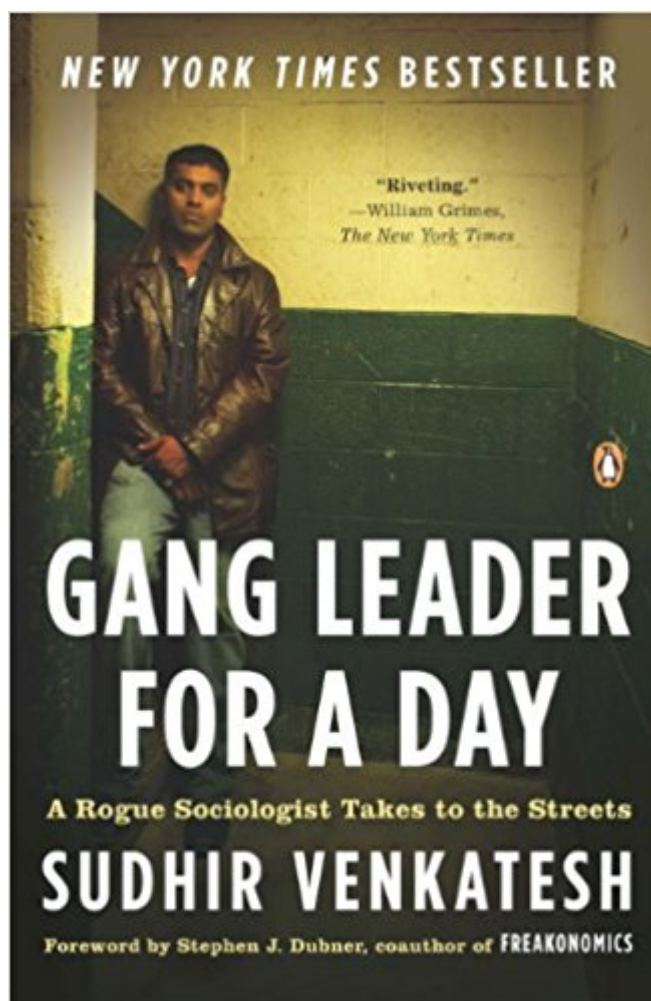




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# Gang Leader For A Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes To The Streets



## 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 Penguin Press

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## Customer Reviews

In the late 1980s and 1990s, rogue sociologist Venkatesh infiltrated the world of tenant and gang life in Chicago's Robert Taylor Home projects. He found a complex system of compromises and subsistence that makes life (barely) manageable. Venkatesh excellently illustrates the resourcefulness of impoverished communities in contrast to a society that has virtually abandoned them. He also reveals the symbiotic relationship between the community and the gangs that helps sustain each. Reg Rogers reads with great emphasis and rhythm. His lilting, cadence and vocal characterization of tenants is enjoyable. Rogers's first-person narrative establishes a deep intimacy with the reader. Venkatesh reads the final chapter, but he lacks the subtlety and nuance that Rogers projects throughout his reading. The insubstantial author interview on the last disc mostly covers material already discussed in the book. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

Adult/High School • As a young graduate student fresh off an extended stint following the Grateful Dead, Venkatesh began studying urban poverty. With a combination of an ethnographer's curiosity about another culture and some massive naiveté, he gathered firsthand knowledge of the intricacies of Chicago's Robert Taylor projects. Early on, he met a megalomaniac gang leader known here as J.T., who became his mentor. Venkatesh observed and learned how the crack game works, and how many have their fingers in the pie and need life to remain the way it is. He observed violence, corruption, near homelessness, good cops, bad cops, and a lot of neglect and politics-as-usual. He made errors in judgment • it took a long time for his street smarts to catch up to his book smarts • but he tells the story in such a way as to allow readers to figure out his missteps as he did. Finally, as the projects began to come down, Venkatesh was able to demonstrate how something that seems positive is not actually good for everyone. The first line in his preface, "I woke up at about 7:30 a.m. in a crack den," reflects the prurient side of his studies, the first chapter title, "How does it feel to be black and poor?" reflects the theoretical side, and both work together in this well-rounded portrayal. • Jamie Watson, Harford County Public Library, MD Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

Sudhir Venkatesh was a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago, studying urban poverty. In an effort to interview those living in urban destitution, he grabbed a multiple-choice survey, and headed over to the Robert Taylor Homes - one of Chicago's most notorious housing projects. After a tense introduction, Venkatesh befriended JT, a leader of Chicago's Black Kings gang. This book is Venkatesh's account of the decade he spent observing gang life in the projects. He followed JT around Robert Taylor Homes, witnessing crack-making and selling, prostitution, and an overabundance of violence -- both gang related, and not. He witnessed life in public housing for those who partnered with the gang, and for those who tried to avoid the gang at all costs. The subject matter of this book is one that has always intrigued me - in high school, I read a book called *There Are No Children Here* (also set in Chicago), which highlighted the lives of children growing up in a blighted and failing housing system. I chose the college I did because I had originally planned to major in Urban Studies and Sociology (I majored in English). Though I didn't study urban plight as I had originally planned, my interest in the subject hasn't waned, and I anticipated loving this book. I didn't. But, I did enjoy it, it was a quick read, and I learned much about the decay of our urban settings. The main issue that I had with this book, is that Venkatesh struck me as painfully naive. He walked into a housing project with a multiple choice survey that asked questions like, "How does it feel to be black and poor?" and actually expected people to respond. What were they supposed to say? "Oh, I love being black and poor. It doesn't bother me at all that I'm a marginalized person, living in a dilapidated building."? Come now. I don't feel like one needs a Mensa caliber brain to realize that these questions are silly and insulting. And yet, Venkatesh was Ph.D. level student at a renowned institution. It just reminded me never to take my common sense for granted. This event took place in the first chapter -- and I didn't really feel that his naivety improved. Venkatesh spent the better part of a decade observing these people, interviewing them, getting to know them, and earning their trust, but, I never felt that he truly understood them. And in fairness, maybe that understanding was never a true possibility. At one point, he broke away from JT for a few days, and interviewed some of the others living in the building. He asked them questions about their "jobs," and their abilities to make a living in this setting. They answered his questions honestly, telling him of the various underground money-making projects that they participated in. Venkatesh knew that JT and his gang "taxed" all the residents who used the building as a place to make money -- and JT was apparently unaware of many of these schemes. Yet, Venkatesh still told JT about these different projects, and then was genuinely surprised when the tenants were angry at him for running his mouth. I wanted to scream at him, "You're a damn fool Sudhir, come on!" During his tenure with

the gang, Venkatesh learned so much about how the gang worked and operated, and saw that the gang functioned with the gusto of a Fortune 500 company. JT was the leader of his faction; he had an accountant and a planner. He had worker-bee foot soldiers who stood on the street and sold the product (crack), and he had a whole variety of customers. But, above JT, there was an entire upper-level hierarchy to strive for. The Black Kings were a nationwide gang, and they held leadership meetings all over the country. Venkatesh was fascinated by this -- and so was I. It's not a surprise that the Black Kings cropped up in these buildings. The Robert Taylor Homes were deplorably set-up -- they stretched from 39th Street to 54th, running alongside the Dan Ryan Expressway. In other words, in order for the tenants to LEAVE their housing, they had to literally cross the highway. Many of them did not have cars. They were effectively isolated from the rest of society. The buildings themselves were high rises of 16 stories each - with outdoor hallways. Outdoor. Like a motel. In Chicago. If you haven't been to Chicago -- I'll paint this picture for you: in the winter, Lake Michigan, a huge lake, freezes over. Solid. I've had the wind in Chicago rip at my face so severely that my eyes streamed like I was sobbing, with those tears then literally freezing to my face the second they left my eyes and hit the air. It's cold. It's so. frigging. cold. And, their hallways were outside. After children began plummeting to their deaths from the upper floors, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) begrudgingly put chain-link fences up along the corridors. So, these people lived in buildings, with outdoor hallways, enclosed by the beauty of chain-link metal. Outdoor hallways aside - the CHA built these buildings, crammed the people inside, and then left, never to come back or administer the required up-keep. Doors fell off the hinges. Water stopped running in many apartments. The elevators sometimes just, went into a free-fall, killing everyone inside -- and this was only if they were working at all. Appeals to the CHA for help went unanswered. It's not surprising that impoverished people, in run-down buildings, with little access to the city, began organizing themselves into street-gangs. But, with all of this said, can gang members be absolved of their multiple misdeeds? I don't personally believe so, and Venkatesh struggled with this also. I don't think he wanted to absolve them; it was clear that he understood that gang-life wasn't a sustainable lifestyle. Gang members weren't long for this world, and unfortunately, neither were the innocents that they came in contact with. The members of this particular gang often said, "You need to understand that the Black Kings are not a gang; we are a community organization, responding to people's needs," and Venkatesh admitted his skepticism about this many times. The gang felt that it provided its tenants "safety," and "employment." They also conducted "community outreach," by going door-to-door and encouraging people to register to vote (once they were signed up, the gang told them who they were to vote for. The Chicago political machine is alive and well,

even in the 'hood). The gang may have provided "protection" to the tenants of their building, but they were also targets of drive-by shootings -- in which innocents were killed. The gang may have employed people, paying them money to sell drugs -- but in this they were perpetuating addiction. For each "service" that they provided, they inflicted a world of pain. The cycle was never-ending, and vicious. My favorite part of this book though, was the illumination of city-wide, governmental corruption. The CHA wouldn't conduct repairs when most tenants called, but they accepted bribes from some of the "building leaders" in exchange for vaguely explained services. There were police officers that would come into the buildings and beat drug dealers, then raid their apartments, stealing their drugs and their money, but without issuing an arrest. They didn't actually have interest in getting them off of the streets (otherwise, how could they get their cut of a rather lucrative drug trade)? The Aldermen were terrible too. They could be bought by the gang leaders -- they would keep well-meaning police officers away from parks where the dealers would be selling their drugs. It was frustrating. Eventually, the Robert Taylor homes were torn down, and all tenants were "relocated." Many moved to different poor neighborhoods, continuing their life in the projects. Some of JT's gang members joined other gangs to ensure their own safety. The CHA was responsible for relocating the tenants, but it shirked this duty along with all of its others, and the tenants did what they could on their own to find places to live. This book was frustrating, eye-opening, and disheartening. Yet, I recommend it. For more of my reviews, go to [readingandmusing.com](http://readingandmusing.com)

As a component of my coursework for PH 2998- Seminar in Child and Adolescent Health, at UT School of Public Health, Austin Regional Campus, taught by Dr. Steve Kelder I selected to read *Gang Leader For a Day* authored by Dr. Sudhir Venkatesh. I found the book to be intriguing and unique. I'm sure it is very rare for an outsider to gain access into a well-known street gang. The book does raise concerns for the risk factors experienced by the citizens of Chicago poverty stricken neighborhoods. I would be interested in reading his dissertation written based on the experiences included in this text. Dr. Sudhir Venkatesh grew up in the suburbs of southern California. While pursuing his masters in sociology at the University of Chicago, Venkatesh was extended the rare opportunity to personally observe the internal network of the Black Kings gang. His intention was to document the effects of a community on the black youth in Chicago, rather than simply collecting data with a typical survey he was permitted to witness the interactions between a local gang and the residents of the housing project. Throughout the publication *Gang Leader for a Day*, I had to remind myself the book was written from firsthand experience rather than a fictional story. *"Gang Leader for a Day"* documented the first hand

experiences and observations made by Dr. Venkatesh during his 7 years spent interacting with the residents of the Robert Taylor Home project. The book depicts the hustling lifestyle required to survive living within Robert Taylor. Everyday life included drug deals, sex trade, bribery, unfit living situations, violence, and financial struggle. Venkatesh divulged the intricate system which operated within Robert Taylor. The relationship between the residents and the Black Kings slightly resembled an "I scratch your back you scratch mine" relationship, except if you try any funny business you will be "taken care of". Building leaders received benefits from allowing the gang to operate within the lobby and various apartments within the structure. Residents benefited from the gang activity by receiving small amount of financial handouts from the gang members and some protection. Gang members were able to conduct their drug trade in a location typically undisturbed by the police and highly frequented by drug users. Gang members within the Black Kings gained an income source and a "community/family", and members were required to graduate high school. Homeless people, known as "squatters", in the neighborhoods around Robert Taylor were able to gain temporary housing and small sources of income. Most relationships involved "taxes" or a trade of services. Some residents would provide childcare, food or clothing items, or offer repair services for money, drugs, or sex acts. Those individuals who received an income from these small business transactions paid taxes to either the gang leaders or the building leaders. Local law enforcement, religious leaders, and aldermen were involved in bribery and hustling some of the residents at Robert Taylor. Dr. Venkatesh authored the book to expose the interworking of a "community" surrounded by gang activity, and to lay tribute to the individuals who tolerated his interviews and intrusion into their daily lives. Although I expect his dissertation presented the numerical/statistical data, his book was able to present the anecdotal version of his research efforts. One of the most interesting aspects of the writings for me was Sudhir's relationship and depiction of Ms. Bailey. As I read the story I went from respecting her efforts to improve the lives of her tenants to disliking her due to her sense of entitlement. The audience gains a brief understanding of the influence and control Ms. Bailey had. Also, the lack of support/funding/involvement from the government in Chicago surprised me; especially the destruction of the homes of 150,000 people. The perpetuation of the poverty cycle was evident at the conclusion of his book. The eviction of the families and residents who lived in Robert Taylor could have served as an opportunity for the city/government to provide connections and improved living situations, but the city let them fall by the way side without adequate support or

services. For health advocates interested in working with individuals in low income, poverty stricken areas it is important to understand removing a child or adolescent from one poor environment is not going to help end the cycle of poverty. As the saying goes, you can take the animal out of the wild but you cannot take the wild out of the animal. These citizens are nurtured by their neighborhoods and surroundings and will revert to their original way of living even if removed. This was demonstrated in the book by the former residents of Robert Taylor who were able to be relocated, but resumed their involvement with the Black Kings and illegal activity. This idea was also demonstrated by the gang's senior leaders who spent money to buy their families nicer homes outside of the projects, but those family members would return to a location or living situation similar to the life they were accustomed to in the projects. I did find it important to note that the community members and members of the Black Kings had boundaries regarding the safety and involvement of children. The Black Kings had rules against selling drugs to children and prevented the conduction of business in areas where children were nearby. Also, the matriarchs of the buildings would ensure the children were fed even if their mother was not attending to her maternal responsibilities. Although a support system may be in place, living conditions described with Gang Leader For a Day will negatively impact adolescent health and development. The dynamic of the income source also impacts a child's ability to continue receiving an education. Those families who are severely struggling see a chance for great income if they remove the child from the school system and into the work place. Direct involvement with residents within the housing projects, specifically those controlled by gang will prove to be a challenging task. It can be assumed that not all gangs will be willing to accept strangers into their community. Instead efforts for support should be mediated by either leaders within the housing community, religious leaders who provide services to the tenants, or former residents of the projects who can relate to the current situation of the members of intervention or support groups.

It was a wonderful insight into the reality of living in Chicago from the late 80's to mid 90's. Is the dialogue a little unrealistic? Sure, but in all honesty, I would have grown tired of reading slang, so I'm very grateful that he avoided that route. I am thoroughly looking forward to reading the floating city. I'm not a terribly slow reader and I'm not the quickest either, but the chapters are long, so be ready for a marathon of reading. It is well worth it though. I feel like I learned a lot about my fellow man and about a class that works hard to remain a family.

For everyone (like myself) who is fortunate enough to grow up in middle class suburbia, this should



be required reading. You can't cast judgment on these communities until you properly understand them. Sudhir portrays this world brilliantly.

I was required to read this book for class but ended up really enjoying it. It reads as a fictional book however it is very true, as well as eye opening. Not only was this interesting to read but it was also an easy read. It is about a sociologist who goes to experience the slums and gang life first hand to learn about it. It is so bizarre to read about his experience from the inside.

Opened my eyes. I never knew about what went on in the "projects." They are like their own little civilizations within the larger city. I can't see how that can ever change as long as the local currency is drugs.

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