

# PREFACE

One day in late May 2000, I left Massachusetts just as dawn was breaking and headed halfway across the country to Chicago. The week before I had graduated from Smith College, an all-women's college in western Massachusetts, and now I was beginning the next phase of my academic journey in the doctoral sociology program at Northwestern University. Later that evening I arrived at my aunt's home on Drexel Boulevard, located on the South Side, on the border between the neighborhoods of Kenwood and Hyde Park. Drexel was a grand boulevard indeed. It had a rich past as a major promenade for the upper-class residents who lived in Kenwood, but it also served to separate the racially diverse Kenwood and Hyde Park neighborhoods from the Black,<sup>1</sup> lower-class neighborhood to its west, Washington Park. My Aunt Patricia, who is African American, owned an apartment building on the east side of Drexel where I would live for the next few years as a graduate student. It was a familiar place since, as a Black child of the Deep South, I would often fly from Jackson, Mississippi, to Chicago during summers and holidays to get my taste of the big city. Now I was here pursuing my own agenda, and it felt liberating. However, that sense of freedom was soon constrained.

My first lesson about Chicago came with the detailed directions I received on how to drive from Drexel Boulevard to my aunt's child care center. My plan was to work for her that summer as a preschool teaching assistant, starting the day after I arrived, until my graduate classes began that fall. The school was located in the predominantly Black, majority-low-income Auburn-Gresham neighborhood just over six miles southwest of my new home. Aunt Patricia told me that the southwest shortcut through Washington Park to Fifty-Fifth Street was the best way to get to the Dan Ryan Expressway, which bisected the traditional Black Belt from what were, until recently, fiercely defended Irish American neighborhoods. I could then take the highway south, exit at Seventy-Ninth Street, and drive west until I arrived at the center.

My male cousins saw this commute differently, however, and were quick to revise Aunt Patricia's straightforward instructions. Shortcuts were less important than safety. I was a newcomer, after all. So they told me ways to avoid major street traffic, gang territories that were in dispute, and streets riddled with potholes. I eventually found my way.

In the coming weeks—and indeed, for as long as I lived in the city—I would receive many more directives for how I should navigate the city during my free time. According to one cousin, I should never venture to Chicago's West Side. Another told me to avoid driving too far south. A third told me that I should stick to the major highways, avoid going through White neighborhoods, and try not to visit Black neighborhoods aside from Kenwood/Hyde Park and Chatham. They all agreed that I should always keep my car windows up and never linger at red lights once they turned green. My relatives meant well, but their orders were infuriating. How much danger could my choice of route really present? Before long, however, I started to realize that the paths you take each day in Chicago matter a great deal.

My second lesson on how much your place of residence matters in Chicago came as I talked to a twenty-year-old from my neighborhood. He asked me exactly where I lived. I told him my block on Drexel, and he immediately exclaimed, "Oh, you're a Black P. Stone." I was obviously confused, so he explained: the Black P. Stones was my neighborhood's gang, so that meant I too was a Black P. Stone. He even demonstrated the gang sign. I gently reminded him that we were no longer in the 1980s. I was getting my doctorate, after all, and he was a middle-class college student himself. Gangs couldn't possibly be that important to our lives. He was as baffled by my response as I was by his insistence. As it turned out, I had a lot to learn about how your address might shape your future and about an America defined—far more than we care to admit—by the sometimes brutal intersection of race and place.

My third, and most important, lesson on how much our expectations and experiences depend on racial and spatial characteristics and attributes came after my first year in graduate school, during the summer of 2001. I was involved in a study commissioned by the National Research Council (NRC) to examine the antecedents of lethal school violence in the late 1990s, a direct response to several highly publicized "rampage shootings" in rural and suburban America—most notably, the "Columbine Massacre" in Littleton, Colorado, in April 1999. After much deliberation on whether urban school shootings should be included in the study, as there had been no incidents of multiple victims of lethal violence in urban schools from 1997 to 1999, our small research team at Northwestern was given the task of studying a "negative" case—that is, an incident that did not fit the parameters—in order to learn more about what might be happening differently in urban school contexts.<sup>2</sup> Our investigation of the social causes and consequences of a lethal, in-school incident with multiple victims at Chicago's Edward J. Tilden High

School on November 20, 1992, would profoundly shape my perspective and my research trajectory.

This was my first encounter with Tilden High, located in the historically Irish American Canaryville neighborhood and bordered by Back of the Yards—an area made famous by Upton Sinclair’s book *The Jungle*, which detailed the pollution and poverty surrounding the Union Stockyards meat-packing plants in the early twentieth century. In 1992, fifteen-year-old Joseph White, a Black ninth-grader at Tilden, brought a gun to school anticipating that he might need extra protection while walking home. He had received a few threats about some money missing from a dice game in the school bathroom, for which he and another boy had been suspended just a few days earlier. On that fateful day, Joseph got into a shoving match in the school hallway. He fired several shots, which he said were in self-defense, killing one of his schoolmates and injuring two others.

As part of our research team’s retrospective ethnography of the shooting, we combed through newspaper articles, court transcripts, and other documents related to the case; we also conducted interviews with lawyers, teachers, community leaders, and students who went to Tilden during that time, as well as many of the main actors involved, including Joseph. As the budding ethnographer on our three-person team, I was selected to do much of the field research in the neighborhood surrounding Tilden and in Joseph’s home neighborhood, several blocks southeast of the school. I would discover that they were two very different worlds.

I experienced a range of emotions as I navigated between those two places, from anguish at the nonchalant answer when I asked how a fifteen-year-old could get a gun so easily in Englewood (“It’s easy to get a gun, we can get you one right now”) to trepidation after I saw the quizzical looks on a couple of White people’s faces from their porch, followed by a watchful “wassup” from one young White male as I was en route to an interview with a Canaryville community leader. This fear was magnified by my interviewee’s insistence that he escort me to my car afterward. After learning more about the Canaryville neighborhood, I decided that my fears were not unfounded. I knew that Blacks didn’t “belong” there, but I was unclear on the consequences of being there without an apparent purpose. More research clued me into the neighborhood’s racial dynamics.

In 1985 two African American men stopped in front of Tilden High to help a stalled car ahead of them. Suddenly, a group of White youths surrounded their car, smashed all the windows, and struck one of the men in the neck and head before chasing them out of the area. In 1991 two African American fourteen-year-olds were waiting on a bus in Bridgeport that would take them to their homes in Englewood. They had just left a White Sox game in the seventh inning. According to the boys, two White police officers pulled up, told them that they did not belong in the community and were violating

curfew, and ordered them inside the police car, while cursing at them. The police allegedly drove them to another White neighborhood just two blocks from Tilden High, near Forty-Fifth and Union Avenue, whereupon, the boys alleged, the female officer slapped them with a half-closed fist and kicked them out of the car. As they started walking, according to testimony, they were set upon by a group of White boys; one of the victims said that the White boys were shouting racial epithets and throwing bottles.<sup>3</sup> One boy was able to elude capture, but the group caught the other, beating him until he was unconscious. He was later hospitalized. Almost two years later, three juveniles were convicted of aggravated battery and ethnic intimidation.<sup>4</sup> The officers were cleared of criminal misconduct charges for dropping the kids in the Canaryville neighborhood in 1991, but in 1992 both were fired for violating several police department rules, including “engaging in any unjustified verbal or physical altercation with any person on or off duty.”<sup>5</sup>

Later that same year, Joseph White was in trouble in the same neighborhood, but he was not running from a gang of White youths. Instead, he had acquired a gun to protect himself from rival African American gang members as he walked to and from school. I was intrigued by the idea that teens have to make alliances throughout the day; more importantly, do their friends, enemies, and expectations change depending on who they are and where they are? For instance, around Joseph’s home the Mickey Cobras were the dominant gang, but the Black P. Stones ruled the hallways of Tilden. These two gangs were often friendly to one another because they created a racially united front against the Latin Kings, who also attended the school. But if a Black or Hispanic student of any gang left school too late, without the safety of numbers, he might have to deal with the White members of that community for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Joseph might have considered calling the police if his mother was robbed, but he felt compelled by the unspoken, life-altering adolescent male code of behavior to protect himself by himself, with no help from school officials or the law. In the years since, Joseph’s plight—he was sentenced to forty-five years in prison—and the look of sadness and resignation on his mother’s face when I interviewed her in that summer of 2001 have never left me.

This book takes readers on a sociological journey into the minds and lives of young people in Chicago to understand how often they face conflicts like Joseph’s, with potentially deadly consequences, as they travel to and from school, or even while they sit in classrooms. Both the sociological literature and our national discussions of opportunity and discrimination have given the perceptions and experiences of young people short shrift. Although as educators and researchers, as politicians and cultural critics, we routinely lament the problems of youth today, we spend precious little time seriously trying to understand their motivations and their experiences. Teenagers have remarkable vantage points on the cities they live in—not only on how their

city functions but also on how it does not. They are a walking experiment in the effects that city agencies—in this case, the board of education and the city policing apparatus—can have on a generation of people who are especially vulnerable and may even be harmed by the policies and procedures that seek to ensure their safety. It is long past time to let their voices be heard.