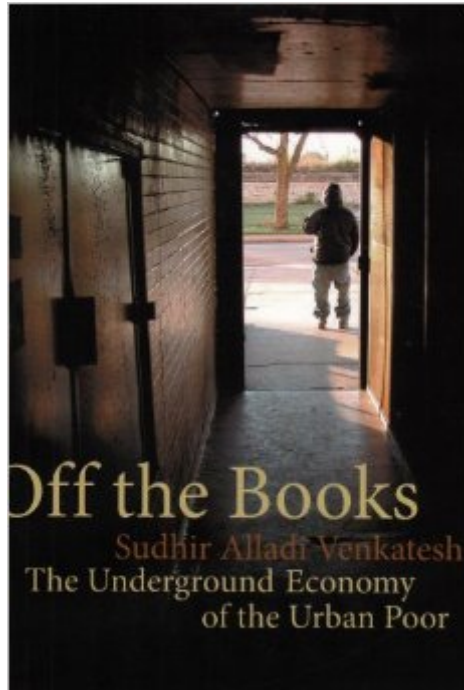


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# Off The Books: The Underground Economy Of The Urban Poor



## Synopsis

Listen to a short interview with Sudhir Venkatesh Host: Chris Gondek | Producer: Heron & Crane In this revelatory book, Sudhir Venkatesh takes us into Maquis Park, a poor black neighborhood on Chicago's Southside, to explore the desperate, dangerous, and remarkable ways in which a community survives. We find there an entire world of unregulated, unreported, and untaxed work, a system of living off the books that is daily life in the ghetto. From women who clean houses and prepare lunches for the local hospital to small-scale entrepreneurs like the mechanic who works in an alley; from the preacher who provides mediation services to the salon owner who rents her store out for gambling parties; and from street vendors hawking socks and incense to the drug dealing and extortion of the local gang, we come to see how these activities form the backbone of the ghetto economy. What emerges are the innumerable ways that these men and women, immersed in their shadowy economic pursuits, are connected to and reliant upon one another. The underground economy, as Venkatesh's subtle storytelling reveals, functions as an intricate web, and in the strength of its strands lie the fates of many Maquis Park residents. The result is a dramatic narrative of individuals at work, and a rich portrait of a community. But while excavating the efforts of men and women to generate a basic livelihood for themselves and their families, *Off the Books* offers a devastating critique of the entrenched poverty that we so often ignore in America, and reveals how the underground economy is an inevitable response to the ghetto's appalling isolation from the rest of the country.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Some books are informative. And some books are eye-opening. This book is eye-opening. Read it and you will learn many fascinating things you never dreamed were going on.....unless you already live in a highly urbanized/disadvantaged neighborhood. The author is an enterprising young academic who is drawn to the firsthand study of life in such neighborhoods. Being of mixed race "gave me (the author) an indeterminate and unthreatening presence" by which he could spend months with the residents - enough time to understand life and the economy there with more thoroughness than perhaps ever before. The underground economy in this corner of America is woven into every fabric of life. You learn first hand about enterprises running the gamut from the homeless fellow who does reliable auto repair in back alleys and side streets, to the (no surprise here) sex workers and drug sellers, to the stay at home mom that cooks meals for local residents, shopkeepers and even the police. You learn how the local gang leader is not simply a lawless soul feared by all, but a broker of influence upon which even the most upstanding residents come to rely. With so much disadvantage built into the neighborhood you come to understand how everyone learns to accept shady economic dealings out of the joint recognition of the need to survive. But when such dealings bring a larger than acceptable threat to the children and residents, then the gang leader is often brought in to broker a deal to return things to homeostasis. As a white suburbanite here is what struck me the most. There is waaaaay more tolerance and acceptance among neighbors in the ghetto than there is in suburbia.

This was a good book at first but once you continued reading it basically repeated the same variations on a single rather depressing theme of how people in absolute profound poverty tolerate every kind of depravity to get by. The book seems to be a written if slightly updated version of the old Norman Lear Comedy "GOOD TIMES!" You see good people kissing up to drug kingpins in a vain attempt to stem violence on the streets that police officers have given up on. You see police officers prostituting themselves to get work done on their personal vehicles at low ghetto prices. Almost everyone in this book is on the take or tainted by ghetto life in some way. The author portrays himself as an almost saintly gift to the ghetto who brokers peace to the unwashed impoverished savages of the inner city mean streets. The book is very condescending in places to the point that it is almost hard to read. In its defense, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* is a mostly accurate if painfully unflattering incarnation of ghetto life. *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* is filled with people doing â œwhateverâ • to survive another day. *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* is bad in that it does not

look beyond the ghetto stereotypes. Let me tell you weak minded lame every ghetto stereotype is adequately represented in *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*. The problem I have with *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* is that it does not look beneath the ghetto stereotypes to see the people, the harsh decisions and the underlying issues that make life off the books mandatory for the people trapped in this impoverished life of pure hell.

Venkatesh has masterfully produced what is both effective and persuasive in his work *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*. It is effective in that he captures the essence of a plighted people and place, and persuasive because some kind of personal change will be experienced in the range of time before the book is read to after it is finished. He shows that there is good, there is bad, and there is ugly existing in Maquis Park, just like every other neighborhood across the United States. In this way, Venkatesh indicate a contradiction throughout the book, which is how this Chicago neighborhood is both its own separate entity unlike any other, as well as a place not much different than certain areas of urban poor and that mirrors those in existence across the nation. Without any available opposition, the argument is that he has accomplished what he intended: an insightful overview and persuasive analyzed study of an impoverished Chicago underground neighborhood that operates by its own rules and yields its own particular series of events. One can certainly appreciate Venkatesh's objectiveness, a key element in writing a piece such as his. He does not take us into this hush world to prove its existence of right or wrong, just as he does not claim its innocence nor deny the evident corruption. As a whole, this book does exactly what you want it to. It does not aimlessly give countless personal accounts like one may blindly prepare for, it instead correctly uses firsthand information to augment support for its arguments. It stays on focus and then brings in the scholarly analysis when necessary. It also awakens one, if he or she is not already awoken, to the world of social stratification.

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