

## BOOK REVIEW

***Us Versus Them: Race, Crime, and Gentrification  
in Chicago Neighborhoods***

By Jan Doering

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 256 pages

The study of Chicago neighborhoods has been a pre-occupation of social scientists who have grown up or have been educated in cities like Boston, New York, or Chicago. Chicago, the “city of neighborhoods,” has spawned numerous works on the significance of local urban communities including the thorough study by Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (2012). For Sampson, any study of urban communities must consider the impacts of the local neighborhood contexts. More recently, other authors have looked closely at representative Chicago neighborhoods, including the ethnographic study by Jan Doering, *Us Versus Them: Race, Crime and Gentrification in Chicago Neighborhoods* (2020).

In a climate dominated by several national issues at once, including a health care crisis, urban violence, and racial injustice and discrimination, this book has proven to be relevant, connecting the reader with many significant issues that are volatile in a dense urban environment like Chicago. *Us Versus Them* focuses on Uptown and Rogers Park, two neighborhoods on the city’s Northside. In some respects, these are not stereotypical neighborhoods that face red-lining and segregation, but rather represent issues facing urban areas more broadly in the city and beyond. These neighborhoods are diverse, and contain a range of social classes, including middle-class professionals as well as low income renters and new immigrants. The diversity of neighborhoods of Chicago’s Northside has encouraged local sociologists like Philip Nyden, formerly of Loyola University, to wonder what makes for vital, diverse, successful urban communities. While Sampson’s work examines the whole city, Doering’s work is more limited, more micro-focused, using ethnographic interviews to get a sense of the narratives that are so much a part of a local social fabric, noting how those stories and perceptions compare with realities. For example, despite the perception of high rates of crime and violence, statistics show that rates on the Northside are relatively low compared to Southside and Westside neighborhoods in Chicago (32). Also, despite fears of gentrification which is indeed occurring, the demographics from 1970 to 2010 show a precipitous decline of whites, a relatively stable number of African Americans, and a slight decline of Asian and Hispanic persons (37). Gentrification is evident by the loss of 3,000 rental units, and an addition of 2,000 owner-occupied units. But the problems in Uptown and Rogers Park appear to be

more perceptual than real, based on fear and hear-say rather than factual data. The issues of fear and the perception of crime and violence that leads to profiling and harassment appear to be the greater challenge.

For Doering, Rogers Park and Uptown are diverse communities both racially and economically. In many respects they are desirable places to live for both immigrants and up and coming middle-class families of every race and nationality. Nevertheless, typical urban problems persist, particularly problems of racial conflict, class antagonism, and the threat of gentrification and displacement of lower income persons and families in these neighborhoods. Therefore the question remains, how great are these threats, and to what extent does the fear or concern of issues like gentrification approximate the reality of gentrification. It should be noted that the reality of forces like gentrification and the actual impacts of gentrification are often very different, and this has always been the case. Urban planner Brian J.L. Berry argued in 1982 that gentrification in Chicago and other rust belt cities represents “islands of renewal amid seas of decay,” but was not a widespread phenomenon (1982). More recently, Richard Florida, in *The New Urban Crisis*, argues persuasively that gentrification does not happen in segregated urban communities, but on the edge of more desirable neighborhoods where the real estate values are potentially higher. Gentrification does not happen in segregated low-income neighborhoods, so it is not as big of a problem as people fear (Florida 2017:73).

In the neighborhoods described by Doering, issues like crime, gentrification, and violence do exist, but the threat and fear of these forces are greater than reality. In one story of Uptown regarding African-American boys playing in Bronco Billy Park, local whites feared that the black urban youth playing on the basketball court were accessories to crime, and called for the basketball hoops to be taken down. However, a local activist group, RYCH (Resist Youth Criminalization and Harassment) obtained crime statistics from the local police department that showed crime statistics in Bronco Billy Park were negligible, so the basketball hoops remained.

Part of the richness of these communities is that there are numerous organizations that are actively present, including the *Uptown Chicago Commission* on one side, and *RYCH*, *Ceasefire*, *CAPS* (Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy), *ONE Northside* and *Northside Action for Justice* (NA4J) who represent the “social justice” constituencies on the other. In this case, the fear of crime was disproportionately greater than the actual incidents of crime. Social justice organizations in Uptown argued that the fear of crime was actually more related to racial attitudes.

Of course, Rogers Park and Uptown are contested spaces, and there is a variety of community groups, many church-based, that are aligned with one faction or another. Doering labels the groups as “safety activists” versus “social justice activists.” The “safety activists” are those persons and organizations who wish to address the crime issue in Uptown, which is understood by “social justice” activists as (mostly) representing the concerns and fears of middle-class white persons. The “social justice activists” argue for greater social and racial

inclusion, more affordable housing, and more educational and recreational opportunities for the urban youth, many of whom are black or brown residents. "Safety activists" sometimes engaged in a policy of "positive loitering" to establish a "presence" in the neighborhood so as to identify problem groups, and perhaps place the minority teenage population on notice that they are being watched. One group in the social justice camp describes the positive loiterers as "white people loitering." Doering concludes that the "fight against crime" has contributed to discrimination and profiling, but has not really resolved the problems identified. Yet issues remain. Some apartment buildings in Uptown, for example, do attract low income persons, and may not be well-managed or maintained, and these become labeled as "problem buildings." Residents argue that the problems are overstated, and with a little work the residents themselves could resolve some of the problems, such as better handling of the trash. But the problems appear to be overstated, and the complaints are designed to remove the occupants from the community.

There are organizations which have argued for a middle way. For example, ONE Northside is represented by some 36 churches and religious organizations, plus almost 100 businesses, schools, and not-for-profit organizations. Rather than the antagonism between race and class groups, ONE Northside has sought collaboration to address the issues of crime as well as inclusion and the need for affordable housing. Some community leaders argue that these are community-wide issues, and should not be attached to one population group. Doering illustrates in his interviews that perceptions and understandings of the issues are not uniform among either race or class groups. Two women in public housing have opposing views on police presence. Two white residents have opposing views on how issues of crime and racial antagonism can be addressed. While one group may advocate for a stronger police presence, another group argues that the problems can be resolved to a greater degree in an organized civil discourse and community-wide conversation.

Many interviewed residents offered insightful comments, identifying the root problems in the community, notably poverty, racial discrimination, and the fear of racial and cultural differences. Others were vocal about solutions, including affordable housing, opportunities for the youth, and the need of more open conversation with the local police force. Doering grouped the coalitions of groups variously as Lakesiders and Northsiders. The Lakesiders were predominantly white, and sought to address safety issues in an aggressive, divisive manner. The Northsiders "became a microcosm of racial harmony in a rather divided neighborhood" (115). One group of "Northtowners" was able to foster inter-racial collaboration to address issues of racial stereotyping and discrimination. A variety of leadership styles was also noted, as one group might be more aggressive in identifying "crime" and the suspicions of crime, while another person's leadership skills were more open, more inclusive, and able to pursue a greater consensus and greater degree of collaboration on how the issues in these communities could be both identified and resolved together. "The Northtowners' willingness to discuss race helped

them create new ties between African American, white, and Latino residents. These different racial micropolitics had non-trivial effects on trust and community in Rogers Park and Uptown” (131).

*Us Versus Them* is a helpful study that investigates the sources of community antagonism. The ethnographic approach elicited insightful interviews from persons who were not just struggling with issues of racial discrimination and crime, but were in fact living with these issues. The description of the competing groups in Uptown remind us of the competing groups we see today in our society as a whole. There are those both locally and nationally calling for “law and order” to control crime, while others such as the *Black Lives Matter* movement argue for inclusion and an end to racial injustice and exclusion. Doering notes that adequate analysis must consider the root problems that are facing urban communities like Uptown and Rogers Park. While policing and safety are legitimate issues of concern, many residents were also arguing for crime prevention, for avenues of reconciliation and mediation, and for policies that address the structural problems of poverty, injustice, and a lack of opportunity. African Americans in the study were interested in issues of community safety for their children, but they also hoped for good schools, after school programs, summer jobs, and for “cultural enrichment” efforts that might keep youth away from gangs. While the groups in this study argued for specific programs that might redress the long term sources of crime, the author argued that positive civil discourse, creative leadership, the development of trust, and authentic examples of social capital are keys to healing the volatile fissures in the urban environment and beyond.

## References

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