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New Book by UCSB Sociologist Examines the Effects of Juvenile Crime Policies on the Lives of Urban Youth

For Victor M. Rios, juvenile delinquency and gang violence -- and ways of dealing with them -- are not abstract concepts. A former gang member himself, he has a unique perspective on the forces that drive adolescent boys into that particular lifestyle, as well as on those that can nudge them in the opposite direction.

In his new book, "Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys" (New York University Press, 2011), Rios, an associate professor of sociology at UC Santa Barbara, returns to his hometown of Oakland, Calif. to study how inner city young Latino and African American boys and young men develop their sense of self in the face of punitive policies in their schools and communities.

To research "Punished," Rios spent three years following a group of 40 Latino and African American boys who were caught in a vicious cycle of delinquency and punishment. He examined the harassment, profiling, and general discipline these boys received -- even before they had committed any crimes -- and, in the book, describes how they accomplished exactly what was expected of them.

"We as a society approach youth violence and gangs in a very monolithic way," Rios said. "We tend to think of them as one problem with one solution. The one problem is that these kids are criminal and violent, and the one solution is to lock them away." Compounding the issue, he added, is society's general perception of the totality of the boys' behavior. "Ninety percent of the time, these kids -- whether they're in Oakland, or Los Angeles, or anywhere else -- are living their lives just like anyone else, and within the confines of the law. It's that 10 percent of the time that they get in trouble," he said.

According to Rios, kids turn to crime and violence because they believe nothing else is available to them, particularly when they are treated as criminals before they've committed any criminal acts. "Different aspects of society put labels on kids, and that affects the way they behave. They take on a fatalistic persona. And that's when delinquent behavior takes place."

His answer? "Let's teach them how to be productive citizens. We have to think about the kind of investment we want to make in these kids," Rios said. "Imagine if the police officers, teachers, or community members became mentors. Then we'd have kids who see themselves in a positive light."

"What we need to do is retrain people who are already in the community and interacting with these kids so they provide more positive experiences." Such interactions, he added, are gateways for kids to abandon lives of crime and delinquency.

"It goes back to the basic principle that it takes a village to raise a child," he continued, "and as a society we turn against these kids. No one wants to take on the burden. It's a risky proposition because it means that sometimes, as adults, we'll have to compromise and demonstrate unconditional caring." He noted that people often want to absolve themselves of responsibility by blaming the parents for their children's behavior. "Sure, some can say it's all the parents' fault," he said, "but in the end we still have these kids that need help."

Withholding that help, he added, results in significant costs, both economic and social. Incarcerating these boys for acts such as truancy, shoplifting, running away from home, or violating probation takes a significant bite out of the state budget. "What's more," Rios added, "in jail, they meet harder criminals. So the petty thief hones his skills and moves up from shoplifting to stealing cars and selling drugs. He

comes out and establishes himself as a harder criminal."

By understanding the lives of the young men who are criminalized and consigned to the criminal justice system, we can begin to find empathetic solutions that support them in their development, Rios noted. "We can eliminate the culture of punishment that has become an overbearing part of their everyday lives."

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