FOREWORD

MY FIRST REAL EXPOSURE to the idea of juvenile delinquency and the lives of teenagers growing up in difficult circumstances occurred when I read S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* as a child. Immersing myself in the experiences of Ponyboy, Soda, Johnny, and the other Greasers gave me an idea of how my life might have been very different if I had been born into a dysfunctional family or a turbulent neighborhood. In short, the fictional boys in *The Outsiders* offered me an early experience in learning both sociology and empathy.

I have now spent most of my adult life studying troubled teens who have committed serious crimes and spent significant time in juvenile correctional facilities and/or adult prisons. The world does, indeed, look different from their perspective, and it's a view we must take seriously if we are to have any hope of improving the lives of troubled young people in the United States.

Laura Abrams and Diane Terry have done just that in *Everyday Desistance: The Transition to Adulthood among Formerly Incarcerated Youth*. This is an important book and should be considered vital reading for anyone who cares about young people who are struggling to come of age amidst crime, violence, and the complicated web of youth justice in the United States. While grounding the book in the context of the extreme inequality in the Los Angeles area, Abrams and Terry meet their goal of giving a "nuanced picture of desistance," change, and the difficult road to adulthood some must travel. They show us exactly what it is like to be "living in the heart of trouble," as one of the young men they follow so aptly phrases it.

The young people in these pages have had difficult lives, and their incarceration has in many ways "piled on" to the obstacles they already faced growing up in harsh environments and circumstances. It

can undoubtedly be confusing and frustrating for less privileged youth growing up in the relatively rich environment of Los Angeles. Despite the wealth in the city, there were no real safety nets in place for young people striving to overcome their daily struggles and trouble with the law. Abrams and Terry clearly illustrate the power of resilience in these disadvantaged young adults before and after going through the “juvenile justice maze.” They highlight the importance of social welfare agencies, mentors, and good fortune for young people trying to build new lives in the community.

Abrams and Terry smartly prioritize the voices of the system-involved young adults, letting them tell their own stories in their own ways. The result is a powerful indictment of our current youth justice system and its many failings. The authors complement the raw and thoughtful voices of their subjects by offering astute analyses that highlight larger issues and provide context for the young adults’ experiences.

These alumni or survivors of the maze of juvenile justice frequently view the system as setting kids up for failure. Many cycled through several placements, including foster homes, sentences in youth camps and correctional facilities, and parole violations before returning to the community for what they hoped would be the last time. Because their lives were often characterized by instability before their stints in juvenile justice facilities, these young adults face extra challenges in returning to the community and learning how to negotiate housing and jobs and to meet their basic needs. In their efforts to become fully realized adults, they struggle in dealing with social service agencies, family and romantic relationships, and the daily challenges of parenting and caring for others.

Abrams and Terry guide the reader through the stories of these emerging adults, and they identify patterns and strategies the young people used for reintegrating into the community. They note three typologies of desistance: “On the Road,” “Running in Circles,” and “Still in the Game,” suggesting that those who want to turn away from crime often face a difficult and zigzagging road. They return to their communities and must once again face all of the temptations and trials of the street and crime-involved lifestyles.

In my own research with incarcerated youth I distinctly remember hearing both staff members and African American and Latino youth

talking about the real dangers these young men would face upon their release. The fears for their physical safety were tangible. The youth spoke about having to hide from enemies on the outside who had held simmering grudges for months and years and were patiently awaiting their chance for revenge. They planned to take jobs out of the public eye so that they would not be visible targets for those looking to do them harm. I felt a sad recognition in reading the accounts in *Everyday Desistance* of youth facing the same fears and obstacles nearly a generation later. Abrams and Terry perfectly capture the confusing new realities young adults face in returning to a community where friends have become enemies and the perceived danger they live and breathe takes a toll on their relationships, their psyches, and their quality of life.

Many of the youth profiled in this book attempt to create new identities when they return to the community, changing their appearance, altering their speech, and finding new peer groups. Abrams and Terry highlight the particular challenges for “crossover youth”—youth who have aged out of the foster care system and have troubled, if any, relationships with their biological families. A cherished yet elusive goal for these young people is the idea of finding a home, although the meaning of “home” varies among the participants.

Everyday Desistance is powerful for including both young men and young women in this study, a welcome change from previous research and reporting that has generally focused on one or the other gender. By following both women and men through the process of reentry, readers are allowed a glimpse into the different values and challenges faced by each. As one example, caretaking was an important component of life on the outside for the young women, particularly as they often emerged from juvenile justice agencies and immediately took on the responsibility for their children, their boyfriends, and their extended families. The men did not face these challenges in the same way.

Abrams and Terry conclude their book with a number of recommendations and policy suggestions specifically derived from their data. Readers can take this information a step further by figuring out how they can apply these hard-earned lessons to their own communities. Young people in every community need a vision for a hopeful future, and social welfare and justice agencies must help to light the path to show them how

to achieve it. Mentors can help them to first imagine better futures and then help them to cultivate the tools that will make such futures a reality.

In the novel *Ordinary People*, the middle-class father of a suicidal son remarks to himself: “Growing up is a serious business. He, Cal, would not be young again, not for anything. And not without sponsors: a mother and father, good fortune, God” (p. 13). The young adults struggling through *Everyday Desistance* are almost entirely without such sponsors. We, as community members, should learn from the powerful analysis that Abrams and Terry have offered us and find ways to honor the experiences of these young adults. If we take their voices and their views seriously, we can help young people in similar situations find their way to a better life.

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REFERENCES

- Guest, Judith. 1976. *Ordinary People*. New York: Penguin Books.
Hinton, S. E. 1967. *The Outsiders*. New York: Penguin Books.

Everyday Desistance