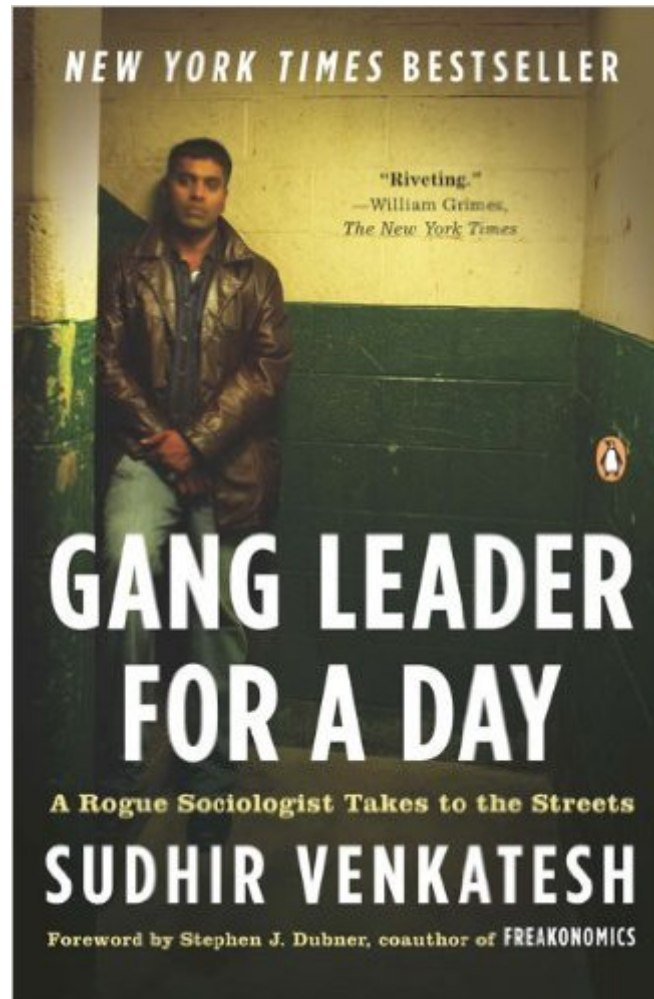


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# Gang Leader For A Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes To The Streets



## Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller Foreword by Stephen J. Dubner, coauthor of *Freakonomics* When first-year graduate student Sudhir Venkatesh walked into an abandoned building in one of Chicago's most notorious housing projects, he hoped to find a few people willing to take a multiple-choice survey on urban poverty--and impress his professors with his boldness. He never imagined that as a result of this assignment he would befriend a gang leader named JT and spend the better part of a decade embedded inside the projects under JT's protection. From a privileged position of unprecedented access, Venkatesh observed JT and the rest of his gang as they operated their crack-selling business, made peace with their neighbors, evaded the law, and rose up or fell within the ranks of the gang's complex hierarchical structure. Examining the morally ambiguous, highly intricate, and often corrupt struggle to survive in an urban war zone, *Gang Leader for a Day* also tells the story of the complicated friendship that develops between Venkatesh and JT--two young and ambitious men a universe apart. "Riveting." --The New York Times "Compelling... dramatic... Venkatesh gives readers a window into a way of life that few Americans understand." --Newsweek "An eye-opening account into an underserved city within the city." --Chicago Tribune "The achievement of *Gang Leader for a Day* is to give the dry statistics a raw, beating heart." --The Boston Globe "A rich portrait of the urban poor, drawn not from statistics but from vivid tales of their lives and his, and how they intertwined." --The Economist "A sensitive, sympathetic, unpatronizing portrayal of lives that are usually ignored or lumped into ill-defined stereotype." --Financial Times Sudhir Venkatesh's latest book *Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy*--a memoir of sociological investigation revealing the true face of America's most diverse city--was published in September 2013 by The Penguin Press

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## Customer Reviews

This book is definitely an interesting read, particularly if you are not from the wrong side of the tracks. For most middle and upper class readers, I believe this is an insightful and voyeuristic view of the lives that are so often forgotten about in this country. Having grown up on the wrong side of the tracks and having lived in the projects for a time, I found myself deeply conflicted by the author's portrayal of others and himself. In the end he is only somewhat honest with himself about being the biggest hustler of all in the book. How exactly do you eat people's food and sit on their couches and follow them around for six years and in the end say you weren't even friends? Is this simply artificial distance inserted to make himself seem more scholarly, or does he really feel this way about the people who greatly contributed to his career? He tries to distinguish himself from the very people he interacted with and at times participated in morally questionable behavior with by describing himself as dressing appropriately for an Ivy League professor while returning to visit the ghetto. This description of himself at the end of the book brought home sharply to me the reality that most people will take a look at this world, like the author, and then put it down and walk away from the very real needs that real Americans have and it left me frustrated and angry. For every person who makes it out, there are hundreds left behind and most people are unwilling or unable to do anything except close a book and forget. I highly question that anything will be done as a result of this work to significantly improve impoverished Americans' situations, a view that the author confirms. For all of the conflicting statements about various individuals moral choices in the book, the real heroes are the people who are trying to make the best of a bad situation. J.T., the drug dealer who gave the author the unprecedented access, reflects the true complexity of his environment and the ways in which people rationalize what they have to do in order to make a life for their families. And in many ways all of the people who spoke with and participated in the author's journey through American poverty reflect the same principles and values that the rest of America have. We all make choices and do what we have to do to get by, no matter how cultured we pretend to be. So while I am frustrated by the author's need to distinguish himself from the people who shared so much with him, I hope that this book makes people think about the people around them and the very real suffering that occurs in our own country. I know from having lived in a place not too far removed from what the author describes, I cannot turn away and forget. While other people see a middle class girl now, in

many ways I will never be separated from that life and I know that even this book does not begin to address the long-term difficulties involved in eradicating poverty in this country. And the main reason for this is in this book: you can leave the projects, but it never really leaves you and thus many people end up back there no matter how hard they work to get out. *Gangleader for a Day*, therefore, should represent a reality check for America, especially as our economy slows.

Thus Reggie, a Chicago gang member, warned the author of this book. Thank goodness, Venkatesh wasn't frightened away, and the consequence is this narrative about a Chicago crack-dealing gang. I first learned something about life in a Chicago housing project when I read David Isay's heartbreaking *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (1999), and something about the street drug trade in David Simons and Edward Burns' grueling *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1998). Both have become classics. Sudhir Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day* is, I believe, destined to join them as an on-the-spot narrative of gang culture of Chicago. Some of the people whose lives he tracks--J.T., Clarisse, Mama and Pops Patton, Reggie, Millie, T-Bone--grow on you until you feel as if you actually know them. While a graduate student at the University of Chicago, weary of cold statistical analysis, Venkatesh began hanging out with the Black Kings, a crack-selling gang who headquartered in the Robert Taylor Homes projects. He wanted to get in touch with the gang subculture through direct observation. He entered into the project pretty naive and just a bit too full of himself. Seven years later, after following the Black Kings and establishing a relationship with their leader, one J.T., the things he'd seen and heard made him a lot more streetwise and a little less cocky. During his seven-year study, "Mr. Professor," as J.T.'s mother initially called Venkatesh, learned that Chicago gangs, or at least J.T.'s outfit, lived in a culture of violence and machismo, but also functioned in an unexpected way as police in their own territory. From the perspective of society, they were lawbreakers. But at Robert Taylor Homes, they were also lawmakers, keeping a tight rein on adventitious violence and, through acts of "philanthropy," keeping the local economy fueled with drug money. He discovered about halfway through his research with the Black Kings that he'd witnessed or heard about so many gang and drug deal activities that he'd do well to seek legal advice. When he did, he discovered (to his discomfort) that there was no such thing under the law as "researcher-client confidentiality," and that he was in a vulnerable legal position. At one point during his project, he actually worried that "he was falling into a hole [of criminality] I could never dig myself out of" (p. 250). He realized that getting wounded in gang violence nine times out of ten meant either that nobody would call an ambulance for you, or if they did, that no ambulance would make a run into

the inner city war zone to pick you up. He learned that there's a city-wide organization and hierarchy when it comes to many Chicago gangs, including the Black Kings. And from spending all this time with pushers, junkies, gangsters, civilians, hookers, and cops, and learning firsthand about their lives, he learned that it's risky to make holier-than-thou comparisons. When he bade J.T. farewell, for example, Venkatesh mentioned to the gangleader that he wasn't sure he was ready to jump into another longterm research project. J.T. cannily observed that there was little else Venkatesh was qualified to do. "You can't fix nothing, you never worked a day in your life. The only think you know how to do is hang out with n-----s like us" (p. 281). An excellent, fascinating book, sometimes frightening, at other times unspeakably sad, and at still others funny: but always with the feel of authenticity and never sentimental. Highly recommended, as is his American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto (2002) and especially his recent (2006) Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor. In fact, the latter book could easily be read as a companion volume to Gang Leader for a Day.

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