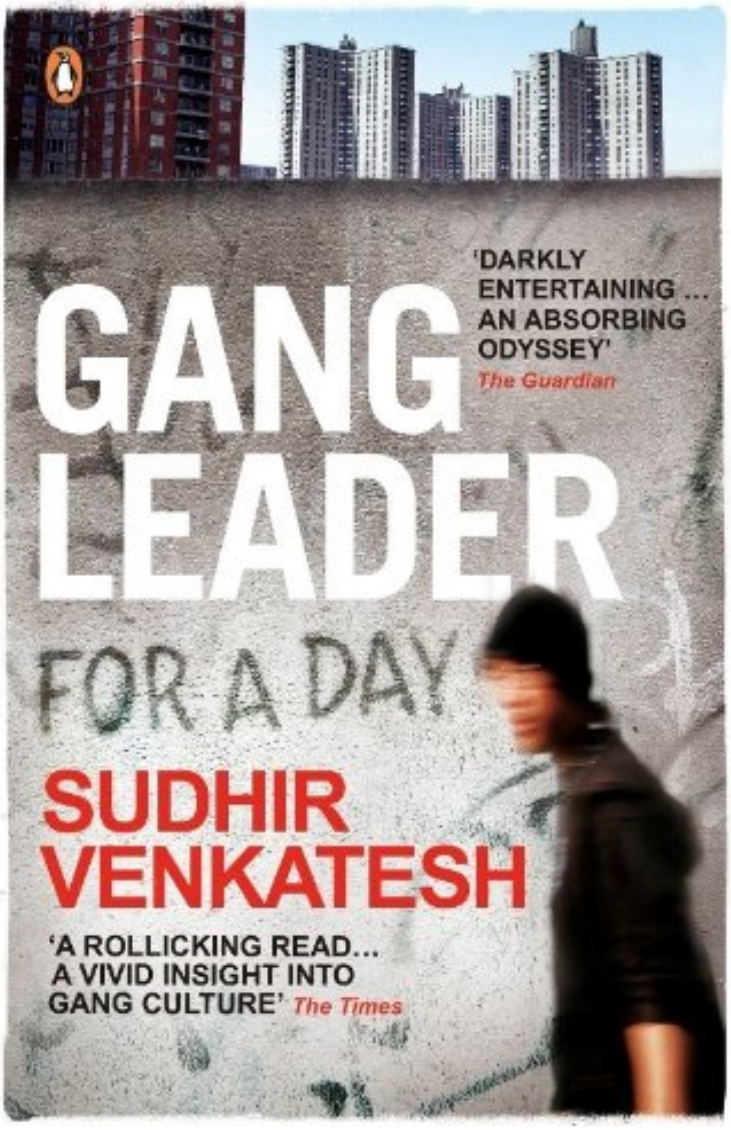
Gang Leader for a Day



Par Sudhir Venkatesh
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[Download free pdf] Gang Leader for a Day

Par Sudhir Venkatesh : Gang Leader for a Day before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Gang Leader for a Day:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSudhir Venkatesh the young sociologist who became famous in Freakonomics (Why do drug dealers still live with their moms?) describes his time living with the gangs on the Southside of Chicago and answers another question: what's it like to live in hell?In the Robert Taylor Homes projects on Chicago's South Side, Sudhir befriends J.T., a gang leader for the Black Kings. As he slowly gains J.T.'s trust, one day, in order to convince Sudhir of his own CEO-like qualities, J.T. makes him leader of the gang... Why does J.T. make his henchmen, the 'shorties', stay in school? What is the difference between a 'regular' hustler and a 'hype' - and is Peanut telling him the truth about which she is? And, when the FBI finally starts cracking down on the Black Kings, is it time to get out - or is it too late?ExtraitFOREWORD

byStephen J. DubnerI believe that Sudhir Venkatesh was born with two abnormalities: an overdeveloped curiosity and an underdeveloped sense of fear.How else to explain him? Like thousands upon thousands of people, he entered graduate school one fall and was dispatched by his professors to do some research. This research happened to take him to the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, one of the worst ghettos in America. But blessed with that outlandish curiosity and unfettered by the sort of commonsensical fear that most of us would experience upon being held hostage by an armed crack gang, as Venkatesh was early on in his research, he kept coming back for more.I met Venkatesh a few years ago when I interviewed him for Freakonomics, a book I wrote with the economist Steve Levitt. Venkatesh and Levitt had collaborated on several academic papers about the economics of crack cocaine. Those papers were interesting, to be sure, but Venkatesh himself presented a whole new level of fascination. He is soft-spoken and laconic; he doesnt volunteer much information. But every time you ask him a question, it is like tugging a thread on an old tapestry: the whole thing unspools and falls at your feet. Story after story, marked by lapidary detail and hard-won insight: the rogue cop who terrorized the neighborhood, the jerry-built network through which poor families hustled to survive, the time Venkatesh himself became gang leader for a day.Although we wrote about Venkatesh in Freakonomics (it was many readers favorite part), there wasnt room for any of these stories. Thankfully, he has now written an extraordinary book that details all his adventures and misadventures. The stories he tells are far stranger than fiction, and they are also more forceful, heartbreaking, and hilarious. Along the way he paints a unique portrait of the kind of neighborhood that is badly misrepresented when it is represented at all. Journalists like me might hang out in such neighborhoods for a week or a month or even a year. Most social scientists and do-gooders tend to do their work at arms length. But Venkatesh practically lived in this neighborhood for the better part of a decade. He brought the perspective of an outsider and came away with an insiders access. A lot of writing about the poor tends to reduce living, breathing, joking, struggling, sensual, moral human beings to dupes who are shoved about by invisible forces. This book does the opposite. It shows, day by day and dollar by dollar, how the crack dealers, tenant leaders, prostitutes, parents, hustlers, cops, and Venkatesh himself tried to construct a good life out of substandard materials.As much as I have come to like Venkatesh, and admire him, I probably would not want to be a member of his family: I would worry too much about his fearlessness. I probably wouldnt want to be one of his research subjects either, for his curiosity must be exhausting. But I am very, very happy to have been one of the first readers of Venkateshs book, for it is as extraordinary as he is.PREFACEI woke up at about 7:30 A.M. in a crack den, Apartment 1603 in Building Number 2301 of the Robert Taylor Homes. Apartment 1603 was called the Roof, since everyone knew that you could get very, very high there, even higher than if you climbed all the way to the buildings actual rooftop.As I opened my eyes, I saw two dozen people sprawled about, most of them men, asleep on couches and the floor. No one had lived in the apartment for a while. The walls were peeling, and roaches skittered across the linoleum floor. The activities of the previous nightsmoking crack, drinking, having sex, vomitinghad peaked at about 2:00 A.M. By then the unconscious people outnumbered the conscious onesand among the conscious ones, few still had the cash to buy another hit of crack cocaine. Thats when the Black Kings saw diminishing prospects for sales and closed up shop for the night.I fell asleep, too, on the floor. I hadnt come for the crack; I was here on a different mission. I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, and for my research I had taken to hanging out with the Black Kings, the local crack-selling gang.It was the sun that woke me, shining through the Roofs doorway. (The door itself had disappeared long ago.) I climbed over the other stragglers and walked down to the tenth floor, where the Patton family lived. During the course of my research, I had gotten to know the Pattonsa law-abiding family, it should be saidand they treated me kindly, almost like a son. I said good morning to Mama Patton, who was cooking breakfast for her husband, Pops, a seventy-year-old retired factory worker. I washed my face, grabbed a slice of cornbread, and headed outside into a breezy, brisk March morning.Just another day in the ghetto.Just another day as an outsider looking at life from the inside. Thats what this book is about.ONEHow Does It Feel to Be Black and Poor?During my first weeks at the University of Chicago, in the fall of 1989, I had to attend a variety of orientation sessions. In each one, after the particulars of the session had been dispensed with, we were warned not to walk outside the areas that were actively patrolled by the universitys police force. We were handed detailed maps that outlined where the small enclave of Hyde Park began and ended: this was the safe area. Even the lovely parks across the border were off-limits, we were told, unless you were traveling with a large group or attending a formal event.It turned out that the ivory tower was also an ivory fortress. I lived on the southwestern edge of Hyde Park, where the university housed a lot of its graduate students. I had a studio

apartment in a ten-story building just off Cottage Grove Avenue, a historic boundary between Hyde Park and Woodlawn, a poor black neighborhood. The contrast would be familiar to anyone who has spent time around an urban university in the United States. On one side of the divide lay a beautifully manicured Gothic campus, with privileged students, most of them white, walking to class and playing sports. On the other side were down-and-out African Americans offering cheap labor and services (changing oil, washing windows, selling drugs) or panhandling on street corners.I didnt have many friends, so in my spare time I started taking long walks, getting to know the city. For a budding sociologist, the streets of Chicago were a feast. I was intrigued by the different ethnic neighborhoods, the palpable sense of culture and tradition. I liked that there was one part of the city, Rogers Park, where Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis congregated. Unlike the lily-white suburbs of Southern California where Id grown up, the son of immigrants from South Asia, here Indians seemed to have a place in the ethnic landscape along with everyone else.I was particularly interested in the poor black neighborhoods surrounding the university. These were neighborhoods where nearly half the population didnt work, where crime and gang activity were said to be entrenched, where the welfare rolls were swollen. In the late 1980s, these isolated parts of the inner cities gripped the nations attention. I went for many walks there and started playing basketball in the parks, but I didnt see any crime, and I didnt feel particularly threatened. I wondered why the university kept warning students to keep out.As it happened, I attracted a good bit of curiosity from the locals. Perhaps it was because these parks didnt attract many nonblack visitors, or perhaps it was because in those days I dressed like a Deadhead. I got asked a lot of questions about Indiamost of which I couldnt answer, since Id moved to the States as a child. Sometimes Id come upon a picnic, and people would offer me some of their soul food. They were puzzled when I turned them down on the grounds that I was a vegetarian.But as alien as I was to these folks, they were just as alien to me.As part of my heavy course load at the U of C, I began attending seminars where professors parsed the classic sociological questions: How do an individuals preferences develop? Can we predict human behavior? What are the long-term consequences, for instance, of education on future generations?The standard mode of answering these questions was to conduct widespread surveys and then use complex mathematical methods to analyze the survey data. This would produce statistical snapshots meant to predict why a given person might, say, fail to land a job, or end up in prison, or have a child out of wedlock. It was thought that the key to formulating good policy was to first formulate a good scientific study.I liked the questions these researchers were asking, but compared with the vibrant life that I saw on the streets of Chicago, the discussion in these seminars seemed cold and distant, abstract and lifeless. I found it particularly curious that most of these researchers didnt seem interested in meeting the people they wrote about. It wasnt necessarily out of any animositynearly all of them were well intentionedbut because the act of actually talking to research subjects was seen as messy, unscientific, and a potential source of bias.Mine was not a new problem. Indeed, the field of sociology had long been divided into two camps: those who use quantitative and statistical techniques and those who study life by direct observation, often living among a group of people.This second group, usually called ethnographers, use their firsthand approach to answer a particular sort of question: How do people survive in marginal communities? for instance, or What makes a government policy work well for some families and not for others?The quantitative sociologists, meanwhile, often criticized the ethnographers approach. They argued that it isnt nearly scientific enough and that the answers may be relevant only to the particular group under observation. In other words, to reach any important and generalizable conclusion, you need to rely on the statistical analyses of large data sets like the U.S. Census or other massive surveys.My frustration with the more scientific branch of sociology hadnt really coalesced yet. But I knew that I wanted to do something other than sit in a classroom all day and talk mathematics.So I did what any sensible student who was interested in race and poverty would do: I walked down the hallway and knocked on the door of William Julius Wilson, the most eminent living scholar on the subject and the most prominent African American in the field of sociology. He had been teaching at the U of C for nearly twenty years and had published two books that reshaped how scholars and policy makers thought about urban poverty.I caught Wilson just in timehe was about to go to Paris for a sabbatical. But he was also about to launch a new research project, he said, and I could participate if I liked.Wilson was a quiet, pensive man, dressed in a dark blue suit. Although he had stopped smoking his trademark pipe long ago, he still looked like the kind of professor you see in movies. If you asked him a question, hed often let several long moments of silence passhe could be more than a little bit intimidatingbefore offering a thoughtful response.Wilson explained that he was hoping to better understand how young blacks were affected by specific neighborhood factors: Did growing up as a poor kid in a housing project, for instance, lead to worse

educational and job outcomes than if a similarly poor kid grew up outside the projects? What about the difference between growing up in a neighborhood that was surrounded by other poor areas and growing up poor but near an affluent neighborhood? Did the latter group take advantage of the schools, services, and employment opportunities in the richer neighborhoods?Wilsons project was still in the planning stages. The first step was to construct a basic survey questionnaire, and he suggested I help his other graduate students in figuring out which questions to ask. This meant going back to earlier studies of black youth to see what topics and questions had been chosen by earlier sociologists. Wilson gave me a box of old questionnaires. I should experiment, he said, by borrowing some of their questions and developing new ones as needed. Sociologists liked to use survey questions that their peers had already used, I learned, in order to produce comparable results. This was a key part of the scientific method in sociology.I thanked Wilson and went to the library to begin looking over the questionnaires hed given me. I quickly realized I had no idea how to interview anyone.Washington Park, situated just across Cottage Grove Avenue from the U of C, is one of Chicagos stateliest parks. Designed in the 1870s by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, it has a beautiful swimming pool, indoor and outdoor basketball courts, dazzling flower gardens, and long, winding paths that crisscross its nearly four hundred acres. I liked to go running on the clay track that encircled the park, a track that decades earlier had hosted horse and auto races. Until the 1940s the surrounding neighborhood was mainly Irish, but when black families started buying homes nearby, most of the white families moved away. I was always surprised that the university actively dissuaded its students from spending time in Washington Park. I failed to see the danger, at least in the daylight.After my run I sometimes stopped by the broad, marshy lagoon in the middle of the park. The same group of old black men, usually a half dozen or so, congregated there every dayplaying cards, drinking beer, fishing for bass and perch in the lagoon. I sat and listened to them for hours. To this point I had had little exposure to African-American culture at all, and no experience whatsoever in an urban ghetto. I had moved to Chicago just a year earlier from California, where Id attended a predominantly white college situated on the beach, UC San Diego.I had been reading several histories of Chicagos black community, and I sometimes asked these men about the events and people of which Id read. The stories they told were considerably more animated than the history in the books. They knew the intricacies of machine politicswhom you had to befriend, for instance, to get a job or a building permit. They talked about the Black Panther Party of their youth and how it was radically different from todays gangs. The Panthers had breakfast programs for kids, but these gangs just shoot em and feed em drugs, one man lamented. I already knew a bit about how the Panthers operated in Chicago during the civil-rights era. What little I knew about modern gangs, however, came from the movies and newspapersand, of course, the constant cautions issued by the U of C about steering clear of certain neighborhoods.I was particularly intrigued by the old mens views on race, which boiled down to this: Whites and blacks would never be able to talk openly, let alone live together. The most talkative among them was Leonard Combs, a.k.a. Old Time. Never trust a white man, he told me one day, and dont think black folk are any better.Old Time came to Washington Park every day with his fishing gear, lunch, and beer. He wore a tired beige fishing hat, and he had lost so many teeth that his gums smacked together when he spoke. But he loved to talk, especially about Chicago.We live in a city within a city, he said. They have theirs and we have ours. And if you can understand that it will never change, youll start understanding how this city works.You mean whites and blacks will never get along? I asked.A man named Charlie Butler jumped in. You got two kinds of whites in this city, he said, and two kinds of blacks. You got whites wholl beat you if you come into their neighborhood. They live around Bridgeport and on the Southwest Side. Then you got another group that just wont invite you in. Theyll call the police if you come in their neighborhoodlike where you live, in Hyde Park. And the police will beat you up.Charlie was a retired factory worker, a beefy man with tattooed, well-developed arms, a college football star from long ago. Charlie sometimes came to Hyde Park for breakfast or lunch at one of the diners where other blacks hung out, but he never stayed past sun-down and he never walked on residential streets, he said, since the police would follow him.What about blacks? I asked.You got blacks who are beating their heads trying to figure out a way to live where you live! Charlie continued. Dont ask me why. And then you got a whole lot of black folk who realize it aint no use. Like us. We just spend our time trying to get by, and we live around here, where it aint so pretty, but at least you wont get your ass beat. At least not by the police.Thats how its been since black folk came to the city, Old Time said, and its not going to change.You mean you dont have any white friends? I asked.You have any black friends? Old Time countered with a sly grin. I didnt need to answer. And you may want to ask your professors if they have any, he said, clearly pleased with his rebuke.From these conversations I started to

gain a bit of perspective on what it was like to be black in Chicago. The overriding sentiment was that given how the city operated, there was little chance for any significant social progress.This kind of fatalism was foreign to me. When you grew up in affluent Southern California, even for someone as politically disengaged as I, there was a core faith in the workings of American institutions and a sustaining belief that people can find a way to resolve their differences, even racial ones. I was now beginning to see the limits of my narrow experience. Nearly every conversation with Old Time and his friends wound up at the intersection of politics and race. I couldnt follow all the nuances of their arguments, especially when it came to local politics, but even I could see the huge gap between how they perceived the world and how sociologists presented the life of urban poor people.One day I asked Old Time and his friends if theyd be willing to let me interview them for Professor Wilsons survey. They agreed, and I tried for a few days. But I felt I wasnt getting anywhere. Most of the conversations ended up meandering along, a string of interruptions and half-finished thoughts.Charlie could see I was dejected. Before you give up, he said, you should probably speak to the people who you really want to talk toyoung men, not us. Thats the only way youre going to get what you need.So I set out looking for young black men. At the U of C library, I checked the census records to find a tract with poor black families with people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. The Lake Park projects looked good, at least on paper, and I randomly chose Building Number 4040, highlighting on my census printout the apartments where young people lived. Those were the doors Id be knocking on. Old Time told me that I could go any day I wanted. Most black folk in the projects dont work, he said, so they dont have nowhere else to be. Still, I thought a weekend would be the best time to find a lot of people.On a brisk Saturday afternoon in November, I went looking for 4040 South Lake Park, one of several high-rise projects in Oakland, a lakefront neighborhood about two miles north of the U of C. Oakland was one of the poorest communities in Chicago, with commensurately high rates of unemployment, welfare, and crime. Its population was overwhelmingly black, dating back to the early-twentieth-century southern migration. The neighborhood surrounding the Lake Park projects wasnt much of a neighborhood at all. There were few people on the streets, and on some blocks there were more vacant lots than buildings. Aside from a few liquor stores and broken-down bodegas, there wasnt much commerce. It struck me that most housing projects, even though they are built in cities, run counter to the very notion of urban living. Cities are attractive because of their balkanized variety: wandering the streets of a good city, you can see all sorts of highs and lows, commerce and recreation, a multitude of ethnicities and just as many expressions of public life. But housing projects, at least from the outside, seemed to be a study in joyless monotony, the buildings clustered tightly together but set apart from the rest of the city, as if they were toxic.Up close, the buildings looked like tall checkerboards, their dull yellow-brick walls lined with rows of dreary windows. A few of the windows revealed the aftermath of an apartment fire, black smudges spreading upward in the shape of tombstones. Most of the buildings had only one entrance, and it was usually clogged with young people.From Publishers WeeklyHonest and entertaining, Columbia University professor Venkatesh vividly recounts his seven years following and befriending a Chicago crack-dealing gang in a fascinating look into the complex world of the Windy City's urban poor. As introduced in Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner's bestseller, Freakonomics, Venkatesh became involved with the Black Kingsand their charismatic leader J.T.as a first-year doctoral student at the University of Chicago. Sent to the projects with a multiple-choice test on poverty as his calling card, Venkatesh was, to his surprise, invited in to see how the drug dealers functioned in real life, from their corporate structure to the corporal punishment meted out to traitors and snitches. Venkatesh's narrative breaks down common misperceptions (such as all gang members are uneducated and cash rich, when the opposite is often true), the native of India also addresses his shame and subsequent emotional conflicts over collecting research on illegal activities and serving as the Black Kings' primary decision-maker for a dayhardly the actions of a detached sociological observer. But overinvolved or not, this graduate student turned gang-running rogue sociologist has an intimate and compelling tale to tell. (Jan.)