

Semaj Booker: Nine Year Old Plays Grand Theft Auto

Victoria Stanhope

Valerie Hurst

SOC 525

March 27, 2008

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“He does not like it here at all”, Sakinah Booker informed the press, describing her son Semaj’s feelings about living in the no frills, working class neighborhood of Lakewood, Washington. Semaj (which is James spelled backwards, and is pronounced Sa-ma-jay) disliked it so much he began running away soon after his family settled in the area. One day he ran all the way to Texas. You may remember Semaj as the 9 year old who managed to get himself not only to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, but through security, and onto a Southwest Airlines flight bound for San Antonio. It was only when attempting to board another flight to Dallas (where his Grandfather lives) that he was found out as a stowaway and turned over to police. While his cross country jaunt led to intense media attention and a great deal of embarrassment for Southwest Airlines, it was Semaj’s attempt to runaway the day prior that led to criminal charges of second-degree auto theft, attempting to elude a police vehicle, and driving without a license (Clarridge, 2007; Lynn, 2008; Sand, 2007).

On January 14th, 2007, Semaj stole a neighbor’s vehicle that was left open and running, and led police on a chase at speeds upwards of 80 mph before blowing the car’s transmission on a highway exit and coasting into a tree. According to his mother and police, this was his third stolen car in the last month. Sakinah believes her son learned to drive by playing arcade and video games such as Grand Theft Auto. One of the youngest to ever be charged with a felony in Pierce County, Semaj was likely one of the smallest too; weighing in at just 80 pounds and standing 4 feet 9 inches tall (Burbank, 2007; Harden, 2007; Sand, 2007).

While the details of Semaj’s cross-country adventure were unusual enough to garner national attention, his motivations were less unique. The Booker family’s living situation had become increasingly unstable, and Semaj had experienced a great deal of change leading up to his delinquent acts, most of it negative. It appears that the disorganization of his environment and the strain of his family circumstances were too much for young Semaj to cope with. As Sakinah stated, “there’s only so much a kid can take, and Semaj just exploded” (Burbank, 2007).

After attending college for a time, Sakinah Booker describes her family's lifestyle as "nomadic" (Clarridge, 2007). Unmarried, it is just Sakinah and her sons; Semaj's father is not involved. The family wound up in the community of Lakewood, which sounds picturesque but, in reality, is a rather unpleasant landscape of small casinos, rundown fast food chains, and check-cashing storefronts. The working class city is described by the Seattle Times as "rough hewn". Older brother Demarius Booker admits the neighborhood's rough side, describing how neighbors pit animals against each other for sport, and how Semaj was shot at by older kids wielding paint-ball guns within days after moving in (Clarridge, 2007). According to Social Disorganization Theory, deficient social order found in communities like Lakewood elicits a delinquent response in many juveniles. Neighborhoods showing characteristics such as a high number of single parent families, high turnover in residences, and unsupervised teens create a scenario where society begins to break down. Inhabitants begin to believe they are living in a place where no one is watching or concerned when crimes are committed, so the rules no longer apply (Siegel & Welsh, 2008).

Although some may argue that Semaj and his family had lived in the community for only a short amount of time, I would point out that research summarized in the *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report* indicates that children new to disadvantaged communities are at an increased risk of being victimized (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), and V. Hurst reports that juveniles who are repeatedly victimized are at increased risk of becoming criminal offenders themselves (personal communication, February 14, 2008). So perhaps the social disorganization evident in Semaj's new home was enough to push him towards behavior he would not normally have engaged in.

Another explanation may come from applying Agnew's General Strain Theory which contends that emotional strain from the removal of positive stimuli and the presentation of negative stimuli may lead to delinquency (Siegel & Welsh, 2008). Sakinah Booker and her sons

resided with her father in Texas for a period and she believes the boys, particularly Semaj, recall this as a period of stability and security. But, Sakinah had recently found herself jobless and broke. At the time of Semaj's police chase and auto theft, the family's situation had degraded to the point where they were due to be evicted from their rundown apartment in Lakewood. Semaj's father and uncles were in jail, and Sakinah herself appears to have rejected her son when she had previously told police that she could not handle Semaj anymore and the next time they caught him they should take him to juvenile hall instead of back home (Burbank, 2007; Sand, 2007). In response to these strains, Semaj may have been trying to retrieve the security he once had with his grandfather and escape the negative stimuli presented by his family and neighborhood.

These insights into the circumstances of Semaj's environment help to illustrate how social structure theories, like Disorganization Theory and General Strain Theory, seek to explain juvenile offending. Understanding why a young boy was motivated to behave in such an extreme manner is important when considering how society should respond. Semaj was found guilty of all the charges against him, but his disposition was deferred for one year. The judge, perhaps taking into account how an improved social structure might improve the outlook and future of this 9-year-old, was creative in his treatment of the case. He ruled that Semaj write a letter of apology to the owner of the car he destroyed, attempt to make some restitution to her, and enroll in family counseling with his mother. If he meets these requirements and gets in no further trouble for one year, the case will be dismissed from his record. Semaj's lawyer reports he has heard nothing since the August 2007 ruling and "no news is good news" (Lynn, 2008).

## References

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