

CHAPTER THREE

“Here I get three meals a day”

Segregation and the Relative Experience of Poverty

As was made clear in the preceding chapter, different cultural assumptions about belonging inevitably impacted the respondents' sense of self and their experience of difference. Similarly, American and German respondents also assessed their socioeconomic status in relation to the standard of living they observed in their immediate environment. Growing up in segregated neighborhoods, the young men in the United States lacked comparative examples of peers who lived comfortably in the middle class. German participants, who grew up surrounded by middle-class prosperity, noticed their families' marginalization more clearly. Different benchmarks of need also shaped the young men's pathways into crime, as well as their perspectives on incarceration. In contrast to the childhood narratives of the US respondents, none of the German participants reported housing insecurity or food scarcity. The young men in Germany explained their criminal behavior by pointing to psychological strain caused by familial dysfunctions or unexpected personal tragedies, such as parental death or illness. They did *not*

frame committing crimes as way of providing for their families' basic needs.

The German young men, like their American counterparts, aspired to a lifestyle that was out of reach for families of their class position. Yet, even as the American respondents desired mundane aspects of middle-class life, they did not compare their childhood experiences to middle- or upper-middle-class children. An upper-middle-class family making \$250,000 can feel "Manhattan poor" in the über-wealthy environment of New York City's Upper East Side.¹ Likewise, living in segregated and disadvantaged neighborhoods, the American young men did not experience their exclusion as drastically as some of the German respondents did (Shedd 2015).

In her groundbreaking book *The Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild argued that women compare themselves to friends of similar socioeconomic status to evaluate the qualities and deficiencies of their husbands (1989). The young men in this study also measured their living standards in relation to others in their immediate social environment. The German respondents lived among middle-class and upper-middle-class children. The lifestyle of these much wealthier families was the baseline they used to make sense of their own experience (Bucerius 2014). In the United States, middle-class children hardly entered the respondents' immediate life-world. Although they may have passed through wealthier parts of their hometown (Leverentz 2020), in their neighborhood they only encountered people who struggled to get by. In Pennsylvania poverty ran so deep that some children perceived prison as a relief from the suffering they had lived through at home.

DESPERATION AND ASPIRATION:
THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Several respondents in Pennsylvania remembered days when they went hungry because there was not enough food for them to eat at home.² Bryan, who had already served two years of his two- to five-year sentence he received for carrying a firearm, remembered the extreme poverty he grew up in: "It'd be hard like when, one week there'd be food on the table for all of us. Then the next day, it'd be a certain amount of food on the table for a number of us. And we ugh, damn. We ate, but not as much as everybody else, you know? We had to take turns on like, on who was gonna get a certain amount this week."

When he was young, Bryan explained, he committed crimes to take care of himself while his mother struggled to feed the family. During his teenage years, his criminal behavior reached a new level. He committed his first armed robbery at fourteen and began selling drugs. At that point, he readily admitted that he was drawn to the lifestyle and the excitement that came from committing crimes. When I asked him if he had any positive memories from his childhood he would like to share, he simply replied: "I wish I had some."

Blake also believed that he was drawn to the streets because he realized how hard his single mother had to work—and how comparatively easy it was to make money selling drugs. The twenty-two-year-old recalled that his family received some welfare payments and food stamps, but this was not enough to cover the bills. His mother had to work two more jobs to make ends meet. Looking back, Blake was unaware of his family's disadvantage. Given the level of poverty he grew up around in Harrisburg, his understanding of what it meant to be poor was

calibrated differently: The homeless who lived in squalid conditions were poor. "We wasn't that," he said, "but we was poor. 'Cause we was living, we, we didn't have a house and car and . . . all that extra shit. To me, now that I think about it, we was poor. We wasn't middle-class."

While it was especially those respondents who grew up in cities like Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, or Philadelphia who lived close to middle-class or upper-middle-class areas, their life-world never overlapped with their white middle-class peers in significant ways (Pattillo 1999). These young men only understood how poor they had been after the fact, or when coincidences in their lives led to interactions with upper-middle-class families. Gabriel, for example, became aware of how other people lived when his family stayed at a homeless shelter located in a predominantly white, middle-class area. As he recalled:

The school I went to was a bunch of white people. My middle school was a bunch of white people, there was only a couple black people there. . . . This white dude was my friend, I used to go over to his house all the time, and then that's when I started seeing stuff. Seeing people, like they used to take me out places. . . . They had like a summer house out there [in Myrtle Beach], and they used to take me out there with them. Yeah. That's when I started seeing like there's other stuff out in the world than what I be seeing. I was like eleven years old, twelve, that's what I remember. I used to want them to be my mom and dad 'cause they was cool.

Jaxon, another young Black man from Harrisburg, was used to eating lunch at school but he usually missed out on breakfast because he was late. At home, meal sizes were small: "It wouldn't be a nice sized amount [of food], it'd be a small amount where we couldn't even get full," he explained. Jaxon had cycled through numerous juvenile justice facilities before he was sent to SCI Pine Grove. In fact, he had committed the robbery he

was incarcerated for, while he was on the run from his final juvenile placement. Jaxon remembered only one non-punitive social service intervention from his childhood: Through the school district he lived in, he was assigned a woman as his “Therapeutic Staff Support” (TSS). The TSS was supposed to monitor his behavior in school. Although he realized that having someone beside him was nothing to be proud of, he enjoyed spending time with her. He recalled doing “fun stuff” with him like eating out or going to play basketball.

In addition to experiencing food insecurity, several respondents faced housing insecurity. Miguel slept on park benches when his mother did not let him come home. The twenty-one-year-old believed that he had no social or familial support on the outside. Being homeless and having to worry about food and shelter inevitably impacted how he perceived his situation in prison. Compared to sleeping outside or bouncing around between friends and relatives, he appreciated the “comforts” incarceration had to offer. “This is honestly the most stable I’ve been,” he explained, “I don’t have to worry about coming home and the doors being locked and I can’t get into my house to go to sleep.” Having regular access to food was a benefit as well. As Miguel put it: “Here, I get three meals a day which I wasn’t promised in the streets. You know? . . . I’m not glad that I’m here but it’s helpful for me to be more stable than I was in the streets.”

Gabriel did not have to sleep on park benches, but his family passed through several homeless shelters. Living in Pittsburgh, the temporary housing they were assigned in that city was usually located in its most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Facing an unstable living situation made it almost impossible for him to study. Staying at a shelter, he explained, “it’s hard to do your schoolwork, because there’s so many people living in one place: “It’s just difficult to do stuff with people running around.”

Gabriel's family remained in temporary housing right until he was finished with fifth grade. He remembered being angry and ashamed that his mother could not afford to live in a regular apartment. When the school bus picked him up, other children would make fun of where he lived.

Like Gabriel, Connor was worried about how other children perceived him. He grew up in Erie and described himself as mixed-race. His case summary file plainly identified him as African American. When I interviewed him, he was twenty years old and two years into his three- to ten-year sentence for robbery. He appeared much younger and his demeanor was that of a child in a man's body. After Connor's parents divorced, they had to move frequently because his mother didn't always pay the rent. Knowing he could not control whether or not his mother had enough money to cover the bills, Connor worried about how others perceived him. He did not want to be made fun of because he was wearing second-hand clothing. It made him feel good to wear the newest items in front of his classmates, and when he couldn't afford to purchase them, he simply stole them from department stores.

The young men in Germany also reported that they used to steal items they couldn't afford, but the US sample more clearly expressed the desire to consume conspicuously (Merton 1938; Messner and Rosenfeld 2007). Tyler, a twenty-two-year-old Black man, who was raised by his grandmother in Harrisburg, used to admire his uncles. As a child he believed that they were successful drug dealers. Like them, Tyler wanted to drive expensive cars and be seen with the beautiful women that seemed to be attracted to those vehicles. "I was like, alright, I want that," he said. Now he just felt "dumb" for falling for this superficial display of wealth. After three years in prison he saw things differently: "In the end," he said, "you gotta pay for it all. At the end, it don't mean nothin.'"

Given the extreme deprivation many of the American respondents lived through, making a lot of money quickly was a compelling prospect for them. Kayden, who moved back and forth between North Carolina and Central Pennsylvania growing up, used to live with his mother and his sister in public housing. For him, the drug dealers were the only people he knew who had money to spend. When he was growing up, he thought: “I wanna be like him one day. Getting money like selling drugs, stuff like that.” In his early twenties, with two children of his own and serving a two- to four-year sentence for robbery, he was now worried that people might think of him as “being some hard ass.” Kayden explained that he always tried to present himself as someone he is not: “I’ve got a heart,” he said, “I sometimes wear a mask.”

Kayden and others framed their behavioral choices as a mix of desperation and aspiration. They desired to live “normal” lives but they were so far removed from any middle-class stability that they could not conceptualize a normative process of upward mobility (Young 2004). Facing hunger, eviction, and neighborhood violence, they identified with the local drug dealers. After spending years in prison, many felt they had reached a dead end. Even though they were only in their early twenties, living a comfortable life was more out of reach for them than ever.

THE “GILDED AGE”

Philadelphia, the largest city in Pennsylvania, exemplifies the divisions between the haves and have-nots that are spatially proximate but that hardly intersect with each other in their daily lives. Philadelphia, one of the oldest cities in the country, is home to several universities and colleges, among them the University of Pennsylvania. Founded in 1740, the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), like Harvard and Princeton, is part of

the Ivy League. During the academic year of 2021–22, attending such a storied institution of higher learning came with a price tag of \$83,298 for students who resided on campus.³ The university is a thirty-minute subway ride from one of the most disadvantaged areas of the city—Kensington. Jesus, who grew up in that neighborhood, offered a harrowing description of his childhood in Kensington and his way into drug dealing:

Me and my cousins used to walk to school at the age of seven by ourselves. So, it was like six, seven, eight blocks from my house to the school. And from that, from the time we walked out of the house, all the blocks we passed, literally on every corner would be a drug corner. Whether it was crack, everything on one corner. But all the same drugs would be on the next corner. And you would see kids, like thirteen, hustling out there. Selling chains, watches, and you thinking damn here I am going to school and they out here making money. And the only thing school really, I don't know. I like education, but school don't give you everything that's really gonna help you in life. Things that you learn in school, the reading and math, that's all you really need from school. Everything, all that calculus and other shit, I ain't never gonna use it. Mostly everybody in Philly ain't gonna use it, unless they be like that percentage that's probably gonna make it somewhere. And I be walking to school from like eight years old, nine years old to be like I'm gonna start hustling. So I started hanging around my older cousins after school. Looking at them, seeing how they interact with fiends, the drug addicts. And then one day, I'm like let me get what you got in your pocket. Like hustling, they calling that trapping. I'm like yeah, I wanna trap. So, they gave me the drugs and told me to stash it. So, I stashed it. And a fiend, like my first fiend came up and they wanted a bag of heroin for \$10. Like you got dope, what's the stamp on it? I'm like yeah, I got dope from such and such. He wanted the stash, I gave it to him. Ever since that \$10 stash, I just, I just loved it. I don't know why. It was just interacting with so many people. 'Cause while I was hustling like even at, even recently and I looked around. I used to interact with the fiends, like why the fuck is he

doing this? You see females pregnant, bring their kids up to you. You know the kids is starving and all that. Yet, they still coming to spend their money, like you gotta stamp?

Jesus's depiction of poverty and excessive drug use is not an exaggeration. According to a community brief put together by Drexel University Urban Health Collaborative, the average income per capita was \$12,669 per year between 2012 and 2016 (Confair et al. 2019). While some of the students at the University of Pennsylvania receive full scholarships, the majority of students are drawn from the top 10 percent of the income bracket. Based on data collected between 1997 and 2013, the median family income of a University of Pennsylvania student was \$195,000 (Chetty et al. 2017).⁴

Reminiscent of the Gilded Age, the University of Pennsylvania's endowment reached \$20.5 billion in June 2021.⁵ Around the same time, the city of Philadelphia tried to clear Kensington of homeless encampments, which, according to activists, may hold about six hundred people during the summer. Even as Kensington's streets were cleared of the mentally ill and drug addicts, the city government conceded that they could offer very little as an alternative. Local residents were resigned and simply expected new encampments to crop up again shortly after the old ones had been demolished.⁶

COMFORTABLE EXCLUSION: THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE

By all measures, the German respondents grew up in a more secure and more comfortable environment. Like the American sample, the German group judged their own social status in relation to their environment. In accordance with Sandra Bucerius's analysis in her 2014 book *Unwanted*, this new generation of teenagers

felt poor in comparison to children who lived in households where both parents were ethnically German. The young men in Germany did not experience abject poverty but, in comparison to the majority of German society, their families were disadvantaged and excluded. My interview took place about sixteen years after Bucerius conducted her study. Given the political and structural change German society underwent between the early 2000s and 2016, it is remarkable that the young men felt excluded in the same way their parents' generation did (Bucerius 2014, 15).

Armend was born in Germany after his parents fled Kosovo during the war in the late 1990s. His father's addiction to slot machines led the family into poverty and further displacement. Even though his father was working every day, the family couldn't pay rent. Armend even remembered that his father seized his sister's salary she had earned working as a nurse aid in a psychiatric hospital. When she refused to hand the money over to him, he became violent. In comparison to other German respondents, Armend's family lived under very difficult circumstances. Dependent on government housing, they stayed in a trailer and had to share a kitchen and bathroom with several single men, who struggled with drug and alcohol addiction as well. Despite their challenging living situation, though, they never had to worry about food and shelter.

Growing up without the fear of homelessness and hunger may explain why German respondents did not frame their criminal behavior in terms of the need to provide for their families' basics needs. Armend, for example, believed that the crimes he had committed were driven by his struggles with addiction. He plainly stated that he committed theft because he needed the money to buy drugs and alcohol. According to his case file,

Armend was sentenced for grand larceny, damage to property, and harassment. He remained in Adelsheim for about a year and six months. The social workers in prison were aware of his difficult homelife, and Armend was offered a place in a nonpunitive group home after he was released. He refused to go there because he did not want to be away from his mother any longer.

Martin, who spent two years at Adelsheim, also distinctly felt that he had less than the other children around him. He and his siblings did not wear expensive brand-name clothes. There were days when the portions that his mother served were smaller than usual. Despite the family's struggles, though, Martin and his two sisters never knew hunger. He and his siblings could always go to his grandparents who lived close by to get something to eat.

Martin's childhood was by no means easy. His little sister was sexually abused by his mother's boyfriend. His older sister became addicted to heroin. But in contrast to the American respondents, he can still easily recall happy childhood memories. Martin remembered going on vacation to the Baltic Sea. The German government subsidizes these kinds of trips for families with children as a preventive or rehabilitative measure to address mental and chronic physical health problems of parents and children.⁷ This trip was Martin's favorite childhood memory. "We took a boat and when we went for walks, my mom pushed me and my sister around in a little cart. I played a lot with my big sister. She did not want play with cars so we played Barbie."

When I asked him why he believed he ended up in prison, Martin replied without hesitation that he wanted adults to notice him. He committed crimes, such as breaking and entering or drug dealing, to get his mother's attention. As a single mother,

she worked a lot and was focused on his two sisters. Martin was the middle child who seemed to function relatively well on his own and he felt overlooked. He believed that receiving more monetary support from the German government could have gone a long way for his family—maybe his mother would have had to work less and could have been more present. According to his case summary file, Martin is emotionally fragile. He has been addicted to drugs and he tried to commit suicide.

At eighteen years old, Jens was the youngest respondent I interviewed in Germany. Jens's grandparents came from Croatia during the 1960s and both his parents were born in Germany. By the time Jens had turned five, he had started living with his grandmother and her second husband. As a little boy, he just wanted to be back with his mother, but she struggled with drug addiction and couldn't take care of him.

Jens described his grandmother as a social climber. In her second marriage she had married "up." Her second husband was ethnically German and, in Jens's recollection, he was a wealthy man. Jens did not like staying with his grandmother and step-grandfather because they were imposing their "bourgeois" values on him. "I had to wear a turtleneck sweater and corduroy pants . . .," he explained. His grandparents did not allow him to listen to hip-hop but forced him to put on classical music. Jens was resentful of his grandmother and what he perceived as her newly acquired "habitus." He insisted that he was of a "different social background." He couldn't just sit at home and study. He wanted to spend time with his friends.

When his grandparents couldn't manage him anymore, he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. While he was not certain about his exact diagnosis, he remembered doctors telling him he had an attachment disorder and anger problems. After being

discharged, he was sent to a boarding school for children with developmental challenges. He did not last long there and moved from one foster home to another. Jens couldn't remember exactly how many different places he was sent to, but he believed that he must have lived in about twenty different homes.

When I interviewed him, he had already spent a year in prison for theft and extortion. Having been institutionalized for most of his teenage years, he insisted that he did not perceive Adelsheim as "punishment." He was bored and wished he could do more sports—for example, weight lifting—like in the US boot camps he had heard about. Jens's biggest worry was that he would start committing crimes again after his release: "If I begin vocational training," he explained, "I'll make eight hundred euros a month; I'll make the same amount of money in a few hours just driving around with my friends."

Arslan faced the longest prison sentence of the German sample. When I met him during the summer of 2017 he had already been locked up for six years in various facilities. Arslan insisted, though, that he had a happy childhood. He felt loved and never lacked anything. Arslan did indeed have plenty of good memories to share. He happily recalled car rides with his father through the snowy streets of Stuttgart. He and his father went sledding at the hilly park surrounding the picturesque Solitude castle. Afterward, they usually went out to eat, drink, and warm themselves up.

Arslan believed that he committed crimes because he wanted to have money to party and buy himself expensive clothes. He was twelve years old when his father died of lung cancer. After that, he spiraled out of control. According to his own assessment, he did not respect or listen to anyone anymore. He mentioned, not without pride, that the police in Stuttgart knew him

well and that he was classified as a high-level juvenile offender. At the same time, his mother fell ill and had a heart attack. She was unable to work and the family had to move into government housing. Based on their family size, the government had allocated only a one-bedroom apartment for Arslan's mother and her two youngest sons. Since Arslan was incarcerated when the family had to move, there was no space reserved for him. Arslan felt the social decline intensely. He went from a well-off residential area to an undesirable part of Stuttgart with high-rise apartments. Many of those apartments were occupied by families who had a migration background like Arslan's family. While the neighborhood was clean, with several affordable grocery stores within walking distance and plenty of green space, Arslan and his family knew the difference. In their old lives they were able to afford luxuries like Bosch kitchen utensils. In their new home, they had to content themselves with what the government deemed necessary.

SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE UNITED STATES AND GERMANY

A welfare state, Gøsta Esping-Andersen argued, doesn't just redistribute resource, it engineers a different system of stratification (1990). The entanglement in the German welfare state came at cost: While their peers lived full and self-defined lives, the young men and their families operated within the confines of welfare governance. Their perceived needs—a bigger apartment, for example—may not match the government allocation of square footage for a family, especially when, as in Arslan's case, a family member stayed in the apartment intermittently. Even though their lives were comparatively stable, the respondents'

families hovered on the fringes of society. Understandably, the young men judged their own social position in relation to their middle-class peers. While their families struggled, the ethnic German majority around them thrived. Automobile companies like Daimler, Porsche, or Bosch pay high wages even to untrained workers.⁸ Before the COVID-19 recession, the booming economy had generated a record tax income for the government.⁹ The young men I met were not part of this economic boom, and from their perspective they did not benefit from living in affluent communities. As children they felt the difference between them and the others, mostly ethnic German families, even more intensely because they were a minority left behind by the increasing wealth around them.

The situation of the American young men was in many ways the exact opposite of the German group. In contrast to southern Germany, Central Pennsylvania has been an economically depressed region for many years. Once prosperous towns like Allentown or Bethlehem never recovered from the closing of the steel mills (Gimple 1999). Currently, the area is being ravaged by the opioid epidemic. In 2018, the state government of Pennsylvania reported that 4,422 people had died of a drug overdose that year.¹⁰ With a death rate of 36.1 per one hundred thousand, only three US states—Maryland, Delaware, and West Virginia—have been hit harder.

As I have argued elsewhere (Soyer 2018), the US respondents and their caregivers did not have easy access to any nonpunitive governmental social services. Any other assistance a family might be able to receive had to be cobbled together from temporary government programs and nongovernmental welfare providers, such as food or clothing banks.¹¹ Navigating a decentralized web of organizations can be challenging, especially for

those who are struggling to find steady employment in the first place. The same obstacles—mental or physical health problems—that thwart people’s participation in the workforce likely also prevent them from maximizing welfare benefits. Living in segregated neighborhoods and surrounded by poverty, they experienced being poor physically as being hungry or homeless. They were never directly confronted with the comfortable lifestyle afforded to upper-middle-class children (Shedd 2015).

The comparison of both groups emphasizes the relative experience of poverty and punishment. Symbolic interactionists have taught us that we tend to judge our own social experience in relation to those we believe to be our peers (Mead 1967; Hochschild 1989). A much less segregated society than the United States, southern Germany has retained a comparatively broad middle class, even as German society has become more unequal. The young men in Pennsylvania were surrounded by deep-rooted poverty. The kind of wealth and privilege the US upper middle class is able to accumulate was beyond their imagination (Reeves 2017; Khan 2011). The young men did not perceive their exclusion as an anomaly—because they were surrounded by poverty. The “opportunity hoarding” of the upper middle class and the legacy of housing discrimination all but assured that the young men may have lived in proximity to extreme wealth, while their immediate environment was steeped in severe disadvantage (Conley 2009).

The US respondents also narrativized their pathways into crime in terms of the deprivation they grew up in. Their social imagination developed in relation to the segregated neighborhoods they called home. Being remarkably resilient, the young men did not accept their class position but strived for upward mobility within their community (Young 2004). Affiliating

themselves with drug dealers was an expression of agency. From a child's perspective, those men were on top in a neighborhood that offered very limited pathways to conventional success (Contreras 2013; Bourgois 1995; MacLeod 1987). The drug dealer's conspicuous consumption was an antidote to the hunger pains, homelessness, and humiliation they experienced growing up.

The German young men had very different childhoods. They were surrounded by prosperity that explicitly excluded them. Armend exemplifies the most extreme case of poverty I encountered in southern Germany. In the context of US public housing units I have visited, though, the family's situation was hardly remarkable. However, in a German social context his family's living conditions were disturbing. Their trailer stood out among the well-maintained, single-family homes prevalent in Armend's hometown.

Blake and Armend grew up under roughly similar socioeconomic circumstances. Both their families relied on government support to make ends meet. Looking at these two families comparatively demonstrates the relative experience of poverty. While Blake said that he was initially oblivious to his family's level of disadvantage, Armend always knew that he was poor. That is family was an anomaly is admitted by the well-to-do residents of the picturesque village he lived in. He felt singled out and he was ashamed of his living quarters. In fact, he disliked staying there so much that he seemed to prefer returning to prison when he violated the conditions of his parole. Subjective levels of discomfort and suffering are difficult to align with the objective disadvantage the young men encountered in both societies. Armend was ashamed of his upbringing and what it represented to his German neighbors. Blake felt better about himself but objectively his family had to struggle harder to get by.

“It could be worse” is not exactly a ringing endorsement of Germany’s welfare system. It is important to note, though, that even the most disadvantaged families of the German group were able to preserve a modicum of dignity and stability for their children. The happy childhood memories the German respondents were able recall testify to how meaningful this kind of support had been.

At the same time, the welfare state solidified the young men’s outsider status. Arslan, for example, stopped going to the social welfare office that was supposed to help him find employment after he was released from prison. He could not effectively express what exactly kept him away, but he clearly stated that he did not want the government to have any more control over his life. Not engaging with government institutions and following their rules also meant that he was not eligible for support and that his family was going to be less likely to be moved to bigger apartment.

CONCLUSION

In contrast to the benevolent exclusion the German sample lived through, the young men in Pennsylvania experienced brutal marginalization justified by instrumental rational calculations of the market. Since their parents had failed to successfully find their place in a modern workforce, US society felt no obligation to provide for their children. In fact, withholding support has shifted what Francoise Bonnet (2019) has referred to as the “upper limit.” Theoretically, incarceration—driven by the principle of “less eligibility”—deters crime and incentivizes participation in the labor force, by being *less desirable* than the life of the lowest paid worker (Rusche and Kirchheimer 2003). The

narratives of the young men in Pennsylvania show that this may not be the case anymore. Childhood poverty had created such an unpredictable environment that in some cases prison offered more stability, safety, and social support than life on the outside.

Most recently, Luisa Schneider (2021) has observed a similar tendency in Germany. In her ethnography of homeless individuals in the eastern German city of Leipzig, she noticed that the welfare state in Germany did not reach this population effectively. For the unsheltered men and women, prison offered reprieve from the streets. Being incarcerated was framed as a “vacation,” allowing the unhoused to get a regular meal and avoid freezing temperatures during the winter months (4). Schneider’s work, more than anything, demonstrates the differences between both countries. In Germany, the welfare state fails to catch a population that, owing to mental illness or drug addiction, cannot overcome the bureaucratic hurdles to receive support. The men and women who live on the streets of Leipzig exist outside the economic incentive structure. From the rather callous perspective of “less eligibility,” it is not surprising that their life on the streets is worse than being incarcerated. There is no need to incentivize them to do work since they have “opted out.”

In the United States, a very different population faced the “less eligibility” dilemma. The young men and their families did not represent the lowest socioeconomic stratum. Unlike the homeless Schneider observed, their mothers worked at least intermittently. As they moved in with relatives or lived in shelters, families still operated within the regular economy. By and large, the young men’s families were part of the working poor that could not make ends meet, even if their mothers and grandmothers worked multiple jobs (Ehrenreich 2001). The

homeless in Leipzig may have desired a “vacation” in prison; in Pennsylvania children were forced to realize that prison had more to offer than their neighborhood.¹² As I will show in the following chapter, the cultural dynamics visible in the narratives about their marginalization on the outside also define how the young experienced punishment inside prison.