

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Chambliss, William J.: The Saints and the Roughnecks

Contributors: Neil Quisenberry

Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Chapter Title: "Chambliss, William J.: The Saints and the Roughnecks"

Pub. Date: 2010

Access Date: September 12, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412959186

Online ISBN: 9781412959193

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n41>

Print pages: 149-150

©2010 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n41>

In William Chambliss's 1973 groundbreaking study "The Saints and the Roughnecks," he observed two groups of students from Hanibal High and showed how both social class and societal labeling led to one group being defined as delinquent while the other was defined as normal teenagers sowing a few wild oats. In the 2 years that Chambliss observed these teenagers, they were involved in activities such as truancy, drinking, wild driving, petty theft, and vandalism. The eight teenagers who were referred to as the Saints engaged in as much or more delinquent behavior than the Roughnecks, but they came from middle-class homes and were able to avoid the deviant label. On the other hand, the six Roughnecks came from lower-class households and were viewed by the community as troublemakers. As a result, the futures of these young men were shaped by the labels they received while still in high school.

Although the Saints were active in school affairs and athletics, Chambliss noted that they were some of the most delinquent boys at Hanibal High School. The Saints were successful in school with grade point averages (GPAs) of an A or B but spent most days manipulating teachers to get out of school early. Once they were away from school, they could be found in a pool hall or café in the suburbs. In neither of these places would the Saints likely be recognized by fellow customers.

On the weekends, the Saints could most likely be found in "Big Town," which was a large city of over a million people 25 miles from Hanibal. While in Big Town, the Saints would drink heavily, drive drunkenly through the streets, commit acts of vandalism, and engage in pranks. They often moved construction signs and watched as motorists drove through pot holes or closed streets. The Saints were never seriously injured during their weekend outings and were only stopped twice by the police, but never arrested. This may be the result of the police believing that the Saints were good boys who were always polite and contrite when questioned.

Unlike the Saints, the Roughnecks were constantly in trouble with the police and the community, although their rate of delinquency was essentially the same. However, the Roughnecks were different from the Saints in several important ways. First, the Roughnecks were not nearly as successful in school as the Saints. They had an average GPA of a C. They were not viewed as student leaders by their teachers, and they were not involved in school activities, although two were athletes. Second,

they engaged in delinquent activities in full view of the community. For example, they could often be seen in front of the local [p. 149 ↓] drugstore just hanging around and drinking. In addition, they were often in fights that were witnessed by the community. Along with drinking and fighting, they also engaged in the petty theft of such items as paperback books, comics, and gasoline. The Roughnecks disliked the police and felt unfairly singled out. The police believed these were bad kids and attempted to arrest them whenever there was evidence. As a result, each of the Roughnecks was arrested at least once during the 2-year observation.

When it came to the total number of illegal acts, the Saints were more delinquent than the Roughnecks. However, the Saints were viewed by the community, teachers, and the police as good kids with bright futures. On the other hand, the Roughnecks were viewed as troublemakers and future criminals. This was the result of several differences between the two groups. The first difference was their respective levels of visibility. While the Saints had access to cars and were able to commit their delinquent activities out of view of their community, the Roughnecks seldom had access to cars and therefore committed the majority of their delinquent activities in full view of their community. Therefore, the delinquent activities of the Roughnecks were well-known to the community, whereas the delinquency of the Saints was not. Another important factor that led to the differential treatment of these two groups was their respective types of demeanor. While the Saints were apologetic and penitent when caught by the police for their crimes, the Roughnecks reacted with hostility and disdain. More often than not, this led to the release of the Saints while the Roughnecks were arrested. Finally, there was the issue of preexisting bias within the community regarding these two groups of boys. Although the Saints were viewed as good kids from middle-class families, the Roughnecks were viewed as bad kids from the wrong side of the tracks.

As a result of the differential labeling of the Saints and the Roughnecks, their outcomes were different as well. While seven of the eight Saints went on to college after high school, two of the Roughnecks went to college on athletic scholarships, two never finished high school, and two were sentenced to prison for murder convictions. While all but one of the Saints lived up to the high expectations the community had of them, the Roughnecks lived up to the community's expectations as well. The common belief was that the Saints would be successful individuals and, except for one, they were. The other belief was that the Roughnecks would wind up as criminals, and except for

two, they lived up to that expectation. Chambliss concludes his study by suggesting that selectively finding, processing, and punishing some kinds of criminality and not others leads to the labeling of some as deviant and others as not, even while engaging in identical behaviors.

NeilQuisenberry

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n41>

See also

- [Becker, Howard S.: Labeling and Deviant Careers](#)
- [Chambliss, William J.: Power, Conflict, and Crime](#)
- [Schur, Edwin M.: Radical Non-Intervention and Delinquency](#)
- [Turk, Austin T.: The Criminalization Process](#)

References and Further Readings

Becker, H. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. London: Free Press.

Chambliss, W. J. The saints and the roughnecks . *Society* 11 (1) 24–31. (1973). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF03181016>

Macleod, J. (2008). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood* (3rd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Reiman, J. (1998). *The rich get richer and the poor get prison: Ideology, class and criminal justice* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.