose were bags, suitcases, and containers like a lunch box or Styrofoam cooler – an example of which opened this subsection.

One afternoon, for example, a man walked through the park repeatedly stating, “Dollar shots! Dollar shots!” He was wearing a crossbody messenger bag as he walked through the chess court, maneuvering around the tables, soliciting dollar shots. He stopped at one of the tables and started talking with a man who was sitting down. Shortly after, the man sitting handed cash to the vendor. Upon receipt of the cash, the vendor

unzipped his bag, pulled out a miniature bottle of liquor, and handed it to the man sitting at the table. After the transaction was complete, the vendor zipped up his bag and continued to walk around the park soliciting dollar shots. The crossbody bag allowed him to store a surplus of dollar shots for future sales while also conceal them from the authorities. The dollar shots were only visible if the man unzipped the bag.

Wilson was another vendor who used a prop, specifically a backpack, to hide dollar shots. For instance, one weekday afternoon during daylight hours, Wilson was sitting at a table in between games. I walked over toward his end of the table and stood across from him as we started to talk. He was sitting and relaxing, hoping to find another opponent to play before he left for the day. As we were talking, a man stopped on the pathway, just outside the chess park on the other side of the flower boxes that served as a natural boundary between the walkway and the chess park. The man motioned to Wilson, waving his hand around to get his attention. I did not know who this man was but it was clear he was signaling something to Wilson. Upon seeing this man, Wilson reached in his backpack and he pulled out two dollar shots. He cupped them in his hand and walked over to where the man was standing. He handed the man the dollar shots and in return, received his cash payment. The man went on his way and Wilson walked back to the table, put his money away, and we continued our conversation as if there had been no break. Wilson's use of the backpack allowed him to store an excess of dollar shots and have them sitting right next to him with easy access. Just looking at the backpack, one would not know it contained liquor. Both messenger bags and backpacks were a discrete way to hide alcohol intended for sale.

Vendors less frequently used other props to hide products. One of these is a suitcase, which was used to store and hide food items for sale. In general, it was common for men at the park to carry bags and suitcases around, especially to hold their chess pieces and other personal items. Being that many of them were living life in transition and did not have a permanent dwelling, they would often bring whatever items they were unable to “stash” at their sleeping spots with them to the park. I would often see bags and suitcases resting under the tables or around the base of the tree. That being said, using these items as disguises allowed the vendors to hide items for sale with relative ease, as it was not unusual for them to be in possession of such an item.

### **Using Blockades**

One evening, after the sun had gone down and the park was dimly lit by the street lights, a group of us were sitting at a table socializing. A few of the men were drinking alcohol while another sat eating food from a nearby eatery. One of the men at the table, Darin, noticed a police officer starting to walk up to the area with a flashlight. As the officer started coming up the walkway toward the chess tables, Darin announced it to the others. Hank, who was drinking a beer, placed his can underneath the table before the officer approached. The officer stopped at our table and briefly chatted with Darin, asking him about the food he was eating and where it was from. Darin offered the officer some but he declined. They small talked for a few moments and then the officer walked away. Shortly after, Hank brought his beer can back out from under the table and he resumed his drinking.

The simple act of placing the beer can under the table allowed Hank to draw attention away from the fact that he had an open container and was drinking in public.

Although Hank usually used a disguise, on this particular evening, he was less vigilant about his illicit behavior, partly due to assuming the nighttime was a sufficiently protective factor. In the evening, there were less eyes and dark, making things more difficult to detect.

Hank's use of the table to hide the cup illustrates the second method the men used to avoid trouble – that of using blockades. By definition, a blockade in this context is a physical item used to hide an illicit item. The main types of blockades used by the men were tables and bodies.

Tables were commonly used as a blockade, as they were permanent fixtures of the park. Being that the men were sitting at the tables already, it required little effort for them to integrate the table with their deviant behavior. For example, as illustrated in the opening paragraph, Hank effortlessly placed his open container of beer under the table to temporarily hide it from the officer. Malik used the table as a blockade by setting his six-pack of Corona underneath. He simply placed it under the table where he was playing chess and let it sit there for an extended period of time. It was easily accessible to him while also being out of sight. Tables were also used to hide a joint or blunt. For example, there were several instances when someone would be rolling a joint or blunt at the table and an ambassador would approach their line of sight. The individual would pause mid-roll and hide it underneath the table until the ambassador was no longer nearby. Additionally, individuals used the table to exchange cash underneath or to direct cigarette smoke below in an effort to hide the resultant “cloud” from the ambassador's view.

The men hid their illicit behavior behind people's bodies, as well. A person could easily be positioned to block the line of sight between the authority figure and the

individual engaging in the illicit behavior. For example, one afternoon Ralph was about to light up a cigarette and he looked around. He noticed an ambassador in his line of sight, then paused for a second. He looked up from the chess game and said to me, “Hey Liz, stand over here and block the smoke from the ambassador.” He motioned with his hand where he wanted me to stand. I ended up positioned at the front of the table, thereby blocking the line of sight from the ambassador to the table. By blocking the ambassador’s line of sight and helping hide the smoke, Ralph turned me into a blockade.

### **Be on the Lookout**

“How do people avoid getting caught?” I asked Julian. “You gotta have somebody looking out, you know, if you smoking weed, you better have somebody watch, more than just you and one or more different directions at the same times,” he responded. Julian was explaining to me the third method for avoiding trouble – being on the lookout. This technique involves looking around for the authorities before or during prohibited behavior. In effect, the surveilled become the surveillers.

Johnny mentioned the importance of being on the lookout for staying out of trouble, stating, “You have to look around and everyone needs to be aware of what they’re doing at all time in the park ... it’s all about being aware.” And Wilson explained how he avoided getting caught when selling loosies: “Make sure they [ambassador] don’t see me, to make sure I look around to see where they at. You know not just go ahead and sell something, and he might be standing right here or he might be there or he might be over there on the sidewalk watching.” To Wilson, it was essential to identify where the authority was located prior to making a sale. He knew he needed to be observant because



although he may not see an ambassador directly in front of him, it did not mean one was not nearby.

An interesting element of the lookout method was the expectation that others, regardless of whether they were directly engaged in prohibited behavior, would and should serve as lookouts. Group cooperating in this regard was made possible, in part, by the large number of individuals huddled around the tables. Strength in numbers meant at least someone should see an ambassador or officer. When this happened, there was a general expectation that the spotter should alert the others to this effect.

An example of the spotter effect involved Darin, who I described in an earlier section. He was not engaged in prohibited behavior, but he was sitting at a table where others were drinking. When he noticed an officer approaching the park, he alerted the men at the table who then modified their behavior as appropriate to avoid trouble.

On a different occasion, I was at the park having a conversation with Julian and standing nearby was Brian, who was smoking a cigarette. I noticed an ambassador walking up toward the chess park but Brian's back was to the ambassador. I tried to get his attention to notify him the ambassador was approaching but I was unsuccessful. Julian then turned toward him and said loud enough for him to hear, "Put your cigarette out." Brian looked behind him and saw the ambassador walking toward the park. He then quickly dropped his cigarette to the ground and stepped on it.

Another instance involved Adrian and myself. We were standing near one of the chess tables talking, when we noticed a police officer riding around the perimeter of the chess park on his bicycle. Having seen the officer, Adrian warned an individual who was about to light a cigarette, advising him not to because of the officer in the vicinity.

These cases of looking out for others were by no means isolated events. Generally speaking, the men were “all in this together” and there was an informal expectation that you would alert someone when you saw trouble impending. The more eyes one has watching out for the authorities, the more one can anticipate and identify potential threats. This strength in numbers enhanced one’s protection.

### **Respect**

The other common way the men avoided trouble was to show respect to those in a position of authority. The men knew full well that they were engaged in prohibited behavior and could be sanctioned for it. They recognized the need to be on good terms with authority figures to minimize the risk. Toward that end, the men made small sacrifices to benefit the authority, albeit with the expectation of a comparable benefit in the future. In practice, respect roughly translated into an exchange relationship in which both parties reaped benefits.

Rolland was one chess player who avoided trouble by being respectful. He detailed how he did this:

The main thing for me is, you know as long as I respect what they have to do alright then they’ll show le-leniency okay, cause they, they get tired of saying you know, “Hey can you put the cigarette out?” You know, they get tired of that shit, right. Half, half they’ll don’t even want to have to say anything. Sometime they’ll see it and be like, “Oh man.” You know, but they know who’s a problem and who’s not. Because see I understand that they have a job to do, and I’m not going to force they’re hand, okay. So what I’ll do is if I see that, like during the day like when their, their, you know, employer is observing them heavily, okay I’m not

going to put them in a position where they have to say something to me because now I'm forcing them to do their job – okay, but as the night falls and their bosses go home, they relax more, they you know, they'll, unless you, unless you like right in their face, like blowing the gas O's right, then they'll have to say something to you but you know if you're kind of discrete or whatever you know what I mean, show a little discretion, right then they'll might, they, they'll let it go okay, but as long as it's done in moderation, you know.

Rolland was sensitive to the fact that the ambassadors had a job to do, and he recognized they were under more surveillance from their bosses during the daytime hours. To show them respect and not force them to do their job, he tried to obey the rules during the day and smoke outside the park boundaries. He knew the pressure to write someone up for smoking inside the chess park was greater when the bosses were watching the ambassadors. Rolland felt he was making a sacrifice on their behalf by obeying the smoking rules during the day. In return, he expected the ambassadors to show leniency during the evening hours when they were under less surveillance from their supervisors. He believed he should be permitted to smoke during the evening, so long as it was done in moderation. Jerold echoed similar sentiments stating, "They know we smoke ... but as long as we put it in a respectful manner where we don't put them in a way with their supervisor or you know, the big ups."

Another way to show respect was to get along with others. By not "messing" with others and thereby being in the good graces of the authority, the men were able to reduce their chances of receiving a sanction for their illegal behavior.

Wilson was one chess player who felt “getting along” was imperative to staying out of trouble. He explained that he had to get along with the ambassadors, stating, “I don’t have a choice. Because what I do, the worst thing you wanna do have an enemy with an ambassador. And what you do, they can make it hard for you. You know they see, they know what I do.” Wilson went on to describe how he showed respect and reduced his chances of getting into trouble for selling loosies:

They know what I do. But they also know I don’t mess with nobody. And so, then I try to get along with everybody. I don’t argue with nobody. I don’t mess with nobody. Come down here, sell my cigarettes and play chess. They know what I do. So, and then I try to get along with them best I can. Because I need them. Because if you, just like in any other work, you get in bad with the police or something when you in jail, they make it hard for you. Or if you get in bad with your boss they make it hard for you when you work.

As in any setting, when someone has a position of authority over you, they have the power to make things easier or harder than they need to be. In the case of the chess park, Wilson was aware of the potential consequences for illegally vending and knew if he caused trouble with others and did not get along with the ambassadors, it could jeopardize his ability to sell loosies. For someone who had grown accustomed to the income generated from selling cigarettes, he did not want to jeopardize this. In order to make things go as smoothly as possible and reduce the chances of being sanctioned, he made an effort to show respect toward the ambassadors.

Building a relationship and having a level of rapport with an ambassador was another way to show respect. Those who were regular visitors to the chess park and, thus,

familiar faces to the ambassadors were in a unique position. Their continual presence gave them the opportunity to get to know the ambassador on a friendly level. Drew explained how this small level of intimacy one may develop with an ambassador could prove to be beneficial:

Uh, I guess, it's a standard that you also have with the ambassadors to an extent of whether you come there on the regular, you know them, you know their faces and they know yours and you know whether or not you have a conversation, certain things they might let you get by that they won't let somebody else get by with ... Just because of the conversation you keep with them and the company that you keep with them.

I continued to ask Drew about the type of the relationship that was necessary between ambassadors and chess players in order to reap this benefit. He explained:

Because, most of the time the ambassadors, okay, yeah it's the people who go there regularly, but when I say that I mean like, somebody who frequently talks to the ambassador, somebody who, I guess, gives the ambassador some type of conversation, they acknowledge them to be who they are, other than, you know, you're just the law right now. You know, we see the law, we don't see the law, and if you keep a relationship beyond that with them I think, you know sometimes, you know they might find themselves breaking the rules a little more and then you know, the ambassador might, you know, not say it to them all the time or you know, every so often they have to supervise, "Hey stop smoking," you know, although they might do it on the regular and the ambassador sees them.

According to Drew, then, rapport with an ambassador made them less inclined to discipline wrongdoing and, instead, apt to let it slide. Every so often the ambassador might say something to the individual engaging in deviant behavior, but, on the whole, the individual would be able to regularly get away with their transgression if they had developed a rapport – and mutual respect – with them.

## CHAPTER IV: GETTING IN TROUBLE

“We see the cops, we see the ambassadors, everybody’s watching them, they watching us, we watching them. And they don’t stop the liquor selling. They don’t even stop the pot smoking,” Steven stated. “Do you think that they know?” I asked. “They know. They can’t catch us. Nobody will tell. Nobody will tell ... They can’t stop us,” he responded.

For all of Steven’s bravado, however, the truth is that people at the park do get in trouble with police and ambassadors. To deter and punish prohibited behavior, these authority figures issued verbal warnings to wrongdoers; asked them to leave the park; or, made an arrest. This chapter examines the circumstances in which these sanctions are meted out.

### **Verbal Warning**

The least severe sanction meted out was a verbal warning. As the name suggests, this was when the person in a position of authority, typically the ambassador, would verbally caution someone to change their behavior or face a more severe sanction. Though, at first glance, a verbal warning may not appear to be much of a punishment, it is a sanction in that it – if the warning is heeded – deprives an individual of what they would otherwise prefer to do. To be clear, often these warnings were implicit in that while the authority figure did not verbalize an “or else” proposition, everyone involved in the interaction knew that was the message.

One type of wrongdoing that tended to be handled with a verbal warning was a noise violation. Most often, this involved an individual shouting loudly and repeatedly, sometimes directed at an individual and other times directed at nobody.

One individual in particular, Grant, was frequently sanctioned for noise violations. He was notorious for shouting and going on incoherent rants. I have numerous field entries that note something to the effect of “Grant was loud today.” Though usually he went unsanctioned for these offenses, I witnessed numerous occasions in which an ambassador verbally warned him to lower his volume. An example occurred one summer afternoon. It was a hot July day and I arrived at the park around 4:30 pm for a chess lesson. Alvin was in the middle of a game so I stood and watched as I waited for him to finish. Grant was standing nearby and he started to go on one of his regular rants. He made a few loud and incoherent comments toward me and I ignored him. I knew it was best not to engage with Grant as it would just make him more agitated and vocal. I had also been informed by some of the men that Grant was often worse in the presence of a female. As Grant continued his rant, the ambassador walked over to him and said, “I know you need a lot of attention but you not getting none today. This is your warning.”

The second type of case that received a verbal warning was a sleeping violation, which occurred when someone was resting their head on the table or lying down on the bench – a fairly common event. Sleeping would occur more frequently in the morning or early afternoon hours when it was less crowded. During these off-peak times, there would often be open tables that were not in use, providing a place to rest.

For example, one day in late November I arrived at the park around 11 am. When I arrived, there was a middle-aged man who was sound asleep at one of the tables. It was not yet crowded and there were other open spaces for people to play chess so he was not necessarily in anyone’s way. Toward the end of my visit, after two hours had lapsed since the man started sleeping, an ambassador approached his table to deliver a verbal warning.



He stood at the end of the table and knocked loudly a few times to wake the man up. As he was knocking on the table he simultaneously ordered the man to sit up.

Verbal warnings were also given for cigarette smoking inside the park. The process of verbally warning someone for cigarette smoking was one type of case where the warning was often implicit. Typically, the person in a position of authority would approach the individual smoking and ask them to either put their cigarette out or explicitly state they were not allowed to smoke in the park. It would then be up to the individual to put out the cigarette or walk outside the park to continue smoking. Failing to do so could mean they might receive a further sanction.

One example of verbally warning someone for smoking occurred one afternoon when Adrian, Hank, and I were standing and socializing off to the side of one of the tables. A police officer happened to be riding by on his Segway and he paused near us. In a curt manner he told them not to smoke in the park. On a different occasion, I was talking with Toby and an older man nearby was smoking a cigarette at one of the tables. The ambassador was trying to get the attention of the man smoking so he could tell him to put it out. The ambassador kept saying, “Hey old man” or “Hey old school” until he got the man’s attention to tell him to put his cigarette out.

### **Asked to Leave**

Being asked to leave the park was a second type of sanction meted out by ambassadors and police. Sometimes the expulsion was for a brief period of time, such a half hour, but at most it was for an entire day.

One prohibited act sanctioned with expulsion was illegal vending. Wilson was asked to leave the park on multiple occasions for selling loosies, which, if it is not clear, is a crime. He described one of these occurrences to me:

The boss caught me. So he told one of the other guys under him, you know, to go tell, to go handle that. So now that's his boss, he gotta front or whatever, he gotta do what he gotta do. So to make it look good, he just told me ... he said I don't told you one time, you know, about selling cigarettes. He said, "Just get your stuff and go on home and I'll see you tomorrow." He don told me one time, I can't argue with him. He don' caught me again. He probably wouldn't have said nothing but his boss seen it. He had to do something. So he told me to go home. He still see me. He catch me all the time. But he don't say nothing. He won't be right here in this park, right in this area, he might be way out there somewhere he see people come up to me and change money and stuff but he [usually] don't say nothing.

Months after that interview took place, I was talking to Wilson during one of my routine field visits. He mentioned again having been sanctioned earlier that morning when one of the ambassadors made him leave. He said the ambassador told him to leave for 30 minutes. I was surprised they sanctioned him but even more surprised it was only for 30 minutes and not the entire day as it had been in the past.

Disruption was another type of offense for which offenders were asked to leave the park. For example, one Friday evening in mid-September, Ross, a petite man with a reputation for drinking and becoming intoxicated, was asked to leave due to poor behavior. By the time I arrived at the park it was already 6 pm and Ross was clearly

drunk. He was walking around the chess tables, talking loudly, and slurring his words. I could tell the others at the park were annoyed by his behavior but they did their best to ignore him. About 15 minutes into my visit, I noticed the ambassador approach Ross. I was standing nearby and I heard the ambassador tell Ross he needed to leave the park. He went on to tell Ross that a lady had complained about his behavior, indicating Ross had rubbed his crotch and made some suggestive motions toward her. Ross started to shout back at the ambassador, but I struggled to understand what he was saying. His incoherent shouts continued as he resisted leaving the park.

Another chess player, Jerome, was sitting nearby and I overheard him make a comment out loud about Ross, stating something to the effect of he's been acting loud all day and they wanted him gone. Ross continued the back and forth with the ambassador for a few more moments. He would resist the order to leave the park and the ambassador would continue to repeat the order. Finally, Jacob, a chess player who was in the middle of a game, stood up, clearly frustrated by Ross' behavior. He turned so he was face to face with Ross and shouted, "Nigger! You're getting a complaint, leave with that!" He was implying that Ross was fortunate he was only getting a complaint when he had been drunk and disorderly for most of the day. Ross responded, "I'm not drunk, nigger!" Jacob encouraged him to leave and they went back and forth for a moment. The ambassador kept persisting that he needed to leave the park but Ross continued to deny he was drunk. Eventually, he started to walk toward the sidewalk and the ambassador followed alongside him. I watched from inside the chess park as they made it further down the sidewalk. Ross continued to deny the ambassador's claims as they made their way down

the sidewalk and away from the park. The commotion he caused was soon forgotten and the men went back to playing, pleased he was gone.

There were several other occasions when an individual was asked to leave and then escorted out by the formal authority for disruptive behavior. The other men would typically be supportive of this decision because they too were annoyed and bothered by the individual. For example, there were several times I was at the park and the men would voice their support saying things such as, “Yeah, thank you!” or “It’s about damn time!” when the person was finally approached by the authority and asked to leave. Although the person might be resistant and it might take a few moments to get them to leave, more often than not they would. When a person refused to leave the park after being asked and their behavior continued to escalate, they could face arrest, which is discussed further below.

Getting caught for smoking marijuana was a third type of relatively common wrongdoing that was punished with expulsion from the park. Julian was one individual who received this sanction. He stated, “One time they banned me, for that day I had to leave. And because the dude, I told him to put it out, but he decided I was scared and nothing’s wrong, and the minute he [ambassador] came out and he smelled it and he pulled all of us out that day.” I asked Julien, “So they kicked you out for the day?” He responded:

Yea, for that day. You know, I ain’t had it – the dude – it was my blunt too, it was my blunt. I tell the cat to put it out, ’cause I see the ambassador’s car. It’s mine.

You can’t even do what I asked you to do – put it out. You, instead, he was

mouthed me, “Nothings wrong. You all get scared tight.” So of course we never, I made sure me and him will never be at the same place at the same time.

### **Arrested**

The third method used to sanction illicit behavior was arrest. This was the most severe but least frequently applied sanction. This occurred, for instance, when individuals were caught by the police smoking marijuana. An example of this involved Johnny and his friend Rayna. I was not present at the park the day it occurred, but I was quickly informed from other chess players upon my next visit to the park.

According to Lenard, Johnny and Rayna were smoking and they were approached by an officer. They did not notice the officer until he started to get close to them. The officer asked Johnny if he was smoking marijuana but he lied and said no. Lenard told me Johnny had chewed and swallowed the joint to hide the evidence. I started to laugh when Lenard told me this and I said in a surprised tone, “He ate it?” Lenard confirmed again that he ate the joint and implied Johnny was not being honest with the officer and that is why he was arrested. He went on to explain that the officer had asked the lady if she was smoking and she told the truth, admitting she was in fact smoking. Lenard seemed to imply they did not arrest her because she was honest but they arrested Johnny because he lied.

A few days after my conversation with Lenard, Johnny was released from jail and returned to the park. I spoke to him about the incident and he said he was arrested for marijuana. He explained how he and Rayna were smoking and they did not notice the officer approaching. In other words, they were caught up on the moment and failed to be attentive to their surroundings thus making it fairly obvious what they were doing. I

asked Johnny, “Did you really eat the weed?” I was still surprised by what Lenard had told me and I wanted to clarify with Johnny if it was in fact true. He said yes and explained he ate the joint because Rayna handed it to him as the cop was walking by. In the brief moment that he had before the officer was standing in front of him, he decided the best thing to do was eat the joint.

Another instance in which someone failed to keep a look out involved Julian. During an interview, he explained to me:

Your eyes are your best defense. You gotta be watching. You cannot act like you on your front porch or your living room. You just can’t really relax and socialize. No. You cannot do that out here. Or you going to jail ... You know, I know you can easily get caught off guard, like me and you talking and somebody smoking weed, you get caught up in the conversation, police walk up and just touch your shoulder, you going to jail.

He had learned about the importance of looking out from firsthand experience. One day he was smoking weed with a female friend and, in his words, “the girl distracted” him and so he did not see the arresting officer.

Another offense that resulted in arrest was drinking in public, though it may also have related to the offender’s belligerence. An example of this took place late afternoon on a Friday. I arrived at the park around 4 pm and there were several games going on. I exchanged hellos with some of the men and stood by one of the tables and watched Hank and Malik play. I noticed a man I did not recognize sitting on the wall behind me. He was trying to get my attention and I reluctantly walked over toward him. It was clear he was drunk as he was slurring his words and not speaking in a coherent manner. I

unenthusiastically stood there and engaged in a conversation with him for about 15 minutes. Since he was not a regular chess player, he was questioning my presence at the park. At this point, I had been coming for over a year and everyone was used to my presence. The only time people seemed to question my presence at the park was if they were new. He asked me a few times if I knew what I was doing at the park and I kept repeating to him that I knew what I was doing and I tried explaining to him that I had been coming for a year. He would imply I was cool but then seemed to be upset I was at the park. I knew he was not in his right mind I just wanted to be done with the conversation because he was not making any sense. I ended the conversation and started to talk to the other guys playing chess.

A short while later, I was standing near Julien and we were watching a game when I heard the drunk man start to shout at me. He said, “You crazy lady! What the fuck your problem? What the fuck your problem.” He started to get up off the wall and I was really confused what was happening. I was confused if he was talking to me because it seemed to be out of the blue. I turned to Julian and said, “What’s that guy’s deal?” He said, “The local natives are coming out.” I walked to the other side of Julian so he was between me and the drunk guy. I was going to walk to another table and Julian said, “Let’s just walk over here.” He was directing me to the table further away from the drunk guy. However, the drunk guy kept saying, “What the fuck your problem?” I said to Julian, “I’m just going to go.” He said, “No, you don’t have to go. You’re my friend, you know I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” I said, “I know.” He said, “You know that, right?” I explained to him that it was cool and I was going to leave. I quickly walked off and did not say bye to anyone. I thought it would be best if I left the park because it

was clear I was bothering the drunk guy. I knew he was not going to calm down because he was so intoxicated by this point and I did not want to draw more attention to the park by staying there.

A few days after this occurrence, I was talking to Julian and another man, Noah. Julian explained that after I left, the troublemaker had been arrested. I asked him to tell me more about this situation so I could better understand the context. He told me:

Well, you notice the man didn't get locked up until after you left. The guy that was lashing out at you, he was sitting right there. He reached in his bag and he grabbed a shot and takes the top off and he turns it up. Mind you the police ride right up as he turning it up and tap him on the shoulder ... He didn't look around, he was high, he did not before he took that shot. It's like driving or walking across the street, you need to look around do a 360 turn and see who around you.

Noah chimed in, stating, "But why would an individual do that – why would anybody put himself in a situation where he can be caught?" Julian replied, "He was already intoxicated, he was getting verbally abusive with her, almost to the point where I started to intervene." "Really?" Noah stated. "Yeah. So I told her look I ain't gonna let nobody hurt you. You see that my friend. But she's an intelligent lady she moved on she didn't provoke him any but when she left – by the time she left – it's when the police busted him," Julian said.

Another alcohol-related arrest involved Ross, one of the regular drinkers at the park who, moreover, often became drunk there. One day, I arrived at the park around 3 pm and Ross was in handcuffs, face down on the cement, just steps outside the chess court. Moaning from pain, he lay in the middle of the walkway on the main path that



served as a shortcut for passersby to get from one side of the park to the other. There were about six police officers surrounding him, with a crowd of about twenty spectators huddled in the vicinity. This crowd was visibly and audibly agitated by how the police were handling Ross. From the comments I overheard, there was a generally consensus that an unnecessary amount of force was applied against him.

I started to ask some of the men about the situation that lead to Ross' arrest.

“They had no business tripping that man like that!” Toby stated, who continued:

He was cussing and calling them all kind of profanity. The police said stop doing that. He start calling the police punk motherfucker this that and the other. The police tried to walk off and he started behind the police “Fuck you! What you did to Treyvon Martin! Fuck you!” The police said, “Look, go head on out.” They finally cuffed him. Lay him across the bench. He said son of a bitch. That’s when they started pushing him around, hitting him, and shit like that. The police got mad because he called them a son of bitch.

Everyone standing nearby mentioned to me how hard Ross hit the ground, making clear the level of force was unnecessary. Ralph emphasized this, stating:

Ross only weigh about a hundred pounds ... so there nothing he can do. He jump and he talk. You know what I mean? He talking a lot but they roughed him up. He roughed him up real forcefully. Then that other big cop came over there and he clipped him. And we heard a big “boom!” I mean he hit the ground *real hard*. Really, he could’ve died! He could’ve died and I wish somebody was standing here that could’ve recorded that. You feel me? He hit the ground *real hard* ... he clipped him. He clipped him forcefully, “bam!”... he in all kind of pain. Those

cuffs – they ain't lock those cuffs when they put them on him so every time he was bent over ... anytime he go like this they get tighter and tighter ... his wrist is really hurting right now. So bad. Look at the back of his arm – he's bleeding ... Ross drunk. You know he can't, he can't hold his liquor. And he was just talking a lot. The officer grabbed him up, I mean he – it went from there to there.

“How should it have been handled?” I asked. “How should it have been handled? He should have just cuffed him and took him on to jail for drunk,” Toby replied. “That's right!” Ralph enthusiastically agreed.

I continued to make observations and record the event. It was loud and chaotic and seemed everyone was talking at once, expressing their thoughts on the events. Though I do not know who exactly said what, my audio recorder picked up: “Listen, they don't give a fuck!” “Why's he on the ground?” “He's hurt!” “And then just like this that man hit straight back up on the concrete.” “See how they roll him over? Every time they roll him over – the cuffs is clicking too ... that's real uncomfortable. You feel me? That's a real uncomfortable position.” “They getting tighter and tighter!” “Make sure you get a picture of the fat one, he the one who did the damn – the fat boy – he the one who trip him and hit him.” “You can't act like that man! You can't be kicking folks in the face, dog. They can't have you on the ground like that then kick you in your face! That shit not right!”

I had been present for about 20 minutes when the medics arrived and started to tend to Ross. He was not able to walk without support and this further agitated the crowd. Comments about the unnecessary amount of force used continued to float around. We stood watching until Ross was eventually transported to the ambulance and taken away.

The events leading up to his arrest and the aftermath of his arrest presented an interesting moment during the course of my fieldwork. His arrest incited various emotions in the chess players, most notably the resentment they felt toward the way in which the situation was handled. This incident put further strain on an already tenuous relationship between the chess players and the police. Ross was out of line and the men agreed that he should have been arrested. It was not a question of whether or not he deserved to be sanctioned but rather how he should have been sanctioned.

Ross was using profanity, talking back to the officers, and “acting a damn fool.” His behavior did not subside nor did he leave the park when the police officer asked him to. In this scenario, the next step was to arrest him. Ross was a small, skinny man who would “jump and talk” but did not have the physical ability to do much more than that. As Toby noted, the officer should have simply arrested him and taken him to jail. The fact that he clipped him was deemed as unnecessary by all those who witnessed the event.

## CHAPTER V: PERCEPTIONS OF CONTROL

The arrest of Ross, which many viewed as police brutality, raises two questions. Generally speaking, how did the chess players perceive the formal control agents watching over them, namely ambassadors and police officers? And, what was the effect of their control, especially their threatened and given sanctions, on the men at the chess park?

### **Players' Perceptions of Ambassadors and Police**

Compared to police officers, ambassadors were more visible and active at the chess park. They had a regular presence there, consistently seen 6 to 8 times a day as they often stood and watched or walked throughout the chess court. In general, the chess players did not respect ambassadors as a legitimate force.

At best, the men found the ambassadors to be useless to them. "They suppose to help tourist," said Johnny, "tell the tourist how to get to where they going and make sure that they alright. That's what they should be doing." Of course, the men did not need that kind of assistance, and figured that if they really did need serious help, they would go to the police station across the street. Johnny continued: "The police station is across the street, you know what I'm saying? So if I had a problem I could always go to the police."

Marley was another individual who felt the ambassadors were useless to the men. When I asked him what their job was at the chess park he stated, "To not give a fuck, that's what they job is." He went on to state "They're lazy as fuck, that's what's wrong with them, they're fucking lazy." His feelings regarding them being lazy and not "giving a fuck" were solidified by how the ambassadors responded one night a young boy was

stabbed to death. He felt they cared more about whether someone was smoking a cigarette than dying, stating:

Yeah because, I mean, they would run up on you when you smoking a cigarette in that God damn park and write you a fucking ticket, but if you were sitting there watching someone get stabbed and not do nothing about it, come on. I mean, where is the justice? Where is it? There is none.

Similar to Marley's frustration, Justin also felt the ambassadors did too much about small issues and too little about bigger issues. For example, he expressed his annoyance with an ambassador who woke up a man sleeping, letting him know it was not allowed. Justin told me in an aggravated manner, "He not bothering nobody. The ones that are [bothering someone], you [the ambassadors] aren't saying anything to." Justin could not understand why the ambassador woke the man up because he was not causing anyone problems. Justin believed they should be addressing those who are actually causing harm at the park, such as those involved in physical altercations, but, instead, they focus on small problems.

The men also disliked how the ambassadors went about controlling the chess players. More specifically, they took issue with the ambassadors' demeanor. Don went on to touch on this point, and also cited it as a reason that the ambassador-player interactions are tenuous and less productive than they could be:

What's needed here is a different type of enforcement. Not so tyrannical and actually dealing with these guys like they're human beings. Because you got to understand man, if you can walk up to a crowd of people and say "Hey guys,

please let's be a little respectful.” They are going to respond [better to that request].

Don went on to say that he believes the disrespectful manner in which the ambassadors interact with players reflects the chief ambassador's attitude and goals.

I don't know this guy's last name, but I guess his name is Jim, alright? And he's top man over these ambassadors, and he's all plugged in with Georgia State and all these big businesses around here, and the attitude from Georgia State all the way ... all these other guys is, “Hey man, let's clean this area up!”

Rolland also spoke, albeit in less kind terms, about how the chief ambassador affects the actions of ambassadors working the street:

Well I feel like, you know, most of them [ambassadors] are house niggas, they a bunch of puppets. ... The Caucasian male – the guy that is the head over top of all them – he's a prick; he's an asshole. ... They think whatever puts a smile on that Caucasians male's face is what required in order for them to establish peace and to keep their job.

Of course, Rolland's comment also implies that he does not perceive the ambassadors he interacts with as worthy of respect.

Yet another reason that the men did not respect the ambassadors was a lack of fear. Ambassadors could make verbal warnings, ask individuals to leave the park, and call on police officer assistance, but could not themselves write tickets or make an arrest. Thus, when I asked Hector, for example, if people listen to the ambassadors, he responded, “No, because they have no authority. Their job was to tell folks how to get

from here to there and that was all.” And Drew equated them to a “hallway monitor,” a comparison he expanded on:

He [the ambassador] pretty much keeps everyone in line and if you get out of hand with him then he calls the principal, pretty much, or calls the teacher. ... He has his position, upholds his position, but, at the same time it’s like, you’re about as useful as a piece of paper in the wind.

Though the chess players discounted the authority of ambassadors to do anything worth being truly afraid of, they saw these agents of control as not entirely without effect on crime and disorder at the park. For instance, the same man quoted above, Drew, said of the ambassadors, “You’re not really doing much [to control us] but you’re doing enough, you know ... You know, you’re the presence that is needed to maybe keep some things down, but at the same time, you know, you’re not much.” He further compared them to “the cool auntie” with whom “I get in trouble, but I don’t really get in trouble.”

Perhaps more so than in any other way, the major threat that the ambassadors held over the men’s heads was the ability to call the police over for assistance. The men knew the ambassadors could easily call for the police officers at any moment if they felt the situation warranted doing so.

Indeed, the police were perceived as a far greater threat, and a more legitimate institution, than were the ambassadors (on police legitimacy, see Tyler, 2004). Given that the police station was literally across the street from the chess park, the players’ greater respect and fear for officers could be explained as a matter of sanction certainty – were it not for the fact that, in reality, the ambassadors were far more often present at the park

than police. Rather, then, the reason players more so feared and respected police officers than ambassadors is that the former wielded a bigger stick.

When the police came around the chess tables, the players changed their behavior, certainly more so than when around ambassadors. Drew described how, and to a certain extent why, people responded differently to these authority figures:

They [ambassadors] still carry some weight. It's like, "Okay, don't do that in front of him," but at the same time you know, you get, you get those people like, "I don't care about him! He can tell me to do whatever, if he decide to tell me to go over there, I'm going to go over there, but other than that I'm going to sit right here, I'm not scared of him." You know it's just, it's that mentality with them. But when it comes to the police it's like, oh, yeah straighten up, sit straight, you know it's that type of mentality.

Though left only implicit in Drew's quote, he is implying that the police carry more "weight" than the ambassadors, meaning the former has greater sanctioning power than the latter. As a result, the men were more motivated to "straighten up" when in the vicinity of officers than ambassadors.

On the one hand, straightening up is deterrence in action (Bentham, 1789/1988; Gibbs, 1975), but the men also cast it as a way to do what they want in the long-term. Stanley explained this perspective:

They can't stop us ... We gonna smoke pot. We gonna drink. They can't stop us. They might slow us down for 20 minutes, 30 minutes 'cause there's a lot of them around but get drunk down here ... When the cops are in the park – Atlanta police down here – nothing's going on. Nobody's doing nothing. Showing them respect.



We wait for them to leave and crank it up. 'Cause they can't stay down here all day. If they don't see anything going on, they sit down here and they see nothing going on, they're going to leave. As soon as they leave, we crank it right on up. Light a joint – he could be right there at that end over there and we'll light a joint as he's leaving.

In short, straightening up in the presence of a police officer amounts to an immediate but short-term termination of lawbreaking in order avoid sanction. After all, the officers would not be at the park at all times, so patience was a useful virtue. Moreover, the men figured that the officers would leave more quickly if nothing was “going on” at the park. Once the officers were gone, the men would “crank it back up.”

#### **Sanctions to what effect?**

As seen in the above excerpt, it is apparent that the presence and sanctions of ambassadors and police may have a limited long-term deterrent effect on crime and disorder at the chess park. Some of the players went so far as to say there was no such effect. For example, when Johnny was talking about sanctions, he argued, “It don't affect the chess park. Everything still happen the same way every day, no matter what they do authority wise.”

In reality, however, formal control at the park does shape all of the men's behavior. Even Johnny knows this to be the case, though he may not be fully aware of it, as I heard him at the park one day comment: “You can't be caught drinking. Your ass going to jail if you get caught drinking. You can take a chance all day if you want. Like dude got caught drinking here last week ... Ross, he got locked up right there, drinking at the chess court acting a damn fool.”

While not an absolute deterrent, ambassadors' and officers' sanctions – threatened and actual – restricted the amount of wrongdoing by players (Gibbs, 1975; Jacobs, 1993, 1996). This restrictiveness includes how often they did prohibited acts; where; when; and how. When sanctions were meted out, the offender would almost always alter their behavior toward conformity in the immediate aftermath. However, later that day or the next, they could be seen engaging in the same activities, although sometimes in a more careful manner. Drew summarized the time effect of punishment on the men's behavior:

Briefly, briefly. Yeah, it's like, "Oh, as soon as the police leave I'm going to smoke a cigarette again." It's like, when the guard tells me I can't smoke right here I'm just going to step outside, smoke, and come back in, but other than that I'm going to smoke as long as he lets me sit here and smoke, or whatever it is that I'm doing.

To further illustrate the point, consider how some of the incidents described in the prior chapter ultimately ended: When Grant was asked to quiet down, he did so, though he would be loud again a few hours or days later. Smoking cigarettes was one of the most prevalent prohibited actions at the park, with the same individuals being asked day after day to put out their cigarettes or smoke elsewhere – requests that they complied with, in the short term. Wilson obeyed an ambassador's demand to leave the park as punishment for illegally vending, but he started up again half an hour later. Essentially the same thing happened with Ross when he was kicked out of the park for public intoxication.

For any given individual, why is formal control a restrictive, instead of absolute, deterrent at the park? The answer is likely complex, including that the players lack,

relatively speaking, a stake in conformity; that trouble with authorities is commonplace in the men's social circles and thus less stigmatizing; and, that the men have less respect for ambassadors and police, and view them as less legitimate, at least compared to other people who may be more permanently affected if sanctioned at the park (Toby, 1957).

The players, too, offered a few reasons why the effect of formal control was restrictive instead of absolute. Don, for instance, spoke to how the effect of punishment is shaped by the type of people punished. Referring to whether sanctions affect the men's behavior, Don told me: "Absolutely not. Because ... you're dealing with addicts. You're dealing with people with emotional and mental problems. You know what I'm saying?" Don recognized that sanctioning certain individuals was useless, at least as deterrence goes, because they have deeper problems.

Yet another reason that formal control agents may have a limited deterrent effect is that being watched or sanctioned makes the men more conscientious about preventing trouble. When Drew asked about how the men's actions are changed by sanctions, he explained that "they don't change drastically, but it's to an extent where they might watch out for the police now or might watch out for the ambassador. I think that's about as much as they change." Wilson was another chess player who noted that receiving a sanction had the effect of making him more careful: "I'm a continue to do it, but I'm a be smart when I do something. I'm a watch out before I do it. Make sure y'all not watching me." And after Johnny was arrested at the park for smoking marijuana, he continued to do so, but wound up being more conscientious when he did and of who he was doing it with.

Though the prior chapters have examined how the men are sanctioned and how they avoid sanctioning, those examinations were not meant to make punishment appear more common than it in fact was. The reason I mention this is that many of the players perceived their wrongdoing as unlikely to be reprimanded, or, put differently, there was a low certainty of punishment. As Julian stated, “It’s a bit more tolerant right here [than other places] ’cause if they wanted to, they could lock’em up every time.”

Don, too, perceived that authority figures were unlikely to sanction prohibited behavior. “As far as smoking and drinking, yeah that’s broken every day,” he said. Referring to the police, he explained: “They pretty much know who the problem drinkers are, who the problem smokers are, and as long as those kids stay within a certain limit, they can drink and smoke all they want, but when they get belligerent, then you got to go.” Landon also supported this notion, stating, “I think they know what’s going on, but they really don’t [care] as long as you ain’t like causing any trouble.” In other words, there was a threshold that existed when it came to prohibited behavior: the men’s actions and crimes were tolerated, so long as they were not too serious – at least in the eyes of police and ambassadors (Friedman, 1994).

An example of the extent to which crime and disorder went unpunished, i.e. had a low certainty of being sanctioned, involved Alvin. On this particular day, I was at the park having a routine chess lesson and Alvin and I were sitting at a table playing a game. He rolled a blunt as I sat across from him, methodically contemplating my next move. He soon lit the blunt and began passing it around and sharing it with a few other men sitting at the table. We continued to play our game and Alvin would occasionally take a puff as the blunt was passed around.

One of the times Alvin went to inhale, an ambassador walked by alongside our table. Alvin noticed the ambassador's presence as he was in the middle of inhaling. He held the smoke in and then quickly started to cough. The ambassador continued to walk by and Alvin quietly mumbled something to the effect of, "Oh, that's great, just as the ambassador walks by." He was frustrated at the others for not alerting him the ambassador was in his proximity. "I don't think he's gonna bust me today," Alvin stated softly. I sat there, waiting to see what the ambassador would do, as surely he could smell the marijuana. All he did, it turned out, was continue to walk around the chess court.

When sanctions did occur, the men viewed them as unlikely to be serious and, thus, unable to impel conformity. Don succinctly summed up the idea when he said: "It's really more like a slap on the hand, 'Stop that Johnny!' So since there's no real punishment adults are going to keep doing it." For example, Adrian noted, "The cigarette smoking people, they ain't worried about nothing like going to jail. So that's the reason why you can see a cigarette smoker smoking without necessarily a big care." Also referring to cigarette smoking, Drew told me:

It's like the only thing the ambassador actually do is put it out or walk away. ... That's the risk you would take. He might tell me to put it out or go behind the wall and that risk there is nothing. So, I guess they really don't look at the punishment as it's important or, you know, I'm not risking my freedom for this cigarette.

Ralph more or less said the same about drinking in public. When asked if being sanctioned for this offense affected him, he answered:

No, no it doesn't. Because it's misdemeanor stuff. It's drinking – I get told to leave the park, I'm coming back tomorrow you know this is my lifestyle, this is what I do every day so it doesn't matter. I'll be back down here tomorrow so, you know what I mean? It doesn't matter.

## CHAPTER VI: CHECKMATE

*“We are not really that bad, you know what I’m saying? Really, everybody out here really ain’t that bad. You have to come down here and get to know us ... People have a stigma about how blacks is perceived. They think we all full of shit. They think we all about nothing. But people don’t realize chess is about the mind. I guess they feel we don’t know how to do things. You know? Because they all think of us as a downbeat, no good, ain’t going to achieve nothing ...”*  
—Hector

The purpose of this study has been to explore the social scene of Ruffwood Park, a public chess park located in downtown Atlanta. Every day, rain or shine, in the extreme Georgia heat or the bitter winter days, the park is “occupied” by a group of poor, unemployed (often homeless), black men. Despite being a fixture of the downtown Atlanta scene, those who frequent the park exist largely on the fringes of society. They are ignored, often deliberately, as people seldom interact with them. The invisible boundary that exists between these men and the rest of society is what drew me to Ruffwood Park, ironically enough. I was curious and wanted to learn more about who these people were, in their own eyes, and gain an understanding for what was going on at this park that almost everyone else seemed to avoid.

I gained access into the park by going for weekly chess lessons from Alvin. He was my main contact and the person I interacted with the most during the initial first few months. When he unexpectedly left, I slowly began interacting with the other men, and over time, Alvin’s departure became less and less salient. In some ways, his leaving allowed me the opportunity to get to know the other men, as I had limited interactions with them when Alvin was present due to his increasing possessiveness. I continued to conduct fieldwork for roughly two years. At the beginning of 2015, I slowly started to

leave the field but I remained in contact with the men and would occasionally check-in as the months passed by.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork and interviews, this dissertation looked at four parts of the men's lives. First, I explored the reasons the men were drawn to the park. I explained why they chose to come to Ruffwood Park and what made this space unique over other places they could have presumably spent their time. Second, I examined how the men went about engaging in illicit behavior in ways that would reduce their chances of being apprehended by the formal authority. Third, I examined which sanctions were handed out at the park, how so, and what types of cases resulted in a sanction. Fourth, I examined how the men responded to being punished, which relates to how they perceived sanctions, police, and ambassadors. In this final chapter, first I consider how the findings fit into the larger body of literature, and I end by describing the closing of the chess park.

### **Good Parts of the Chess Park**

There is a rich history of urban ethnographic studies that have examined group interactions in public spaces such as bars (Anderson, 1976), street corners (Liebow, 1967), restaurants (Duneier, 1992), and other such establishments. These studies have focused predominantly on marginalized black men and have illustrated that such establishments “serve as important gathering places” and are often “special hangouts for the urban poor and working-class people, serving somewhat as more formal social clubs or domestic circles do for the middle and upper classes” (Anderson, 1976, p. 1).

For these black men, many of which are excluded from participation in mainstream society, these various public establishments are a place they can call their own and feel as though they are among equals (Anderson, 1976). These places have been



shown to provide a space for them to pass time and see “what’s happening,” to feel “manly,” to find a sense of self-worth, to turn their failures into successes, to engage in sociability, and to fulfill the need for companionship.

Duneier (1992) notes the importance and regularity of such gatherings, stating how it is “a notable constituent of masculinity ... to pass time with one’s peers in a regular hangout, and male clusters have always been an important dimension of the public life” (p. 58). That said, these male clusters are not distinct to one city, but rather, they resemble what is a common existence across many metropolitan areas.

The chess park is one such public space where clusters of urban poor and working-class black males gather to “hangout.” For the men I studied, the chess park served a similar purpose as other public spaces examined in previous ethnographic work that looked at group interactions of poor black males in public space.

Among other reasons, the men came to the chess park because it provided them with a sense of community, one where they felt comfortable and welcomed for who they were. In the words of Anderson (1976), “they were among equals” when they were at the park. Their social status outside the park was not a relevant factor to how they were treated.

Also, the park was one of the few places the men could sit to pass time, and it became a routine part of their everyday life. It was their “regular hangout” similar to that of the street corner, bar, or restaurant, and it offered them a sense of purpose for their day.

Furthermore, the chess park was a place where they had grown to know one another and formed friendly associations. They looked out for one another in their own

unique ways, engaged in friendly banter and play fighting, and created a space of fellowship.

At the park, they felt a sense of security that they did not feel at other places. This was largely because of the network of personal relationships they formed with one another. As Liebow (1967) stated:

More than most social worlds, perhaps, the streetcorner world takes its shape and color from the structure and character of face-to-face relationships of the people who live in it. Unlike other areas in our society, where a large portion of the individual's energies, concerns and time are invested in self-improvement, career and job development, family and community activities, religious and cultural pursuits, or even in broad, impersonal social and political issues, these resources in the streetcorner world are almost entirely given over to the construction and maintenance of personal relationships. (p. 105)

Additionally, as other ethnographies of public spaces have shown, the chess park offered the men an arena to acquire status. The means by which this was achieved was through the game of chess. One of the unique things about the park was the fact that these men, who existed on the fringes, were participating in chess, something that has largely been associated with higher status groups. This was intriguing in and of itself, but, more so, because the game of chess served as an avenue to success.

At the chess park, there was an equal playing field when it came to chess. Anyone could learn how to play, and succeeding at the game was not dependent on one's race or class. Outside the park, there were not many opportunities where they had an equally fair

chance at success, as they embodied cumulative disadvantage (Wacquant, 2008; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Wilson, 1987). Yet, at the chess park, they could compete for mental toughness and garner status and respect based off their level of play. The men were passionate about playing chess, and, for many of them, it was one of the few things they could be “good” at and thereby gain a sense of self-worth.

However, the status they achieved at the park could not be transferred to or “cashed in” in other social settings (Anderson, 1976, p. 35). These ideas surrounding the important role chess played was summarized well by Drew:

It's like, you know, we're all here to play chess, we're all here to enjoy ourselves, you know, talk a little trash and you know, spend their day like that ... And it gives them, like for some of them, it gives them a, that bravado that they're missing because of the situation they're in and it gives them that big head about themselves in certain situations because it's like “Well I'm better than him, I'm better than him.” They have something going for themselves to where they can say I'm the best at it. You know, whether it's the best in the chess park or the best amongst the circle that they play with, it's to the point of, I-I feel like it gives them that sense of, I don't know, like, everybody I guess needs a sense of where you belong and I'm not going to say superiority over somebody, but to an extent of “I can do this.” I don't know how to break it down but it gives them a certain type of ... what's the word I'm looking for ... Yeah, status and uh ... achievement.

Chess was a “game of war” as some of the men would often say. It was a battle that no one wanted to lose because of the prize that came along with it. Beating one’s opponent offered the men an opportunity to display their “manliness” and it also allowed the men to “be the king” for a moment. For individuals who were so often pushed to the edges of society, the park was a space that allowed them to be somebody and establish a sense of self-worth and purpose.

### **Scary Sidewalks**

Despite the “good” that the park provided to the men, it was not a space inviting to outsiders. Instead, it was one that many deemed unsafe. One reason for this revolved around the issue of race and the stigma attached to being a black male. In a society where race supersedes others characteristics, to be black puts you at an automatic deficit. The presence of blacks in public spaces is often viewed as intimidating because they are stereotyped as criminal and, more specifically, violent (Anderson 1999, 2011; Wacquant, 2008).

Such negative assumptions guide the treatment of blacks in public, as strangers tend to “fall back on scripts, roles, and stereotypes that raise doubts about the black person’s claim to decency” (Anderson, 2011, p. 255). As these strangers go about their days, navigating public spaces, they make snap evaluations about other people based on the level of danger they perceive (Anderson, 2011, p. 247). The social boundary that existed between the men and passersby was surely influenced by such assumptions.

Not only were the men at the park at a deficit because of their race, but their social class evoked other negative stereotypes that further isolated them. As noted earlier, the majority of the individuals who frequented the park were homeless. Homeless

individuals are often the “objects of curiosity and negative attention” and they are routinely ignored and avoided as pedestrians avert eyes and hasten their pace to make distance (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 199).

The appearance and demeanor of homeless individuals make some people nervous, and often they just do not want to “deal” with them. People are afraid of the homeless because of negative attributes associated with this group (Donley, 2008). For instance, homeless individuals are frequently perceived as being prone to criminal activity, regardless of whether the relationship is substantiated by evidence (Wright & Donley, 2011). Areas where homeless people spend time, such as the chess park, are viewed as dangerous and, thus, avoided by the public for fear of being victimized. These assumptions and fears are regularly seen on the faces of people walking by the chess park.

Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, data were collected from student passersby regarding their perceptions of the chess park. They were asked a series of questions that gauged how they felt when they walked by the park; if they purposefully avoided the area; what they thought about the chess players; and, if they had interacted, to describe the nature of the experience. Their answers revealed that, for the most part, passersby thought of the chess players as black, homeless, crazy, or drug addicts. These perceptions relate to disorderly activities that the students reported witnessing, such as the players hitting on women, begging for money, yelling at one another, sleeping, drinking, and using the park as a bathroom. All told, these perceptions and observations led passersby to fear the chess players. When moving through the park, the passersby felt

– to quote a few – “uneasy,” “anxious,” and “scared of being robbed” and, therefore, would be on heightened alert or avoid the area.

When public spaces become feared, people use them less, and this in turn makes them more unsafe (Jacobs, 1961). In order for public spaces, such as sidewalks or parks to be safe, they need to be “heavily and constantly used by people of every race and background” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 35). A continuous flow of users engaged in business and sociability allows for greater surveillance as there are more “eyes and ears” on the street to serve as a voluntary network of controls (Jacobs, 1961). Jacobs (1961) argues this network is essential to maintaining public safety:

The first thing to understand is that the public peace – the sidewalk and street peace – of cities is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves ... No amount of police can enforce civilization when the normal, casual enforcement of it has broken down. (p. 30-32).

In order to establish such surveillance, there needs to be a mixture of uses that draw people to the area, and especially those used in the evening and night (Jacobs, 1961, p. 36). The streets need a lively public life with a continuous and dense number of users. This “sidewalk ballet,” as Jacobs refers to it, creates a vibrant urban area and fosters the preponderance of “eyes on the street” and allows opportunities for casual face-to-face interactions among the people (Jacobs, 1961).

A greater amount of “eyes” can foster more natural surveillance and reduce the opportunities for crime and nonconforming behavior. However, she argues these “eyes” must belong to the “natural proprietors of the street” and the individuals behind them must feel a sense of responsibility for what happens on the streets (Jacobs, 1961, p. 35). This is established in large part by the informal public contacts people make through face-to-face interactions that result from the sidewalk ballet. These contacts help foster an assumption of support and trust between strangers as they go about using the space.

When public spaces become less used and the order and safety is kept primarily by the police, this is problematic. This is the case at the chess park where the order and safety is kept primarily by agents of formal control. One reason for this has to do with the urban space itself and the lack of diverse uses and users along the sidewalks and streets surrounding the park. People use the streets and sidewalks bordering the chess park mainly because they attend the university, work there, or at another office building nearby. Pedestrians more or less operate on the same schedule. For example, when people are going to classes or arriving at work, they will use the surrounding streets and sidewalks. Around lunch time you will again see people out on the sidewalks. When classes are over, you will see groups of people cutting along the sidewalks once again.

However, there are large gaps of time throughout the day when the sidewalks are fairly empty and this is reflective of the fact that most of the users are not using the sidewalks at different times or for different uses. Once classes are over and work ends, the sidewalks and streets surrounding the park are more or less empty. There are several eateries that could theoretically bring more diverse use to the area but they predominantly serve the individuals affiliated with the university and the business men and women who

work nearby. In other words, the eateries bordering the park are not patronized by a diverse set of people that are coming to the area for reasons other than work or school. Further, most of the dining options close at 6 pm and are not open on the weekends, again, limiting reasons to use the sidewalks surrounding the park. This is similar for the office buildings bordering the park as they typically operate during normal hours Monday through Friday. Finally, the remaining buildings that surround the park are university buildings. Although there are evening classes that keep some of the university buildings in use during the weekday evenings, this is typically until 10 pm. The university is not in session during the weekends and this again limits the sidewalk users.

In general, on the weekends, the sidewalks and streets surrounding the park are desolate and carry an eerie feel to them. I frequented the park multiple times on the weekends and can attest to the emptiness of the sidewalks surrounding the space and the lack of open businesses. In short, the sidewalks and streets surrounding the park were not used by diverse users for diverse reasons.

Although there were periods during the weekday when the streets and sidewalks surrounding the park were busy, and there were technically “eyes and ears” on the streets, there were elements missing to allow for these “eyes” to form a network of voluntary controls that Jacobs found essential to safe sidewalks. The sidewalks surrounding the park do not have a “sidewalk ballet” where pedestrians are out and about at all times of the day. The activities that bring people out are restricted to a few purposes during specific times of the day. In turn, there is limited interactions and preponderance of “eyes” throughout the day. Additionally, for reasons related to race and class, the streets and sidewalks surrounding the park are sometimes avoided by pedestrians, or, they



hastily walk through, making it more difficult to create the casual public contacts that are necessary to establish the sense of mutual support and trust while among strangers.

The differences in race and class that are present in sidewalk life make the interactions between strangers tense. As Duneier (1999) stated:

Sidewalk life today is different from how it was when Jacobs was writing. In Jacob's time, sidewalk life brought people into limited contact with other strangers substantially like themselves. Because the strangers appear too different now, so do the problems (p. 192).

The focus of Duneier's ethnographic work was marginalized individuals, predominately black homeless men, who worked as street vendors on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village selling mainly used books and magazines. His work illustrated how the sidewalk exchanges people have today are less likely to make them feel the strangers among them have good intentions. This in large part stems from the stark differences between them and the strangers. Many people are afraid of the unknown and the strangers that occupy many public spaces today are precisely that.

On the sidewalks surrounding the chess park, passersby did not interact regularly or informally with the strangers among them – the men who spent time at the park. Instead, there was a tendency to pretend they did not see the men, avoid eye contact and conversation, and so on. The social boundary that existed between the chess players and the passersby was just as, if not more, formidable than a physical boundary. Duneier (1999) suggests this type of response is based on the belief that such strangers who look substantially different do not adhere to conventional norms:

In the early 1980s, residents of many American cities came to see their sidewalk life as a new kind of struggle. They perceived that conventional standards did not apply on streets like Sixth Avenue ... For many city dwellers, informal social control was no longer enough, because the eyes upon the street were no longer conventional. (p. 157)

The street vendors in his study were those on the extreme margins of society, much like the men who frequented the chess park. The nonconventional appearance of his subjects and their job as a street vendor, led to the assumption they could not possible have conventional norms because this lifestyle was not “normal.” These assumptions feed back into issues of race and class addressed earlier. Whether it is the street vendors on Sixth Avenue or the men at the chess park, they will never be viewed as “desirable members of the neighborhood” (Duneier, 2002, p. 1562). They carry with them a deviant status simply by being black and homeless. When passersby come across these types of individuals in public spaces, they fall back on their scripts and make judgements about them. What results is fear, and this in turn thwarts the development of a network of voluntary controls and standards which Jacobs (1961) argues is essential to a safe city life. With the loss of this natural surveillance, a host of others problems can occur.

When passersby are no longer be able to informally control the behavior in public places, it can give rise to nonconforming behaviors. Duneier (1999) showed evidence of this when the vendors in his study engaged in illegal and deviant behavior. Although there were many vendors who did not engage in offensive behavior, there were a number of vendors who engaged in acts that “affront the sensibilities of local residents and passersby” (Duneier, 1999, p. 9-10). He showed there were a number of vendors who

engaged in such behaviors as sidewalk sleeping, drug use, selling stolen goods, public urination, and unwanted conversations with passersby (Duneier, 1999).

Similarly, at the chess park there were a number of men who showed “decency,” however, alongside them were men who hustled and engaged in various forms of vice. Many of the men were drawn to the park specifically to engage in such behaviors. In this respect, several of their reasons for frequenting the park are supported by the criminological framework of street life.

### **Street Life**

A large body of literature on poor black men focuses on street life, an oppositional culture used to understand an assortment of phenomena and social problems that exist and are caused by growing up in disadvantaged inner cities (Anderson, 1999; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Ilan, 2015; Venkatesh, 2006, 2008; Wright & Decker, 1997). Street life is defined as “a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies” that lead to a “spontaneous set of rebellious practices” (Bourgois, 1995/2003, p. 8). These practices can range widely, but at their core, they provide individuals from disadvantaged urban communities an avenue to obtain personal self-worth in the face of social, economic, and cultural marginalization.

Street life behaviors range widely in seriousness. They include actions “which cause little harm and indeed may not be considered criminal when engaged in under different circumstances or contexts, to those which are inarguably harmful, detrimental and criminal” (Ilan, 2015, p. 82). There is a wide range of behavior associated with street life because, like many cultures, it is complex and people range in their level of commitment to it (Ilan, 2015, p. 10). On one end, individuals more strongly committed to

street life may be more inclined to embrace criminal, including violent or predatory behaviors (Anderson, 1999; Jacobs, 2000; Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Wright & Decker, 1997), while, at the other end, less committed souls may only engage street life through certain bodily postures, clothing, and verbal communications that embody “cool” (Ilan, 2015, p. 106-107; Majors & Billson, 1992). Yet regardless of one’s level of commitment to street life, the dominant middle-class culture view all of its manifestations as criminal or, at least, related to crime.

There is a tendency to vilify street life. This can lead people to make the assumption that all individuals who embrace elements of the culture are violent street offenders. However, it is possible to embrace aspects of the street culture and not be a hardcore street offender. This is the case with the men at the chess park, as evidenced in several ways.

One commonly cited aspect of street life is the pursuit of the “high life,” characterized by an indulgent lifestyle of “unnecessary consumption” and excessiveness (Collison, 1996, p. 430). It is manifested in a variety of ways ranging from materialism to party pursuits, such as drug and alcohol consumption. Individuals gain respect through public displays of such consumption. People operating within the street life culture take pride in the ability to live “life as party” and overcome the “restrictive bonds and routines” practiced by conventional lifestyle (Shover, 1996, p. 110). More so than any other activities, the men at the park displayed the “life as party” element through their regular indulgence in drinking and smoking there. They were constantly searching for a good time and living for the enjoyment of the moment. This was one of the main reasons they were drawn to the park in the first place. The men were pleasure-seekers and if they

wanted to drink or smoke, they were likely going to do it unless an ambassador or police officer was standing next to them.

Street life is also evident in how the chess players talked to each other. Street life encompasses modes of expression, such as what words are used, how they are pronounced, and to what effect (Majors & Bilson, 1992). In *Code of the Street*, Anderson (1999) goes on at length about the ways in which adherents to street life “talk trash,” which can sometimes be a real slight, but often is a form of joint-recreation between the talker and the talked about. Through such expressions, individuals are able to form a street identity and further distance themselves from the “boring” conventional society. The men in the park did so when they engaged in loud, confrontational verbal play. Although this behavior was off-putting to passersby and would not be considered “proper” by polite, conventional standards, it represents the men’s involvement in street life.

Another commonly cited aspect of street life is marked by a lot of “hanging out” in public spaces with their friends. Whereas those in conventional society emphasize structured leisure, street culture views “casual, unstructured activities” as desirable because they allow the opportunity for an “autonomous expenditure of time” (Ilan, 2015, p. 85). Being able to display this independence to others is another way an individual’s social capital or respect can be accrued on the streets. Clearly, the men at the park were expert at “doing nothing,” from a conventional viewpoint. They spent much of their day “hanging out” at the park engaging in unstructured leisure. Although they did play chess and this could be considered a structured activity, it was more akin to having the

television on in the background than a formalized way of being together. Chess gave the park its name, but a lot of time was spent socializing, just “chillin” together.

Yet another element of street life relevant to the chess players is obtaining cash through nonconventional means, such as illicit street vending. Crime is both the preferred and, often, necessary way to make money because, respectively, it can be quicker – thereby not jeopardizing time hanging out – and does not require a formal education or other factors that go into being hired for a legitimate job (Jacobs, 1999). Prohibited entrepreneurship was a common fixture at the chess park. This included smaller offenses, such as gambling over chess, to selling loosies, to selling illicit substances. Indeed, many of the men were dependent on the proceeds of these activities to make due.

A final aspect of street life present in the chess players’ lives is a nonchalant attitude toward breaking the rules and the belief that police, and often governmental authority figures, are illegitimate due to incompetence, disinterest, or corruption (Anderson, 1999; Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). There exists a general antipathy and defiance toward law enforcement. The chess players held a similar disposition, although they held the ambassadors in even less high regard than police. The men at the park often displayed a disregard for formal authority, treating it more as a temporary nuisance than legitimate power to control behavior.

### **Deterrence**

Despite the openness and normalcy toward hustling and vice, the men knew that many of their behaviors were against the rules and, thus, could be sanctioned. This awareness was demonstrated by how they prevented and responded to warnings, expulsion, and arrest. Though the men deemed these sanctions not too serious, with,

perhaps, the exception of arrest, nonetheless it was better to avoid these punishments than not – so long as they could more or less keep the good time rolling.

One way the men responded to the threat of sanction was by employing a variety of tactics to reduce the risk of their misbehavior being detected. These techniques included using props and barricades as well as using a lookout and treating authority figures with respect. In part, and somewhat ironically, another way that the men prevented sanction was to momentarily go along with lighter sanctions. This involved stopping whatever action they were warned not to do, and also leaving the park if requested. However, the men would only oblige temporarily, as later that day or week the sanctioned behavior would be enacted again.

The above findings speak to deterrence, of course, or how fear of punishment shapes behavior. Well ingrained in modern day criminal justice, the deterrence doctrine is grounded on the assumption that individuals make choices based upon the perceived rewards and costs. It argues that individuals perform a reasoned, if imperfect cost/benefit analysis prior to engaging in criminal activity. If the anticipated risks of crime outweigh the expected pleasure, individuals should, in theory, forgo involvement in unlawful behavior and opt instead to conform to societal norms. (Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Decker, Wright, & Logie, 1993).

There are several other types of deterrence, however, relevant to the men's lives. One distinction in the deterrence literature is the difference between experiencing punishment and avoiding it. For example, although a person does not "suffer" a legal punishment, they still have a direct experience with the threat of legal punishment (Stafford & Warr, 1993, p. 124). This example would fall under specific deterrence –

personal experiences with being sanctioned or not (Paternoster & Piquero, 1995) – and is likely to impact one’s perceptions of punishment because people who continually evade trouble might start to believe they are “immune from punishment” (Stafford & Warr, 1993, p. 125). In this sense, it could encourage them to commit more crime. This likely happened at the chess park, as far more of the men’s prohibited actions went unpunished than did. Punishment avoidance may also involve learning about what happens to others, which is a matter of general deterrence (Paternoster & Piquero, 1995). For example, people may see or hear about others engaging in illicit behavior yet not be punished, which was common at the chess park, too.

Another aspect of deterrence, and which was alluded to in the prior chapter, concerns the difference between absolute and restrictive deterrence (Gibbs, 1975). The former refers to never committing a particular offense out of fear of punishment, whereas the latter refers to how offenders change their behavior due to said fear by limiting the frequency, magnitude, or seriousness of their crime.

Given my study is one of men involved in lawbreaking or, at least, violation of city ordinances, my findings are particularly illustrative of restrictive deterrence, of which there are two types: probabilistic and particularistic (Jacobs, 1996). Probabilistic restrictive deterrence occurs when an individual reduces the frequency of their offending based on odds and the rationalization that they are going to get caught eventually (Jacobs, 1996). This curtailment is done out of concern that they are more likely to be punished if they do not reduce their frequency.

Particularistic restrictive deterrence occurs when an individual reduces the frequency of their offending based on “tactical skills” that make them “less likely to be



apprehended” (Jacobs, 1996, p. 425). This can include anticipatory strategies, which are those to avoid contact with police, or reactive strategies, which are those to avoid arrest when one is in contact with police (Jacobs, 1993, 1996). Examples of this in the chess park include the men’s use of props to hide their entrepreneurial activities, as this could hurt their bottom line by making it less obvious to others they had product for sale. Another particularistic technique of the chess players was to limit their involvement in illicit behavior when an ambassador or officer was standing nearby, which included not taking a puff of a blunt, putting out their cigarette, and not taking a sip of alcohol unless in the clear.

### **The Closing**

It goes without saying that the social life of the chess park is far richer than this dissertation can do justice. Important questions left largely unaddressed include: How are the chess players perceived not only by passersby but also ambassadors, police, shopkeepers, and others? How does their behavior affect that of the chess players and vice versa? And while this dissertation has focused on formal control, another question is how do the chess players informally regulate themselves? In the future, I will be able to analyze these issues with data I collected from the chess players and passersby, as well as through to-be conducted interviews with ambassadors, police, and shopkeepers.

As with all studies, this one raises questions that, for a time, must remain unanswered because all things come to an end. The chess park is a case in point. As summer 2014 came to an end, two major events occurred at the park within weeks of each other. The first occurred in late August during a weekday afternoon when school was in session. Georgia State University had sent out a violent crime alert via text, email,

and automated phone call telling students the university police were working on a crime scene at Stovall Ave, one of the streets that border the chess court. They advised students the incident was under control but to keep away from the area.

Being that this was right near the chess park, I wanted to make sure none of the chess guys were involved, and I wanted to get their perspective on the event. I walked over toward the park around 4:30 pm and there was yellow crime scene tape blocking off the street and the chess court. There were numerous police cars and several news reporters. The chess court area had been vacated and crime scene investigators were working in the area collecting evidence. The chess players were standing around in groups watching and talking amongst themselves. There were a handful of news reporters trying to interview the men as I was also trying to talk to them.

I stayed at the park for several hours, talking to different men trying to piece together the events that had unfolded. Based on my conversations, there was an incident that occurred between a man passing through the park and a female police officer. The officer was looking for a suspect and saw the man sitting on the steps near the base of the chess court. The officer approached him and started to handcuff him when he pulled out a butcher knife and begun to swing at her. He got up and started to walk across the street with his knife. The officer gave three or four warnings for him to stop but he continued to walk across the street with the knife and stabbed a man. The police officer drew her weapon and fired a shot. He fell to ground and both he and the man he stabbed were quickly transported to the hospital.

The men made it clear that this man was not a regular chess player and nobody knew who he was. After 2 to 3 hours the police were finished investigating the crime

scene and they took down the caution tape. They opened the chess court back up and things quickly went back to normal. It surprised me that the chess players so quickly went back to playing chess as if a shooting and stabbing had not just occurred in front of their eyes.

The second major event occurred about three weeks later on a Sunday evening in September. Two white males got into a verbal argument over a drug rip-off, and it escalated into a physical altercation and fatal stabbing. The boy who died was runaway teenager who was reported missing a few months prior. He had recently befriended one of the men at the chess park, and I had only seen him pass through the park 2 or 3 times. The individual who committed the stabbing was a 20 something male who shared the mutual acquaintance at the park. Although the individuals involved in the altercation were not chess players, their actions ultimately brought negative attention to the chess park.

Many of the men were at the park playing chess the night the stabbing occurred. They saw the events unfold and witnessed the young boy slowly dying in a pool of his blood as he waited for an extended period for an ambulance to arrive. I spoke to many of the men about the events of this evening, and they all mentioned the excessive amount of time it took to get medical attention, particularly given the proximity to a trauma hospital. Further, the men were angry and upset by the ambassador who, in their words, “walked straight the fuck off” and “got the hell out.” Another man explained to me that people were beating on the door to the police precinct and shouting that they needed help and explaining that someone had been stabbed, but no one answered the door. Numerous men commented that the response time of the 911 call was upwards of 30 minutes, and they

believed the lengthy response was because the authorities had assumed it was just a black man from Ruffwood Park.

Immediately following this incident, the chess park was closed for an undisclosed period. The tables were removed and barricade gates were placed around the perimeter. Some men went so far as to suggest the park was closed because it was a white person who was killed versus a black. Either way, the men no longer could go there to play chess or engage in the many other activities that brought them there in the past.

In the first few days following the closing, many of the men sat alongside the walls surrounding the chess park. Others ventured over to a local tourist spot, Millennial Park, and played there for a week until they were kicked out for being disruptive. The rest ended up on the far end of the park where there was a large waterfall and stairs and wall space to play chess. There was little oversight on this end of the park and one man described this area as the “wild, wild, west,” suggesting people had different attitudes and were now going more “street” over on this end.

In addition to conducting interviews, I also reached out to my contact at the Atlanta Police Department (APD) and the higher-ups at the Parks and Recreation Department regarding the closure. According to my contact at APD, the park was closed to keep crime rates down in that zone, as there had been several other crime incidents in the proximity before the officer-involved shooting and fatal stabbing. The information I gathered from the Parks and Recreation Department was mixed. My first conversation with a staff member was in agreement with what APD had told me. However, in subsequent conversations with the staff, I was repeatedly told the park was closed due to

improvements they were making such as new lighting and trimming the trees. They informed me the park would open back up once the improvements were completed.

As January 2015 was nearing an end, the chess park was still closed, and there was little clarity regarding its future. Nobody seemed to know when it would open and if it did open, would the men be permitted to play chess again as they had before the stabbing. Some thought there would be new rules and restrictions while others thought it was not going to reopen as a chess court but something else entirely. With no indication of when the park would reopen, and looming graduate program deadlines, I made the decision to leave the field. I had a sufficient amount of data to finish my dissertation.

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