Key Dates and Assignments

- March 23rd Class -- Read chapters 1-5, and come to class with initial reflection notes
- March 30th Class -- Read chapters 6-8, and come to class with completed reflection exercise
- Reflection exercises due in Blackboard prior to class on March 30th.

During our next two classes, we will be discussing the issues presented in “Gang Leader for a Day” by Sudhir Vankatesh. On March 23rd, we will spend some time processing your initial reactions to the book and talking through some of the issues that emerge in the first 5 chapters. While there is no formal assignment related to the book, you should come to class with your notes in hand, having spent some time thinking about the issues. On March 30th, we will be conducting a more in-depth discussion of the book, the stories within it, and the implications of these stories for social policy. On this date, you will be expected to come to class with a completed reflection exercise as described below.

You should find the book and its stories to be fairly captivating. As you read, it is important that you actively reflect on what the book and its characters tell us about human behavior and about matters of poverty, race, crime, and urban economies. You should also carefully consider the implications for how we think about public policies and the roles of social institutions (e.g. police, social service agencies, legal systems, schools, etc.).

This type of active reading requires that you spend some time jotting down your ideas as you read through the book. The specific approach is up to you – you could take stock after each chapter and write down your thoughts, or perhaps read along with some post-it notes and flag certain stories or anecdotes that you found particularly thought provoking or revealing – the important thing is that you actively engage with and reflect upon the readings.

In advance of the March 30th class, you should prepare a 3-4 page series of reflections that address each of six general areas:

- Community Mindset
- Community Survival and Adaptation
- Community Leadership
- Community Views of Crime, Drugs, Gangs, and Violence
- Community Codes of Conduct and Social Controls
- The Role of the Researcher

For each of these areas, your reflections should cite and discuss specific situations, characters, or anecdotes from the book that form the basis for your perspectives.

Reflection exercises (which are in lieu of blog assignments for that week) should be submitted via Blackboard prior to class on March 30th. You should also bring a copy with you to class, since we will be using these papers as part of our in-class activities.
The questions below are intended as a guide to give you a sense of the types of issues and concerns that fall under each topic area – they do not represent an exhaustive list. Within each topic area, you may explore additional questions that occur to you as you read the book. While your reflections do not need to address all of the noted questions, you must address each of the master areas into your discussion.

Community Mindset

- How do members of the community view outsiders such as police, government agencies, social service workers, and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA)?
- How do members of the community feel about their level of control over their lives and circumstances?

Community Survival and Adaptation

- How do members of the Robert Taylor community adapt to their physical living conditions?
- How do they adapt to the presence of drug gangs and violence?
- How does the “underground economy” work within the community? What are the conditions that give rise for the need for a shadow economy?
- How do members of the community access food, clothing, medical care, and other needed goods and services?

Community Leadership

- How does J.T. assert his control over members of his gang?
- Outside of managing his gang, what role does J.T. play in the broader community?
- How does Mrs. Bailey assert her control within the community?
- In what ways are the views and tactics of J.T. and Mrs. Bailey similar? How are they different?
- What are the roles of individuals such as Autry, C-Note, and Pastor Wilkins in the community?

Community Views of Crime, Drugs, Gangs, and Violence

- What illegal behaviors are accepted within the community, and which are considered “out of bounds?”
- How is interpersonal violence viewed within the community?
- What is the role of the illegal drug trade within the community and its economy? What are the benefits? What are the liabilities?
- What roles do different individuals and agencies play in preserving order within the community?
  - J.T. and the Black Kings?
  - Police (consider both Officer Reggie and Officer Jerry)?
  - Mrs. Bailey?
  - Autry?

Community Codes of Conduct and Social Controls

- At several points throughout the book, Sudhir finds himself in disfavor (or in some cases, serious danger) after he unwittingly violates certain unspoken rules in the community. Reflect on those situations – what “rules” does he violate? Why do such rules exist?
- What types of illegal activities are deemed “acceptable behavior” by most of the community? Which are tolerated but not necessarily condoned? Which are considered truly “out of bounds?”
- How are codes of conduct enforced within the community? What mechanisms are used to instill order and respond to transgressions?
Role of the Researcher

- What are Sudhir’s goals and motivations? How do they evolve during the course of the story?
- How is Sudhir viewed by various members of the community? What do those views suggest about the challenges of conducting community-based research?
- In Chapter 6, Mrs. Bailey suggests to Sudhir that he is a “hustler” - what does she mean by this? Do you agree with this characterization?
- Do Sudhir’s relationships with his research subjects ever cause you to question his objectivity as a researcher?
- At what points (if at all) do you think that he oversteps his boundaries as a researcher? Does he violate any ethical codes? If so, do the ends justify the means?