Book review


Reviewed by: Thomas J Mowen, University of Wyoming, USA

Simon Singer’s newest book, Delinquency and Modernity in Suburbia: America’s Safety City, focuses on an area some may overlook when thinking about crime and delinquency: suburbia. In fact, the city of focus in the book, Amherst, MA, was named “Safest City” in the United States by Money Magazine in 1996. Beyond Singer’s engaging writing style and ability to craft an informative narrative, this book makes an important contribution to the existing literature by examining why delinquency occurs within suburbia. He shows readers how the increasing complexity of modernity may lead some suburban youth into—and out of—offending.

Singer highlights the pitfalls suburban youth encounter in a post-industrial society. Modern suburban youth face challenges navigating a complex social environment as they respond to parental and family expectations, demands from teachers and coaches, and work to form and maintain peer relationships as well as their own identity. Singer crafts a compelling story: living in a decentralized and complex suburban landscape can present a host of difficulties for modern youth as they transition into adulthood. These challenges have significant implications in understanding—and responding to—delinquency in suburbia (and Singer makes a compelling case that these challenges matter elsewhere, too). At the same time, the complexity of this landscape may also explain why serious violent crime is rare in suburbia.

Singer makes a significant contribution to existing knowledge on delinquency by explaining the importance of both relational and societal aspects of modernity, and how these constructs influence adolescence in today’s society. He finds:

Modern-day societies are complex, segmented in ways that did not exist in earlier times. In earlier times, the city could be more neatly divided into identifiable concentric zones. The delinquencies of suburban youth cannot be so well organized […] adolescents must adapt to the demands of a complex society, which in turn means that they must begin to think for themselves in one complex organizational setting after another.

(p. 111)
In *Delinquency and Modernity in Suburbia*, Singer presents eight well-organized chapters that aid the reader in understanding the importance of modernity and suburbia as powerful forces in the lives of modern youth. He seamlessly transitions between citing pivotal work in the field, drawing parallels to *Money Magazine*’s list of safest cities, and, later on, introducing readers to his own research on youth who reside in Amherst, MA.

In Chapter 1, the reader is introduced to *Money Magazine*’s “Safe Cities” but readers will be compelled to understand why the definition of a “safe city” must move beyond simply counting the number of index crimes. As Singer demonstrates, we must also consider city structure—such as the decentralization of suburban communities—and other important social mechanisms such as community resources and schools. He draws from central works by Travis Hirschi, William Chambliss, Robert Sampson, and others to explore the complex relationship between social class, urbanicity, and delinquency to examine what makes a “safe city”.

In Chapter 2, Singer discusses the importance of structure within a post-industrial society. He makes a novel contribution by showing that while many relatively affluent youth of suburbia have resources—such as caring parents, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, and access to mental health—there are still obstacles to which youth must respond. This becomes especially clear when placed within the context of modernity in suburbia; that “for a large segment of youth, societal demands are not easily met” (p. 48). To illustrate this, the reader is introduced to a series of case studies, which highlight the difficulties youth have in navigating such a complex society. For example, David O, a young man who committed murder at the age of 15, started to experience a great deal of emotional turmoil as a young child due to his parents’ divorce.

Chapter 3 introduces some well-known cases of serious violent crime committed by middle-class and affluent youth including a school shooting, rape, and a cheating scandal. Here, Singer focuses on the social and psychological development and obstacles faced by youth in a modern environment, and explores how youth and law-abiding adults work in tandem, thus “creating critical social bonds” (p. 86). Singer suggests that “good” parents recognize adolescent troubles and have the resources to address those troubles, echoing work by Travis Hirschi and others. Many suburban parents can afford mental health care, counseling, and, if needed, legal counsel to assist their child in successfully transitioning into adulthood. Yet, some youth fall through the gaps and do not develop these bonds; some parents are too busy to successfully parent their child; and some adolescents struggle to develop an identity in an increasingly complex environment. In Chapter 4, Singer draws from well-known ethnographic work on “street-corner” delinquency by William Whyte, Elliot Liebow, and Elijah Anderson. Singer highlights the importance of these classic ethnographies, and then shows that the focus of many of these works (the “street-corner”) is absent in suburbia. Moving this body of literature forward, Singer ties these cornerstone ethnographies into his conceptualization of “relational modernity” which refers to the recognition that modern youth do not simply develop though adolescence by rules imposed upon them by parents, but that “adolescents are in pursuit of on-going identities” (p. 106). The formation of an identity occurs in a multitude of places: schools; extracurricular activities; the home; and among peers. These relationships are unique characteristics of modernity, and thus, relationally modern.
Chapters 5, 6, and 7 outline Singer’s own research on youth in Amherst, MA, first with an in-depth cohort study of 26 (mostly) affluent youth, and later on with detailed analyses of delinquency in Amherst. Singer uses narratives collected while the 26 youth were in high school, and later on as young adults, combined with parental responses, to examine patterns and causes of delinquency during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Singer is innovative in this regard; in Chapter 5 he presents side-by-side comparisons of the most delinquent respondent in the sample with the least delinquent, the second most delinquent with the second least delinquent, and so on to demonstrate how divergent experiences in the modern suburban landscape may lead to exceptionally different outcomes. Chapter 6 explores the “middle category” of offenders; youth who were not exceptionally high or low in their self-reported delinquency. Singer uses this opportunity to explore how “sources of discontent” (p. 180) no matter how trivial they may seem, still might contribute to delinquency. For example, one youth found that Amherst, MA was “boring” and engaged in delinquency as a form of defiance to “make her life less routinized” (p. 182). In Chapter 7, Singer draws data from a variety of sources to show trends in offending, arrest, and adjudication in Amherst. Although the rate of offending appears high, Singer situates this within his theory of relational modernity in that youths’ “lack of high-offending status indicates that the relational force of modernity largely enables delinquencies to be nonconsequential” (p. 242). As a result, most delinquents in Amherst are never arrested and, even when they are arrested, are extremely unlikely to find themselves in juvenile court. The final chapter concludes with Singer tying the previous discussions back into the importance of relational modernity and finding that even the USA’s “Safety City” is not one without delinquency. For example, 71 percent of Amherst youth could have become adjudicated delinquents (p. 249). Yet, the relational modernity that exists in post-industrial suburbia may create the necessary pathways for most suburban youth to avoid serious offending.

Singer should be commended for addressing an area of research that is often overlooked: how some youth in suburban environments fall victim to cycles of delinquency, and why serious offending tends to be absent in modern suburbia. But even beyond that, Singer provides a means in which to understand the complexities of delinquency in a post-industrial society even outside suburbia because all youth are relationally modern, which makes this book a must read.