

# Crime and Justice in the City as Seen through *The Wire*

Edited by

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CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS

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Durham, North Carolina

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Collins, Peter A. (Peter Alan)

Crime and justice in the city as seen through *The Wire* / Peter A. Collins and David C. Brody.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61163-033-6 (alk. paper)

1. Wire (Television program) 2. Social problems on television. I. Brody, David C. II. Title.

[DNLM: 1. Social Problems--Baltimore--Autobiography.]

PN1992.77.W53C65 2013

794.45'72--dc23

2012050911

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS  
700 Kent Street  
Durham, North Carolina 27701  
Telephone (919) 489-7486  
Fax (919) 493-5668  
[www.cap-press.com](http://www.cap-press.com)

Printed in the United States of America

This book has not been endorsed or authorized by HBO or the creators of *The Wire*.

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# Foreword

*Peter Moskos*

In a place like Baltimore, word travels fast when David Simon and Ed Burns are seen around town filming a new police series. After all, they were the same guys who made *The Corner*, so I was excited! I had watched *The Corner* while I was cop policing the same streets of East Baltimore featured in many of the episodes of that series (and later in *The Wire*). I even watched the show on a quiet night while I was supposed to be policing, as my notes confess: “humping out at the [police station] desk with George (well at least *he* was supposed to be there).” On the street, we police knew which corners were used for *The Corner* because they were often spruced up with paint. In American ghettos, even something as simple as fresh paint can stand out.

*The Wire* followed the desolate themes of *The Corner* but filled and expanded the picture in a true-to-life style with a focus on police and poor, urban America. Rarely in TV history has this ravaged landscape been presented with any realism—but *The Wire* was different. The style, writing quality, and depth of *The Wire* have earned it the deserved appreciation of legions of fans, myself included.

Some of my favorite scenes concern the often mundane world of policing. Take, for instance, the effort McNulty makes at the start of the second season to “dump a body”—push the responsibility for a hard-to-solve murder—onto his old homicide squad. And there is the concern of the Southeast District commander when his legacy (and ego) are threatened by a church’s display of the union’s stained glass. Faced with such absurdity police often say, “You can’t make this shit up.” *The Wire* shows you can. And take the casual, laughable, and entirely believable conversations between the police knuckleheads, Hauk and Carver. In the first episode Carver describes their role as police officers: “What [Hauk] means to say is that we are effective deterrent in the war on drugs when

we are on the street.” Hauk interjects, “Fucking mothafuckers up.” In the end, Carver, usually the sharper of these two tacks in the box, concludes, “You can’t even call this shit a war.... Wars end.”

*The Wire* is not and does not purport to be one hundred percent realistic, but it gets much more right than wrong, especially from a police perspective. Even a decade after I last heard the real thing, I still perk up anxiously when the show occasionally broadcasts the two-toned Signal-13 sound indicating an officer potentially in danger. “The location ... what’s the ‘twenty’?” I think before reminding myself that I am a civilian, hundreds of miles away ... and watching a TV show. From my perspective the show is about eighty percent realistic. Though this percentage declined somewhat in the faster-paced final season, this still is the most realistic cop TV show or movie ever made, *fiction or non-fiction*.

I do, admittedly, have a few minor (read: petty) complaints about realism in *The Wire*. For instance I wish more characters spoke with a Baltimore accent. And the police Marine Unit, which the seasick McNulty finds himself on at the start of the second season, is a highly coveted assignment, never a punishment post (for that, we have foot patrol). And in the real world the grapevine of the Baltimore City Police Department could never, not even for a day, keep a secret like the drug free-for-all zone “Hamsterdam.” But the writer of this episode admitted as much to me.

When *The Wire* takes a deliberate turn away from reality, it does so to present a greater truth. Through Hamsterdam, *The Wire* presented an alternative vision of illegal drug distribution, one that isolates the harms of drug-dealing violence away from greater society. For a short while, in season three, the rest of the district was free from violent drug dealers! If only this could happen in real life. Of course it could ... but we would need major changes in law enforcement’s approach to drug laws. And that, of course, is the very real point.

If there is a single underlying theme of *The Wire*, it is the disastrous effects of the war on drugs on post-industrial urban America. Well-paying manufacturing jobs are gone for good; the show’s unflinching gaze highlights not America’s winners but the police officers, the working stiffs, the junkies, the street hustlers and the strivers who fail to succeed because the game is rigged. One message of *The Wire*, one that needs to be better understood, is that when drug selling is criminalized, only criminals sell drugs. The show does not wrap up every hour with the guilty repentant and a hero making a stirring speech about protecting the innocent. In contrast with television that typically thrives on American optimism, *The Wire* can be downright depressing. And yet we can’t turn away.

*The Wire* presents irreplaceable firsthand perspectives and does so without condescension or pandering. The worldview of police officers, for instance, is very much shaped by their forced interactions with society's least wanted. When I was working in Baltimore, an officer once told me, "If you're documenting this for your research or whatever, get this down: ... I mean, this raid we did today, you pull up a sheet and cockroaches are running around the bed. Who can sleep like this? Everyone is drugged out, like that zombie movie: 'Brains, I want brains!'" Another time an officer called the Eastern District residents, "drugged-out, lazy motherfuckers." Then he spelled out the full stereotype: "These people don't want to work. They want to sit on their ass, collect welfare, get drunk, and make babies. Let them shoot each other." But after a brief pause he turned to me and said with faux sincerity mirrored by Carver in the first episode, "I think the problems here are caused by social conditions, which can be solved by better education." Finally he concluded: "That's so when you write down all this stuff for your book I don't come out like an asshole." In truth, many officers who know him—even those who agree with his questionable views on social responsibility and public safety—think he *is* an asshole. And, boy, he would make a great character in *The Wire*, because the show breaks through the uniform exterior of any police department to show the diverse characters of the blue family. As I learned in the academy, "We're one big happy family, right? Dysfunctional as hell; but what family isn't?"

Fortunately, in 2013, Baltimore and its police department aren't quite as hopeless as one may think from watching *The Wire*. Charm City has had a recent influx of immigrants, which is very promising. And, even after a massive population drop over several decades, the city has held on to a healthy, albeit struggling middle class, both black and white. These groups are underrepresented in *The Wire*. Also given short shrift is the entire half of the police department assigned to patrol. This is unfortunately typical of TV shows and movies, which tend to focus on police detectives because they give writers greater freedom of plot. The average Baltimore officer has no wiretaps or long-term investigations in progress. A patrol officer drives around for most of eight hours, answers 311 and 911 calls for service, clears drug corners, backs up other officers, and fills out paperwork for anything that comes out "domestic related." Maybe once a week somebody is arrested.

Though firmly set in Baltimore, *The Wire* could be about any American city in post-industrial decline. Even more dramatic (and depressing) stories are found in Camden, New Jersey; East Saint Louis, Illinois; or most any city in Michigan. Large neighborhoods and even entire cities have been swallowed and destroyed by a combination of joblessness and drug prohibition which

leads almost inevitably to poverty, segregation, violence, and incarceration. *The Wire* helps show how human despair does not simply happen—it comes from bad personal choices often rooted in decades and centuries of choices the powerful have made and imposed on others. Social mobility is the exception in America, not the rule. And *The Wire* does not pretend otherwise.

Having faith in humanity, I prefer to think that Americans' tolerance of this kind of suffering is rooted more in ignorance than malice. Society may lack the political and moral will to regulate drug distribution, provide employment opportunities, and reduce incarceration levels, but *The Wire* lets us imagine how our world might be different if the poorest among us did not grow up in the shadows of violence, poverty, and prison. *The Wire* presents not only the problems but also an aspirational vision of an unrealized future.

By the time I finished *Cop in the Hood*—my book on the subject of police and the war on drugs in Baltimore—*The Wire* had wrapped up its final season. I half-jokingly proposed to my editor that my soon-to-be-published book should be titled *Like The Wire: Season Six, but Real!* (It wasn't, though it might have sold better had it been.) I quit the police department before season one, after I got civil-service protection and gathered enough material for my dissertation and book.

I still have mixed feelings about leaving, even though that was always my plan. Baltimore was good to me. I made life-long friends and return when I can. But like hundreds of thousands of those before me who had the means to leave Baltimore, I did. And once you leave, the problems of Baltimore seem very far away, out of sight and almost out of mind. *The Wire* kept me feeling close to the police, people, and problems of the city I loved and left. Of course I had a good excuse to leave—I needed to earn my PhD in sociology, after all—but aren't excuses something we all have?

*The Wire* paints a pointillist picture of life in urban America without excuses or apology. Individual characters in *The Wire* coalesce into a striking group portrait which brings to mind something I heard in Baltimore time and time again: "When you get back to Harvard, tell 'em what it's really like!" Of course I tried; I wrote a book. But *The Wire* did it better and streamed this reality into more than four million living rooms simultaneously. Yes, as critics have pointed out, some dirty laundry was aired (stereotypes often have some basis in truth). And yes, the show can be a quick and perhaps too easy slumming tour. But such a tour can be the first step to a greater understanding of the world. Like a good liberal arts education, *The Wire* provides a strong foundation for academic discourse. But unlike academia, *The Wire* is effective in part because it ignores the traditional camps and rivalries of academic disciplines

and public-policy efforts.

Consider our current national discourse in which police are dichotomized as either saviors or oppressors; unions are demonized by the right; and the ghetto is such a toxic mix of race, poverty and dysfunction that national politicians dare not even talk about “poor people” except in the context of cutting social services. In the pages of this wonderful compendium you will learn not just about a TV show, but about American society. This book breaks new ground because it provides, through *The Wire*, a common language by which we can once again discuss issues of poverty, race, crime, gender, drugs, justice, and economic inequality in America. *The Wire* presents the humanity and daily struggles of characters who are empathetic and even sympathetic. This book, like *The Wire*, will allow us once again to care.

# Acknowledgments

First and foremost, this project would have never been possible had it not been for all of those individuals who worked to bring us such a provocative and entertaining experience in *The Wire*. So, to the show and its creators, actors, and all those behind the scenes, we say thank you. Next, we would like to sincerely thank each of the authors for sharing our vision for this work and for contributing their time, expertise, and unique points of view. We are deeply grateful for your efforts and creative input and any success that comes as a result of this endeavor is due directly to your hard work. We would like to thank a few of our graduate student assistants who helped with various tasks on this project, namely: Heather Burns and Naomi Rosenburg (from the Seattle University Master of Arts in Criminal Justice Program), who drafted most of the end of chapter study questions, and Lauren Block (a PhD candidate from the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Washington State University), who not only contributed a chapter, but also provided a great deal assistance on various editorial tasks. We would also like to additionally thank Wendy Molyneux for her substantive input and editorial assistance in the inception stages of this project. We would like to thank the editors and staff at Carolina Academic Press for sharing our interest in this book. Finally, we would like to thank our families for their support while we completed this project.