

Jamie J. Fader: *Falling Back: Incarceration and Transitions to Adulthood Among Urban Youth*

Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2013, 256 pp, ISBN: 978-0-8135-6073-1

Dana Ford¹

Received: 20 October 2015 / Accepted: 27 October 2015 / Published online: 3 November 2015
© Springer International Publishing 2015

Secluded in a dense forest, a five hour drive west of Philadelphia, rests a place where you will find young delinquent males between the ages of 13 and 18 carefully marching in single-file lines with their hands behind their backs, doing highly structured activities while cadence-like “thank yous” and “you’re welcomes” roll off their tongues. These boys, who have been involved in drugs, violence, and other criminal delinquency, are in the process of a behavioral reform in order to help them reflect, make better decisions, and lead a better life for themselves and for others. Jamie Fader, graduate of the University of Philadelphia, inner city godmother, and now assistant professor of criminal justice at the University at Albany SUNY, writes in her book, *Falling Back*, about the transition to adulthood for these young inner city males of color who have already been imprisoned by the age of 18. The book is based on her ethnographic research with black and Latino males who help to answer the question of how these vulnerable youth transition back into their urban Philadelphia neighborhoods as adult men after being incarcerated at the Mountain Ridge reform school in Pennsylvania (Mountain Ridge is the name she uses to protect the identities of staff and clients). The reform school uses a “criminal thinking errors” approach that is supposed to help the young males identify patterns of thinking that lead them into delinquency and to replace these patterns with prosocial and corrective thoughts, and behavioral change will follow along with it. The young men were informed at the academy about where their delinquent behavior stemmed from, and that they would

not be released until they learned to identify and correct their errors.

Fader spent over three years exploring their transitions back home after they were released from reform school, doing intensive participant observation and interviews with fifteen of the young black and Latino men, documenting their experiences and struggles of “falling back” and becoming productive members of society. Fader is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, educated white girl, which makes her the complete opposite from those who were participating in her study, and many people ask how it was possible to establish rapport with these young men. For one, Fader had many previous years of being an evaluator for juvenile justice programs and had a good understanding of the system, along with access to the programs. She also did preliminary field research examining the various stages of reentry into the community, which helped her establish relationships with reintegration workers that were later useful. Fader says that establishing a relationship with these young men was quite simple, as they were eager to tell their stories about reform school because it helped alleviate boredom and monotony, as well as giving them freedom to say whatever they wanted about the school behind closed doors. She also says that being a straightforward person and sharing things about herself helped her to gain their trust and respect. She openly talked about the differences between them, and made them comfortable to talk about race and different perceptions. Fader quickly became close with these men and soon began to accompany them almost everywhere they went; to work, to school, to the stores, and met many of their family members and friends along the way.

What Fader found throughout the process is that, despite the high costs, energy, and time put into it, the program failed to deter the young men from returning back to the

✉ Dana Ford
danaford@indiana.edu; danaford18@gmail.com

¹ Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

same lifestyle. The youth in her study had been removed from the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in Philadelphia and moved to incarceration in a secluded bucolic setting. While these kids were under strict discipline and scrutiny for their criminal lifestyles, their peers were spending time doing the same old thing, hanging out bored on street corners until there was excitement from negative interaction with the police or other residents. They returned to the city to find the same problems they faced before they left: violence, drugs, conflict with the law, and lack of employment. And although many of the conditions remained the same, much more had changed by the time they had returned, including relationships between family members and siblings and the milestones that these loved ones had reached while the men were away. In essence, the skills they learn in the reform school are not able to translate into the environment they return to at home. They are consumed with the immediate concerns of self-protection and dealing with delinquent friends and family members who are ill or addicted to drugs, which is what started them on drug dealing and other forms of criminal activity in the first place. Throughout her book, Fader details why it is so hard for these young men to avoid this lifestyle and what changes should be made to address this problem. Each chapter tells the different stories told by fifteen young men of color belonging to the most vulnerable population in the nation. Fader goes into detail about their experiences, helping us to better understand the reasoning and motives for the choices they make and life they live.

The first chapter, “No Love for the Brothers”, is an introduction of the young men who tell their stories throughout the book and it also gives the reader an understanding of the life of these boys before they were incarcerated and as they returned to their city. Philadelphia is known as the city of brotherly love, but these young men describe it as a place where there is limited public service, rising property taxes, high murder rate, organized drug markets, racial segregation, and little employment. Mountain Ride Academy uses the criminal personality theory to assume that young people commit crime because they continually make errors in their thinking, and also that crime is freely and rationally chosen by those who engage in it. There is a cultural perspective that views urban street culture as crime: acting “street”, walking with “swagger”, using slang, sagging pants, and rapping are interpreted by white, rural counselors as behaviors of criminal thinking patterns. Philadelphia is one of the most racially segregated municipalities in the nation, with only 43% of the residents being African American. Most people in the black population live in “hidden Philadelphia” (Fader 2013, p. 19) where the white people have no reason to go and most people forget about, except for the police. This “hidden Philadelphia” is where

the young men in the book came from, and their stories have a contradicting view on Philadelphia as the city of brotherly love. Fader gives a brief description of how the residential landscape has been shaped by ethnic groups who move to find jobs. She talks about the migration of blacks from the South, Puerto Ricans (who were later surpassed by those of Central America and Mexico), and refugees from Southeast Asia, all of whom were looking for better living conditions and employment. Fader highlights on the history of Philadelphia, including the Great Depression and their failure to recover and prosper after World War II, the decline of employment, and the long history of strife between the black residents and the police, and also briefs the reader on the community crime control strategies used in the city that aim to bring the criminal justice system and social service agencies together to offer community policing and support for offenders. The policies target gang leaders and drug dealers, as violence and substance abuse are the two greatest factors affecting criminal activity in Philadelphia. The young men that Fader followed had grown up in this type of neighborhood, and had watched their families be pulled apart as a result of drugs and/or incarceration. These boys became involved in drugs themselves, many times as an alternative way to make ends meet and also to show masculinity. The streets were their main source of socialization, where they learned to survive by using “street code”. An everyday routine of leaving their own street to walk to catch a bus exposes the boys to a lot of danger, and they must practice and know what their performance will be in a confrontation. Eye contact and a nod signify respect to other males of color, but holding the eye contact too long is a sign of provoking violence. Dark hooded sweatshirts provide a feeling of safety, and a “strut” appears more casual. Young black men from the inner city take pride in their knowledge of street code, as it allows them to avoid and regulate violence. One of the boys, Warren, helps Fader to demonstrate some of his knowledge, including how to find a “wifey”, how to survive a house party, and how to use street slang. He mentions words like “bean” and “buck”, which both mean a hundred dollars, and also things like “got change”, meaning that the person has a lot of money (Fader 2013, p. 34). “Smut”, “scag”, and “jumpoff” refer to a girl that sleeps with everyone, and having sex is called “hittin”, “smashing”, or “piping” on the streets. “AIDS” is “A-I-Die slow”, and someone that “throw that shit on” is someone that dresses nice. Ironically, a “weirdo” is someone who is not into street life like typical guys around. A “yoke” is crack cocaine, and if you are offered a job without any benefits, the only benefit is death or jail (Fader 2013, p. 34). The phrase someone “caught a body under their belt” means they killed someone, and if they “did a bid” then they’ve been locked up (Fader 2013, p. 35). The amount of slang words for weapons is outrageous, as well as the amount of words for violent activity. There is slang for

sending letters to jail, ways to do drugs, ways to fight, and snitches. Warren claimed he was a master of slang.

When Warren was 18, he was the first to meet Fader before he returned home from Mountain Ridge. He was a rapper, his older brother was the leader of a gang, and at age four Warren had witnessed his dad shot and killed by a pimp. Warren earned about \$6,000 a week from dealing drugs. He returned from Mountain Ridge in December of 2004 to live with his mother and siblings on the south side. On the same day he returned, also came 18-year-old Luis. Luis was also a rapper, as well as a recovering drug addict. He returned to live with his mother in a white-working class neighborhood in the Northeast part of the city. He and his siblings had previously been removed from their home, and their mother had spent time in prison and had a violent relationship with her divorced father. The next to return was 18-year-old Akeem, who came back to live with his brother in North Philadelphia in a tidy apartment, accompanied by his brother's girlfriend and their child. Akeem loved the drug game and girls, and was an aspiring rap artist. Sharif, also 18, returned in January 2005 to live with his father and stepmother in North Philadelphia. After him, came Hassan and Keandre. Hassan was very religious and wanted to become a mechanic, while Keandre had twin children and had not completed high school. Soon after, 17-year-old Malik returned home to see his newborn son and live with his mother in South Philadelphia. He had a GED and wanted to do carpentry work with his father. Later that April, James and Raymond returned. James, who was an angry young man while he was locked away from his daughter, came out with a positive attitude and started a job immediately. Raymond, 18, was released to live with his mother. Eddie and Gabe were released in May of 2005. Eddie enrolled in college and Gabe, being the only one to grow up with married parents, came back and secured his relationship with his girlfriend and took the job that his parents secured for him. Leo, 18, returned the following month to live with his grandparents in the West section of North Philadelphia and took a minimum-wage job while becoming a law-abiding citizen, looking for a stable relationship. The last two men to return, in July 2005, were Tony and Isaiah. Tony, a quiet kid whose mother was a drug addict, came back to live with his sister and was provided no-cost medical training to pursue his dream of becoming a nurse. Isaiah, 19, belonged to two gangs and was a very involved drug dealer. He made plans to go to college and the military, and returned to live with his aunt in North Philadelphia, and later moved in with his girlfriend and son. These young men's stories are all intertwined in poverty, instability, anger, pain, and fear: the basics of the inner-city experience. Yet, these young men took pride in the level of adversity that they had endured and their ability to survive in the city of Philadelphia. The

thought of leaving the city is both refreshing and terrifying to them, as they have learned to love and hate their city and their own neighborhoods.

Chapter 2, "Because That Is the Way You Are", examines the methods and philosophy of change at Mountain Ridge Academy, looking into the theory of delinquency that involves habitual errors in thinking and the assumption that crime is freely and rationally chosen. It also examines the deeper element of the conviction that urban street culture correlates with innate criminality. Fader describes the inner workings of the reform school, including its target population, therapeutic strategies, and the guidance of change. Mountain Ridge is held in high esteem by judges and probation officers, due to their intrusive intervention, toughness, scarce reports of abuse, and their short and long-term objectives. Yet, despite the treatment they receive, there are few graduates who experience success upon their return to their community as they continue to use and sell drugs, have housing problems, and are many times rearrested. However, in other facilities, graduates are assumed to have greater issues after their return along with lower rates of graduation. Mountain Ridge Academy stresses that the participants must earn their release. They are forced to memorize twenty-two criminal thinking errors and practice the corrections for each of them. In order to be released, they must willingly accept criticism, which is called feedback, and have a desire to make a change in their life, all of which is shown through their behavior. Many of these boys see themselves as victims who are controlled by others, rather than taking responsibility for their own actions. They tend to give up in difficult situations, be irresponsible, have a lack of empathy, misdirected energy, and easily succumb to peer pressure. They also usually cannot think in a long-term perspective, manage their emotions, or admit any instance of fear or challenge to their manhood. They feel worthless, tell lies, and many times isolate themselves from groups. All of these attributes correlate with criminal activity, according to the program design at Mountain Ridge. It is also believed that criminality is fixed in early childhood and that is almost impossible to change their habits as they get older. So, in order for a change to occur, they must break down their personality by an "assault on the self" and then build it back up. There must be a total destruction of the criminal's personality, including the "good parts" (Fader 2013, p. 37). To be rehabilitated, the youth must learn how to weigh the consequences of crime effectively. Street behavior is forbidden. The boys are given constant feedback on their behavior, and this feedback is the basis of the participant's status, or level, in the program. As he moves up, he receives more privileges. Failure to abide by the rules of the program results in a drop in status. The boys must remain on status 3, which is serving as a positive role model for their peers, for four to six consecutive weeks in order to get a home pass. In addition, there is a twelve-week

portion of the academy that addresses drug and alcohol problems. They have daily meetings and group counseling sessions to help them practice the thinking error corrections and to discuss the dangers of drug use.

The weeks spent at Mountain Ridge are highly structured, down to the limited time they are given for showering and using the bathroom and the requirement to ask permission to move around the dorm. There are no baggy pants or clothing labels, nor handshakes or “fist bumping”. There is no prolonged eye contact with other participants, and all sports played are monitored extremely closely. Listening to and/or writing rap music is not allowed, and they are forbidden to “strut” on the campus. The counselors view Philadelphia and other cities of the same nature as problematic for young people who want to make good decisions and avoid crime. Tony told a story about one of the conflicts he had with a dorm staff member who was agitated after the Pittsburgh Steelers lost a game:

“Ya’ll sittin’ here mad over a game? “So how ya’ll feel about how Philly lost the superbowl, like ain’t ya’ll gonna root for us? We still PA.” In response to Tony’s question, the staff member said, “I don’t care about Philadelphia, ya’ll some slimy, ignorant kids. That city don’t show no respect...That’s my perception on Philadelphia and stuff like that. I’m a productive citizen”. Tony told Fader that he was “mad ‘cause Philly’s not even like that type of city. It only bad when you go in and join the bad people. Like you can go in Philadelphia and be a positive person” (Fader 2013, p. 51). Malik shared a similar thought:

“Seventy five percent [of the staff] hate Philly kids, because Philly kids come here and talk about how staff can’t survive in Philly. So, they really hate us ‘cause we got this mentality that... they say we got this dumb mentality, this criminal mentality, that no matter what we are nothing but criminals down there” (Fader 2013, p. 52).

Many of the boys shared stories like this, about the staff’s perspective on their clothing, hair, and speech. Mountain Ridge continued to forbid their culture and talk down the city of Philadelphia. They even predicted failure for these young boys as they came to the academy, telling them that they will grow tired and start looking for excitement again and would likely be back after their release. There may be clinical reasons for that approach, such as motivating them to succeed; yet, failure after release is actually very common, even after forming close bonds with their counselors. The strategy used by Mountain Ridge Academy is doubly perverse in this sense, as the predictions of failure contrast the rehabilitation and the stigmatization of black urban culture contradicts the system’s desire to not stigmatize people.

The third chapter in the book, “You Can Take Me Outta the ‘Hood, But You Can’t Take the ‘Hood Outta Me”, focuses on the way that the young men adapted to and interpreted the program at Mountain Ridge Academy. Fader

draws primarily on the in-depth interviews that she conducted with them right before they were released. In these interviews, the young men made many negative comments, but they also balanced them with subtle contrasts in their expressions toward the facility. Warren said that some were “here for a paycheck,” (Fader 2013, p. 56) but that others really wanted to help them, and Luis said that “they ain’t tryin’ to hurt you, they just tryin’ to better you” (Fader 2013, p. 57). According to the interviews, learning coping skills was one of the biggest and most important accomplishments that these young men made throughout the program. Eddie said that learning “how to control my mouth, how to control what I say to people”, and “how to control myself” (Fader 2013, p. 57) was most important because it was something that got him in a lot of trouble with a lot of different people. Sharif said that learning to handle his anger was the most important for him: “If I was home and I got mad, that would just lead to something else and escalate the situation to something more worser. But here, now I learned how to deal with my anger, I learned how to cope with stuff” (Fader 2013, p. 57). Many of the young men, when asked how to get the most out of the program, mentioned that Mountain Ridge had “good information” (Fader 2013, p. 58) if one was willing to take advantage of it. Gabe responded to this question by saying that “you’re gonna have to be willing to accept that information. You got to go apply it ‘cause if you’re not applying it, then it’s a waste of time”, and also that “you have to be willing to change your ways” (Fader 2013, p. 58). Eddie, talking about the thinking errors, said, “some of them relate and some of ‘em are just off” (Fader 2013, p. 59). He mentions religion, saying that they make it seem like people only turn to religion for “wishes and stuff like that”. He also mentions that the “I can’t attitude” is silly because “there’s some things that you really can’t do. Some people can’t read, some people can’t write cursive, some people can’t walk. Just because they can’t walk doesn’t mean they’re not willing to, it’s because they really can’t” (Fader 2013, p. 59). Some that Eddie did agree with included “criminal pride, failure to put oneself in other’s positions, and failure to consider injury to others” (Fader 2013, p. 59). The young men pick and choose from the aspects of intervention and apply only what they believe is useful information, many times saying that both law-abiding and offending individuals make thinking errors and that everyone fails to endure adversity every once in a while.

The boys were encouraged to open up to their counselors and work through their problems during individual and group sessions, but, like Leo and many others said, “they don’t really know people here” (Fader 2013, p. 61). Gabe says that they “talk to you about things. They try to get you to be honest with ‘em, to trust ‘em. But it’s not something they can expect to fall right in their hands ‘cause

we don't know them from a can of pain, then how can you trust 'em? How can they help me fix something that they've never been through?" (Fader 2013, p. 61) When discussing the expectation of having an open channel of communication, the young men also reported that total honesty would result in a no-win situation: "If I tell them that I'm angry about being locked up, then I've avoided one thinking error, but made another thinking error, anger" (Fader 2013, p. 64).

Another thing that caused issues for the young men at Mountain Ridge was the difference in perspectives of respect. On the street, a sense of masculinity and high status was earned from selling drugs, mastery of the street code, and the threat of violence. Unlike Mountain Ridge, where this was seen as a form of criminal activity or a criminal thinking error, this was seen as a form of respect on the streets. The boys would be "restrained", sometimes for hours at a time, if they disregarded the rules or acted up against the staff. The young men reported that the "costs were too high" (Fader 2013, p. 69) to fight the staff members back and that this forced them to change their ways to be able to make it through the academy. Those who are experiencing incarceration at Mountain Ridge must choose between retaining their fidelity to the street and meeting the behavioral expectations for release. For some, this creates confusion about what is required and how to demonstrate it, and others "fake it to make it" (Fader 2013, p. 72), pretending that they have a newfound commitment to a better lifestyle in order to get out. From the program's perspective, offenders view themselves as victims from their environment, but in contrast, the residents see the staff members as out of touch with the reality of urban life and unwilling to understand them. The participants and the staff both fail to acknowledge the role that social inequality plays in criminal offending, and although the boys were given conflicting expectations from the staff, they also did not accept all aspects of the program to promote their change. The program encouraged the young men to get rid of the street culture, instead of teaching them how to switch between behaviors that are appropriate among peers and those that are appropriate for a job interview. Yet, despite all their differences and the rearrests after release, the young men claim, "you gonna learn something through all of this" (Fader 2013, p. 73).

The next few chapters document the men's first few months after their release back in the community. Chapter 4, "Nothing's Changed but Me", starts out with Tony's story, describing his childhood spent with his drug addict mother, basically homeless, moving around to whoever took him in. After he was released, he told Fader, "School really is power. The more education you got, the more power you have. I wish I was still young, like I wish I could do it all again. Drugs made me forget about school but if I woulda just

stopped using drugs, man, I woulda been better off" (Fader 2013, p. 77). He had plans to stay in school for at least the next six years and join Job Corps, a free education and training program, but Job Corps didn't want to accept him just yet with his criminal history, and this also resulted in an extended probation. Tony began to miss the days when he spent his time doing demolition on a house because he had control over the pace of work and he could be engaged in the daily life in the community. He did not see his knowledge of what was going on in the community and its affect on his status as something that was worth giving up for a traditional job. After his best friend was shot and killed in a car six weeks after Tony had started school, he was caught with marijuana two different times, with the intent to sell. He stopped attending school, and his enthusiasm about education had been washed away by the reality of life. He was arrested many more times, and started serving his sentence of five to ten years in prison for a robbery charge. Tony's story outlines exemplifies many of the reentries of the young men who "fell back" into their previous lifestyles on the street as they struggled to view themselves in a new way. All of the young men had talked a lot about regret after taking the time to reflect on the past, and each of them had plans for school and work in their future. They were optimistic about their change and their hopes for a crime-free future. They spent their first few weeks adjusting to the changes that had happened with friends and family members, talking with old girlfriends, and running into people who were still living the same old routine of the Philly life. They soon realized that their opportunities for trouble were the same as before they left, but still had determination not to return to their old ways. They were surrounded by drugs and gang violence, and felt that the new rules of the household challenged their manhood by infantilizing them just like Mountain Ridge. Many people they encountered didn't believe in them and predicted failure for the young men. They had trouble finding employment and trying to stay in school while everyone else around them was making their living in the drug-game.

Chapter 5, "I'm Not a Mama's Boy, I'm My Own Boy", considers the risks, costs, and meanings of work for young men after they returned to Philadelphia. Searching for work was difficult for many reasons, as the boys felt vulnerable and out of place in spaces that were considered "white" (Fader 2013, p. 103), like restaurants, schools, and retail centers. There were also technological tests, personality tests, and educational tests that the young men could not pass. They instead, to reduce their discomfort, searched for jobs among peers, which was counterproductive for their success. This resulted in shady activities, like "hustling" and "working off the books" (Fader 2013, p. 104) to do construction, washing cars, selling pirated DVDs, fixing cars, doing laundry, and more. Although these types of jobs attracted little police activity, there was an unclear line between hustling and

criminal activity. Leo spent several months as a “gigolo” (Fader 2013, p. 104), accepting small amounts of cash from older women for sex. Sincere engaged in drug selling and other hustles to support his family. Finding a “real job” was extremely difficult and exhausting, as the boys did not meet enough of the requirements for employment, which constantly reminds them of their position in the racial and class-based hierarchy. Many times the young men referred to employment in the formal economy as “just not me” (Fader 2013, p. 126). These young men were very vulnerable to the pressures to return to the “hustles” on the street, many times resulting in violence and the use and sell of drugs. They also, after moving in with family and catching up with all the new happenings, felt that strong loyalty to their mothers and siblings who were sick, addicted, and/or homeless. They needed money quickly, and their reaction was to use the tools that worked in the past. Criminal thinking errors and their corrections became irrelevant and inadequate to meet the demands of street life. Warren, Malik, Isaiah, Sincere, and Eddie, who all had great plans for success and even attended college, had all been arrested for drugs, weapons, or violence within months of being released. Despite their solid plans, desire for a better life, new set of decision-making skills, their knowledge of consequences, and the support and control of professionals, it did not prove to be sufficient enough to help them as they returned to violent, poverty stricken, and drug filled neighborhoods. These conditions were the reason they began offending in the first place, and consequently the same reasons why they continued after their release.

However, very few of the young men were willing or able to work as full-time hustlers. Without a steady income from work, whether illegal or legal, the men sought out their dignity and sense of mastery in a different way, many times by becoming a father. In Chapter 6, “I Just Wanna See a Me That’s Never Been Bad”, examines the relationship among fatherhood, employment, and offending, a very complicated relationship at that. Fader uses the stories of Sincere and Isaiah, who both were young fathers trying to set up household with their babies’ mamas and who both wanted very much to become better fathers than their own. This is said because many of the young men had witnessed their fathers assault their mothers, become drug addicts, go to prison for habitual offending, and even watched them get killed.

Sincere, who had a very unstable life filled with a lot of drugs, poor relationships with his family members, and difficulty with employment, believed that having a child, a “mini-me, a part of me that’s never been bad” (Fader 2013, p. 136), would redeem his past mistakes and would compensate for the failures of his own father. Soon after his release from Mountain Ridge, his girlfriend was found to be pregnant with their child. During the pregnancy, the couple broke up and reunited many times, and Sincere had

a lot of doubts about the possibility of marrying her. When their baby boy was born, Sincere was pushed to make a regular income for the household, which resulted in many arguments between the two. Not everything was bad though; there were times when Sincere and his girlfriend, Marta, functioned as very happy family with their son. Sincere enjoyed the family man role, but he also struggled with keeping his fidelity to Marta. He wanted complete control over her so that she wouldn’t be a threat to his “manhood” (Fader 2013, p. 145). As a result of the constant struggles, their child was taken away by the Department of Human Services, and was given back at a later date when they proved to have more stability. This epiphany resulted in marriage, moving in with family, and seeking out better employment. Yet, even after this, and for years onward, the financial support and stable family relationship were sporadic. Sincere turned many times to hustling and came close to incarceration, but his son proved as his motivation, and Sincere tried to make a strong presence in his life to show him love and affection, which in his opinion helped to counteract the lack of financial support.

Isaiah’s story was much like Sincere’s. The two men desired the life of fatherhood, wanted to build a family and be able to provide for their child better than their own fathers, yet neither could say that they lived up to their own standards. Their relationships with their babies’ mamas are characterized by infidelity, lack of trust, and struggle for power. They also could not find and/or keep steady employment to be able to provide stability. They both felt that their manhood was threatened, and consequently turned to the underground economy when they failed to find their sense of masculinity in the both the labor market and the family. Although romantic relationships and fatherhood are seen as “turning points” for young men like Isaiah and Sincere, returning to the inner-city as a former offender makes it unlikely to develop enough stability for either of those domains.

Although many of the young men fell back into their old lifestyles after the release, we cannot forget those who made successful transitions to adulthood in their communities to a crime-free life. Chapter 7, “I’m Finally Becoming the Person I Always Wanted to Be”, asks what made these men able to accomplish this success and how their lives differed from the others. Fader tells the stories of James and Gabe, who were the only two young men to make successful transitions. James, who’s motivation for success was his daughter Maya, returned to Philadelphia and immediately got a job as a fry cook with the help of his uncle Clifton. He spent a lot of time with his daughter, but also had a lot of trouble with his baby’s mama. He eventually got his felonies wiped off his record, and was in hopes of a better job at the airport. James’s friendship with his best friend, Dell, is one that allowed him to help

someone and give back to someone who needed it. Many ex-offenders seem to take on this role, as a “wounded healer” (Fader 2013, p. 168), counseling others on how to succeed. James continued this trend, helping many of his friends to get jobs and become and see themselves as productive citizens. He also took pride in his ability to provide for his daughter. James constantly talked about self-improvement and viewed his life as a continual growing process, believing that he had the power to control the events in his life. He took seriously the concept of “thinking errors” and continually worked on improving them after his release. He made it clear to others that he had changed, and the fear of public failure gave him more motivation to succeed. He had a fall out in 2005, when he dropped out of school, lost his relationship with Dell, and left his mother’s house, where he was not cared for. He soon realized that cutting ties with his mother was in his best interest, despite what Mountain Ridge Academy told him, and he got himself back up and searched for more employment. Again, with the help of Uncle Clifton, he found a job. He formed new relationships with co-workers and also reunited with Dell. Clifton always had James’s best interest in mind, and the relationship that the two had was probably central to the finding of James’s identity. He cut ties with Dell, who became involved in crime and violence, and continued to circulate around those who lifted up his social character. His devotion to his daughter was deeply rooted in his hopes to become a good father, and his commitment to steady work stemmed from the necessity of money and the need to be surrounded by others who viewed him as a workingman. James constructed a respectable version of his self, and realized that offending was not a path that would help him meet his goals and obligations, even when trouble showed up.

Gabe’s reentry experience was quite different from James, not to mention each of the other young men. Gabe’s return to the city was marked by stability in nearly every aspect. He was the only one who had grown up in a two-parent home, where they had been married for thirty-four years. His parents also both had steady jobs with a regular income, until his father became ill and turned to drugs, which didn’t have a significant effect on their marriage. Gabe’s girlfriend, who stayed with him the whole time he was incarcerated, had a steady job and attended college. Gabe was also able to get a job immediately after his release, and his situation made his transition look easy. Gabe had sold drugs for years before his placement in Mountain Ridge, but not because his parents couldn’t provide for him. During an interview, he said, “I didn’t have to sell drugs. I wanted to because I didn’t want to ask my mom for things. Anything I asked my mom for, she would buy me. But I ain’t want to. I felt like I was grown up and what man wants to ask his mom for things?” (Fader

2013, p. 184) When Gabe got his first paycheck, he never returned to hustling, telling Fader that he saw the connection between selling drugs and getting locked up. Gabe said, “I wasn’t really trying to back there. I mean, who wanna live that life?” (Fader 2013, p. 188).

Although Gabe and James had a lot of differences in their stories, their formulas for success shared many important common aspects, especially the important of masculine identity and the support of social networks. Their stories suggest that deterrent power of incarceration may only be limited to those with enough social resources.

Fader returned to Mountain Ridge for the annual graduation with five of the young men a few months after their release. She wondered why they were so set on returning to the facility that they hated and what others functions were served at the ceremony. She tells this story in Chapter 8, “I Got Some Unfinished Business”. The visit back to the facility gave the young men a rare opportunity to reclaim the experience on their own terms, wearing what they wanted, speaking how they wanted, and listening to whatever music they wanted. The young men wanted to prove to the staff they “aren’t all bad” and “ain’t failed yet” (Fader 2013, p. 194). A couple of them stated that they had “unfinished business” (Fader 2013, p. 194) there and that they wanted to see their counselors and teachers again. In their opinion, making a presence there was evidence that they were “doing good” in the community and they thought this would disprove their counselors’ negative predictions about their future. During the ceremony, Fader and young men listened to many speeches of the present graduates, laughing at the jokes and making jokes of their own, reminiscing on their time in the facility and time spent with counselors and staff. However, according to Fader, Mountain Ridge’s graduation ceremony “failed to confer to concrete privileges of a new status. The graduates’ claims to be doing well were based on ties to legitimate institutions that were not as tight as they attempted to portray” (Fader 2013, p. 17). She also noted that the staff members were invested in these fictions and exaggerations that make up the ceremony because it made them look good, like there was value and effectiveness to their work. The graduation ended up being a success for the staff, not the graduates.

The title of the book, *Falling Back*, has different meanings. In one sense, it refers to young men “falling back” into their previous lifestyles, committing crimes and getting locked up. However, in another sense, it refers to the young men “falling back” or “going straight”, as they called it, being able to get out of the drug game and stay out of trouble when they came back. Although the young men sincerely wanted to fall back and live crime-free after their release from Mountain Ridge, most of them found themselves falling back into their old patterns, losing progress toward becoming “productive adults”. This book suggests

that reform schools, like Mountain Ridge, do not prepare the graduates for change after release because they fail to change the primary sources of the crime. They do not facilitate the social bonds that will help lead these young men in positive directions. The messages that they receive are negative and stigmatizing, and the predictions of failure become self-appraisals. There is a disconnect between the experience that the young men have inside the facility and the settings to which they return and try to apply their new skills. They are removed from their environment but they are not taught the skills they need to succeed when they return. Criminal activity, especially in the form of earning money, is one of the only ways youth can earn respect and be seen as a “man” on the streets. Employment, fatherhood, and romantic relationships are each characterized by a constant fluctuation in success, not the perfect linear model that most programs sensationalize. Also, many of the graduates who appear to have stopped offending are actually just “selling smarter”, using ploys that make them less likely to be arrested. The struggle that these young men endure while trying to transition back home is characterized by both the need for a masculine identity and social bonds. Fader, at the end of the book, discusses better methods for addressing youth crime, including a judicious use of reform schools, keeping young people closer to their homes and communities when they are incarcerated, using interventions that incorporate strong support, holding institutions accountable for the outcomes, and building a “youth support complex” (Fader 2013, p. 18). It is impossible to tell each of the young men’s stories in much detail, as they have had numerous struggles, hardships, and battles throughout their life that many people cannot even imagine. They have

all made strides trying to better themselves and overcome many hardships, but unfortunately, the street is overpowering for many of them in the end. The stories of the young men are incredible, and Fader does an outstanding job of allowing the reader to look at life through their lens and to gain a better understanding of the lifestyle of urban street culture. It is eye opening and at times heart wrenching to read their stories and to try to understand their battle during their transition back into their own communities, where they are predicted to fail. Fader does a fantastic job of telling the experience reported by the young men throughout their time in Mountain Ridge Academy and the time spent during the transition after their release. Those who read this book will educate themselves, and be better prepared to educate others, benefit from about the realities of urban street culture. It will allow all of us to ask ourselves to try and understand where criminal activity stems from and why it occurs. Accepting and understanding the realities may be one of the biggest steps in creating path toward a better life for vulnerable inner-city youth, many who otherwise will continue to tell the same stories as these fifteen young men.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest None.

References

- Fader, J. J. (2013). *Falling back: Incarceration and transitions to adulthood among urban youth*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.