Recently the current incidence estimates for new HIV infections in the United States were released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Hall et al., 2008). The resulting higher estimates of new HIV infections reported should come as no surprise to scientists who conduct “on the ground” ethnographic research with the marginalized women of American and global societies.

Studies of this kind are numerous (Inhorn, 2006; Rosenbaum, 1981; Sharpe, 2005). In Inhorn's seminal article (2006), she presented the messages discerned from her review of 150 ethnographies regarding women's health. Her findings demonstrate that ethnographies add substantially to looking beyond statistics to examine the cultural, social, political, economic, and gender inequalities that shape and constrain women's lives, health, access to care, and self-actualization. Many of the published works emphasize the intersectional dimensions of race, class, and gender for critical examination of women who commit crimes.

Barbara A. Rockell steps forward to add her voice to this body of ethnographies and to the cries of many who understand the complexities of socially marginalized women, their restricted choices, their abusive families of orientation, and gendered scripts within their communities that channel them into drug use and other illegal activities, including prostitution. It may be difficult to believe that these women were once little girls raised in environments that did not offer them protection, nurturing, and the ability to realize full human potential. 

*Women Street Hustlers: Who They Are and How They Survive* is another in a long line of social ethnographies about marginalized women.

However, Rockell's work is distinctive in that it rejects the theories of “victimization” and passive responses to external stimuli (pp. 19–20) to delve intensively into “what crime seemed to mean to my research participants” (p. 21). Wisely, Rockell includes a comprehensive review of the literature to compare and contrast the various theoretic perspectives applied in research on women and illegal activities (pp. 19–52). The theoretical perspectives include the feminist perspective (p. 21); street-life subculture (pp. 22–45); criminal identity and deviance (pp. 46–49); family dysfunction (pp. 49–51); and street life as a stage for expression of guilt, shame, and anger (pp. 51–52).

The perspectives serve to contextualize the lives of her participants and discussion of her findings in ways that help the reader understand the variety, complexity, and struggles of women street hustlers. Her participants
are not caricatures of flamboyant thieves or prostitutes but real women living under extraordinary circumstances leading to their involvement in the sex trade industry, drugs, and other criminal activities.

Rockell distinguishes her work from field ethnography because she conducted observations and interviews within a medium-security correctional facility detaining women with one-year sentences or less. Thus, she uses the term *quasi-ethnography* to describe her process for data collection and analysis, which are informed by the bedrock principles of grounded theory methodology and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using semistructured interviews, Rockell aims to discover the women’s life histories and describe profiles of hustling and ecologies of survival (p. 72).

**Life Histories**

Despite the fact that Rockell’s participants were ethnically diverse (Black, 53.3 percent; White, 35 percent; Hispanic, 3.3 percent; Native American, 3.3 percent; and mixed race, 5 percent), reading the findings reminded me of my research (Sharpe, 2005). All of her participants grew up in extreme poverty settings in urban areas or on Native American reservations, isolated from mainstream educational and employment opportunities. The majority had experienced some type of abuse—sexual, physical, or other—as children.

Similar to my research participants, most women had not completed high school; some completed high school and beyond but were very limited in the range of career opportunities. The majority of women were never married, and those who had been married were divorced, separated, or widowed. Crack cocaine was the drug of choice for 43 out of 60 participants. Only 1 participant reported not using drugs or alcohol extensively. The majority of women were mothers, with histories of noncustodial arrangements for their children with family, the state, or other care providers (pp. 98–104). The similarities in the women Rockell interviewed and the women I interviewed are striking and uncanny.

**Profiles of Hustling**

Rockell identifies six “pathways to the street” or life trajectories leading to criminal activities (pp. 104–155). Although her categories overlap and intersect, Rockell found that some of her participants were women whose families members were career criminals and who grew up knowing little else (“All in the Family,” pp. 105–109). Some women were “partiers,” or those who became involved in exotic dancing or waitressing in bars, strip joints, gambling houses, or other night “entertainment” places (“Partiers by Trade,” pp. 109–113). The “challenged” pathway is represented by women whose lives were deeply scarred by family violence, failure at school, and early substance use (“Challenged,” pp. 116–120). For some women, criminal activities were synonymous with drug addiction. The “just another addiction” group enjoyed the excitement and exhilaration evoked by getting away with something against the law (“Just Another Addiction,” pp. 120–124). The final pathway is described as “Lives of Loss and Trauma” (pp. 124–129). More extreme than the challenged women, this group experienced the most significant psychological damage growing up in severely dysfunctional homes characterized by abuse, disruption, dislocation, and instability. Women in this group experienced rejection and were endangered most of their young lives.

**Ecologies of Survival**

Life on the street is tough. Survival for Rockell’s participants meant acquiring the street savvy and flexibility to avoid dangerous situations and handle the unavoidable ones. A primary goal for all the women was staying “off E” or empty of drugs, an automobile gasoline-tank metaphor. Hustling in pursuit of drugs meant “catching a good lick” (p. 161). “Catching a good lick” is defined as “having the wits or ability and opportunity to con
someone out of something of value, with very little effort” (p. 131); getting paid as much as possible for sexual acts, while doing as little as possible for the customer and receiving perks—for example, cigarettes—as well as drugs or money (p. 137). Catching a good lick can also refer to success at “boosting” (shoplifting) or purchasing drugs from a dealer and getting the better end of the deal. The ability to scam or con to stay “off E” is described as the life focus of all the women studied (p. 165).

**Concluding Remarks**

Rockell's purpose is to demonstrate how the women in her study conceptualized hustling (p. 55), and I believe she is successful at capturing this. The larger implication of her work, my work, and that of many others points to the gaping hole in the safety net for poor and minority women and children created by changing implicit sex codes.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s freed many mainstream White and middle-class women from traditional family roles while encouraging career and intellectual development. Advances in technologies to control fertility available since 1961 also freed women from having larger families, as was common in past years (Gazit, 2002). Though many middle-class educated women married and had children later, with exceptions of, for example, divorces and remarriages, the marriage relationship still serves as the basis of family formation and as the principal unit in which children are nurtured and raised to adulthood (Edin & Reed, 2005).

It is my opinion that many poor and minority women experienced the sexual revolution differently. The result of the changing sexual norms and widespread mainstream acceptance of sexual relationships outside of marriage dramatically changed family stability. This is an unforeseen consequence of the sexual revolution that is rarely recognized. To some extent, the sexual revolution freed men from family responsibilities, giving them unlimited choices of sexual partners but leaving children behind and women struggling to raise them, alone.

Most of Rockell’s participants are poor, marginally educated, unmarried mothers, having difficulty caring for their children and themselves. Also in my research, most of the participants with children were not married. Their children are likely to experience the same rejection, neglect, abuse, and devastation of their mothers and end up on similar trajectories to street hustling and incarceration (Amato, 2005). In addition, the women themselves are products of these kinds of families. Serious questions should be raised regarding American sexual values and erosion of family structure.

The strikingly similar lives of the women in Rockell’s research and those of my own are positively haunting. Though I knew this to be true, her research confirmed the continuing, overwhelming evidence that despite welfare-to-work programs, pockets of chronically disadvantaged women and their children are without assistance and support. Despite these women’s efforts to “catch a good lick,” they all ended up in jail! Their children ended up in the care of others. Furthermore, engagement in prostitution puts them at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Rockell’s work stands in sharp contrast to Norman Rockwell's idyllic depiction of American family life. When will our nation’s policy makers high enough in the chain of decision command realize that something in our society is dysfunctional? Why are so many women and children in poverty and at risk of living desperate lives, engaging in high-risk behaviors just to survive the day or the week? *Women Street Hustlers: Who They Are and How They Survive* should be required reading for social workers, lawyers, judges, corrections workers, public policy makers, and students of criminology and sociology.


