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Crime as culture revisited: Being young, poor and delinquent in Lisbon, Portugal

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Abstract

In Portugal, a large number of young residents living on the urban periphery have adopted a lifestyle in constant conflict with the law. This article discusses their stories and their willingness to endure violent encounters with the police and draconian prison sentences, drawing on a cultural criminological framework of the phenomenology of delinquency. It is argued that the youths' behaviour is driven less by monetary considerations or the thrill of transgression than by a deep yearning to make amends for past humiliations and to compensate for their mistreatment at the hands of state actors. Seeking to gain respect and avoid the role of perpetual victims, their marginal social beingness is deliberately forlorn, as they realize that the proceeds of crime will never buy them the true citizenship to which they aspire. Clinging to a culture of deviance that only exacerbates their original state of marginality, they submit to the life of social outlaws, provoking increasingly harsh responses from law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Keywords

crime, cultural criminology, marginalization, police violence, Portugal, prisons, violence, youth

Introduction

"If growing up was easy, nigga / If it was easy, there wouldn't be so many man kids", goes a line from the song "Crescer" by Allen Halloween, a legendary rapper from the Odivelas municipality in the Lisbon metropolitan area. Halloween knows what he is talking about: born in the former colony of Guinea-Bissau, he was raised, like many African immigrant

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youths in Portugal, by his mother in the shantytowns of the urban periphery, drifting along a life path traversed by violence, drug use, delinquency and run-ins with the police, as he recounts in another song lyric:

> I have no plans, I'm a suburban vandal
>
> Violence and delinquency are my daily routine
>
> Jesus, I'm a citizen of hell […]
>
> Around the corner come the police
>
> PSP, Pigs Follow Blacks, they came to say hello
>
> It's the tenth time we've met
>
> Fucking nigga, you gonna sleep in jail […]
>
> That's the karma of a rogue's life
>
> I'm going along, keep dragging my feet […]
>
> (Allen Halloween, "Dia de um Dread")[1]

While Allen never had to serve time in prison, most of his peers who led similar lives were less fortunate and "went to Caxias", as he says in the same song. Caxias is a prison near Lisbon that houses mainly pre-trial detainees who, if convicted, are transferred according to their age, the nature of their crime and the length of their sentence. Most young male offenders from the Lisbon periphery serve their terms in Linhó, a prison built in the mid-1950s during the Estado Novo autocratic regime of António Salazar, who ruled the country for 36 years. Today, the two prisons hold around 800 inmates, mainly young and poor residents of the urban periphery, often with a migration background. Based on the stories of some of them, I will explore what makes a considerable proportion of Portugal's suburban youth embrace the "karma", as Allen and some of them call it, of a life as a "rogue", "bandit" or *malandro* (rascal or thug), and what this life is all about.

The discussion of the youths' life stories is situated within a cultural criminological framework that aims to connect individual experience with social structure through an ethnographic lens (Ilan, 2019: 3). However, while sharing cultural criminology's attention to the experiential aspects of crime, and the positive emotions and sensations that drive criminal lifestyles (Hayward, 2001; Katz, 1988), I consider it imperative not to overlook the negative concomitants inevitably associated with a life as an offender. Although the former can help to illuminate how economically disadvantaged youths slip into crime, I argue that the positive aspects of delinquency tend to be short-lived and are thus insufficient to explain the persistent deviance to which the young citizens' narratives bear witness. As their stories show, their ongoing involvement in crime is paradoxically more related to its negative aspects, such as their experiences with law enforcement and other state institutions, including youth attendance centres and adult prisons. Whereas the positive sensations associated with offending draw them into delinquency, the negative

aspects reinforce their marginalization and their perception of an apparent lack of alternative, law-abiding lifestyles, resulting in their deepening entanglement with the world of crime.

Many of the stories recounted by the inmates from Caxias and Linhó echo observations made by other authors in different geographical contexts. The importance of paying attention to childhood experiences, for example, has been repeatedly noted: Reid (2023), for instance, traces how becoming "trapped" in the drug economy of a London housing estate is frequently linked to parental neglect and adolescent recollections of trauma, poverty, shame and stigma. Winlow and Hall (2009) describe how violent incidents and memories of humiliation during adolescence shape the criminal behaviour of persistently violent men from the north-east of England. Similarly, Mercan's (2020) psychosocial analysis of long-term offenders in Turkey highlights the criminogenic impact of perceived everyday humiliations while growing up in the urban periphery, and the resentment towards the middle-class Other caused by such experiences.

Experiences of violence and humiliation during their formative years, and the inner revolt these provoked, were equally prominent in the accounts of the young offenders from Portugal. However, as I will show, despite recounting memories of early humiliation and abandonment, which they identified as possible catalysts for their initial forays into delinquency, most of them at the same time expressed a profound reluctance to take on the role of a "victim". In other words, while they articulated a "sense of malaise" regarding their early and present life situation – comparable to that observed, for example, among London council flat dwellers by Bakkali (2019) – and although they likewise acknowledged their structural disadvantages and the impact these had on their lives, they refused to consider themselves products of their marginalization, emphasizing their agency and decision-making capacity. Rather than using their life circumstances as an excuse for their behaviour, they explained their involvement in crime either as "foolish" adolescent behaviour, the consequence of missed opportunities or, alternatively, as a conscious move to reject the precarious jobs available to them in the legal Portuguese economy.

The stories of the Portuguese youths thus reflect debates on the relationship between structure and agency, both in terms of their life trajectories as such and their emic conceptualization of this relationship. Cultural criminology has highlighted the dialogical nature of structure and agency (see Ferrell et al., 2015). In line with this, the present article draws on the life experiences of offenders inside and outside prison to examine "the ways in which abstract structures become concrete in the cut and thrust of everyday life" (Ilan, 2019: 4). However, it adopts a decidedly bottom-up methodological approach, seeking to keep the analytical engagement firmly on ethnographic ground. *Pace* Wacquant, who warns against the pitfalls of an "ethnography […] carried out under the banner of raw empiricism" (2002: 1523), I subscribe to Geertz's (1973) idea of "thick" ethnographic description and its capacity to elucidate the mechanisms of human behaviour, in the sense of "setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are", while at the same time hinting at "what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found" (1973: 27).

The findings presented here are based on fieldwork conducted over the course of three years in two adult prisons holding young adult inmates in the Lisbon metropolitan area (Caxias and Linhó prisons). The article also builds on an earlier study carried out in Lisbon's Bela Vista juvenile prison (Zoettl, 2017a, 2018). Access, including to the inmates' case files, was granted by the General Directorate responsible for correctional services (DGRSP). However, the feasibility of the fieldwork depended largely on the goodwill of the respective prison directors. While this varied considerably, over time I was able to establish a rapport with a representative sample of inmates in all prisons, which informed the selection of participants for formal, recorded interviews (28 in total across Caxias and Linhó). These were loosely structured and focused on inmates' experiences with state institutions, using their offending careers and subsequent judicial proceedings as a guiding thread to trace their biographies. If interviewees considered other aspects to be more relevant to the understanding of their trajectories, or if they preferred to speak about different matters (such as personal problems, conflicts with prison guards, etc.), they were given ample leeway to steer the conversation in their preferred direction.

In what follows, I will first describe the origins of these young people's marginalization, what it means, on an experiential level, to be young and poor in Portugal, and how this marginality paves the way into the world of crime. Second, I will examine how their state of marginality is linked to growing up in specific urban areas, where neighbourhood dynamics entail the need to confront both personal and state violence, and how this contributes to the youths' propensity to transgress. I will then elaborate on the phenomenology of their deviant behaviours, and the positive and negative aspects they associate with them. Finally, I will discuss their persistent failure to "sort out" their lives as an intrinsic aspect of their resistance to marginalization and victimization.

Being young, poor and delinquent

I will start with the story of Tomás. His life path is typical in some respects, unusual in others, which makes him a good example of both the commonality and multifariousness of the youths' careers. Though his parents are both white Portuguese, Tomás's story is similar to that of many African immigrants, as his family moved from a small town in the interior of a Portuguese overseas archipelago to the city of Lisbon when he was about eight years old. His early childhood was marked by "extreme poverty", as he recounts:

> When we were little, my mum used to take her children to beg on doorsteps. To go begging for food. Can you imagine what that was like? She'd take the kids, she'd hide, we'd knock on the doors [knocks five times on the table]: "Do you have anything to give us to eat?" (Tomás)

Upon arriving in the metropolis, they settled in the neighbourhood of Chelas, a social housing district built from scratch in the 1960s to eliminate the informal settlements that had spread across the area, and which today is home to around 30,000 inhabitants (Tulumello, 2015: 482–484). This is how Tomás described the place where he grew up:

> I moved to the most dangerous neighbourhood. At the time, it was the most fucked up neighbourhood in the area. I went to the most fucked up school in Lisbon, which was the school with the most niggas, the most… It was the most dangerous school, there was all this shit. Like if we were in America. (Tomás)

Tomás's view of his *bairro* (the Portuguese word for neighbourhood) is a recurring topos in the stories of the inmates from Caxias and Linhó. Ulisses, whose parents were relocated to Chelas when their home had to make way for the construction of the "Salazar" bridge over the River Tagus, likewise remembered that, when he was a child, the area was "considered one of the worst neighbourhoods in Portugal […], the neighbourhood with the most drugs at the time". Like Tomás and Ulisses, many of the youths who ended up in prison had grown up either in resettlement neighbourhoods or in neighbourhoods that were resettled, that is, demolished by the municipal authorities during their childhood. Notorious in Portuguese crime reporting, these city areas receive special attention from the police, which, in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, fosters the criminalization of their inhabitants (see Zoettl, 2013, 2025). They encompass Lisbon's urban core with a girdle of precariousness, exemplifying the growing differentiation through space and its "social marking" in consumer capitalism, as described by Baudrillard as early as the 1970s (2016: 77).

To be young and poor in the outskirts of Lisbon is, to begin with, unspectacular. It is not a matter of going hungry, even though there is evidence of a significant prevalence of food insecurity among children due to socio-economic factors (Ramos, 2020). Rather, it is about the eventless, ordinary scarcity experienced by the less privileged under the conditions of the "late liberal governance of difference" (Povinelli, 2011). For those growing up in Lisbon's low-income communities, this social differentiation manifests itself, apart from the usual economic constraints, primarily as a deprivation of emotional security. Like many of his peers, Tomás had a very difficult relationship with his parents. For reasons he preferred not to elaborate, he "always hated my mum. […] It's not hate, it's anger. Sometimes I think my life has gone wrong because of her." Though maintaining a more positive image of his father, he regularly suffered domestic violence at the hands of both of them:

> I feel very aggressive nowadays. I experienced a lot of violence at home. […] I was beaten up so many times. […] I was beaten with chairs, I was beaten with chains, I was beaten with garden hoses. […] We were children. Children do anything. And their way of educating was to hit us, was aggression. And I think that shit was… (Tomás)

Whether or not domestic violence was the main reason for his life going wrong, Tomás's experience of the family not as a safe haven but as a source of tribulation was shared by many fellow inmates, and was often linked to their parents' alcohol or drug abuse. Vicente, who reported a more difficult relationship with his father, recalled:

> I got beaten up a lot. Beatings that a kid that age shouldn't have to take. It's a lot of years of being beaten up. […] For throwing up. Because I don't like that meat. I threw up. 'You have to eat the vomit. You'll get one in the snout. Because it's me who is your father!' (Vicente)

The family memories of Tomás, Vicente and others evoke a picture of extremely uncaring parents. Vicente's father abducted him from his mother when he was three years old, only to abandon him when he was 11. Ivo, aged five, was handed over by his mother to his father, "who didn't want to take on his parental role either. Successively handed over to different relatives, he ended up going to the Azores with his paternal grandmother" (case file). Santiago's mother died early and his father "I don't know. He has disappeared"; he also grew up with his grandparents. João was abandoned by his father when he was six. Kevin "was not recognized by his father as his son and did not establish any emotional bond with him" (case file). Afonso's parents, "when I was little, 24 hours old, they abandoned me. They left me in the care of my grandmother." Afonso met his father for the first time when he was 12, only to find out that "he doesn't want to know about me."

However, many of the youths' parents appear to have led gruelling lives themselves. Some of them had serious health problems: Both of Tomás's parents suffered from lung disease and died while he was serving his sentence. Miguel's mother, who had immigrated to Portugal from Cape Verde, suffered from kidney failure and was dependent on daily dialysis. Lucas's mother, who had arrived from Guinea-Bissau with eye problems, eventually went blind in Portugal. Ivo's father died, the "victim of an immunological disease, following a drug addiction problem" (case file). In financial terms, those parents who were not unemployed belonged to the lower or lowest strata of the Portuguese social pyramid: Guilherme's parents (who were raising two disabled children) worked as a cleaner and a gravedigger; William's father as a plumber and his mother "ironing in a launderette". Cristiano's mother worked as a cleaner in a crèche, Xavier's father as a charcoal burner, João's stepfather as a gardener, and so on.

In addition to their precarious health and economic conditions, a number of inmates' parents had been, or still were, deprived of their liberty themselves: Yuri's father was held in Caxias between Yuri's fifth and eleventh years. Kevin's father "was also a big gangster" and served a sentence of "more than a year", as Kevin said. Santiago's father was held in Linhó in the 1990s before Santiago's birth, as were his brother and cousin. Ivo's father was imprisoned in Lisbon Central Prison for attempted murder, robbery and drug trafficking. Vicente recalled that, at the time he was growing up with his father's brothers, he once came home from school to find his uncle being arrested for trafficking "by a big police apparatus". Like others, Vicente felt that the emotional insecurity caused by the absence or misconduct of close relatives had a lasting impact on the course of his own life:

> I had a very bad time in my life. […] I had to raise myself. I had no affection when I was little. I was beaten, I was beaten up. I used to drink. I had the responsibilities of an adult when I was a child. I had no education. (Vicente)

Like many inmates from Caxias and Linhó, Vicente spent part of his early youth in a childcare facility. As his father stopped paying the tuition fees shortly after handing him over to the institution, Vicente was obliged to work on the facility's farm, cleaning the pigsties, to earn his place at the boarding school: "The same with the cows. And also collecting firewood." Ivo lived in a childcare institution in the Azores from the age of seven to eleven, and was later sent to the infamous *Albergue da Mitra*, an involuntary

asylum for mendicants set up in 1933 during the dictatorship under the supervision of the Public Order Police (PSP), and still functioning in democratic Portugal as a temporary childcare facility at the time of Ivo's stay. The few months he spent there seem to have been an important turning point in his early career of deviance and progressive institutionalization:

> It was a school, [taught] by the older boys. […] We stole together. I started smoking more [hashish]. I started drinking every day. That's normal. I started stealing cars. I started stealing everything. I started robbing people in the street. Before, it used to be more houses. […] Not after that. After that, it was in the street. I'd beat people up. […] I used to hang out with those who robbed people. Then I'd go with others and steal cars. (Ivo)

At his next stop – another "temporary" childcare facility, where he spent more than a year – it was already Ivo who was setting the tone: "I've learned how to teach others to fuck up." After being caught mugging tourists near the facility, he was sentenced to a two-year term in a so-called "educational centre" in the north of the country, 250 km from his family. The institution was visited at the time by a representative of the bar association, who concluded that:

> The centre operates like a real prison, with the same rules, only with the difference that it's called an educational centre. The detainees are marginalized young people who see their internment as a prison sentence, the end of which they count down day by day, with no other goal in mind than to reach that end.[2]

Ivo was released at the age of 17, moving to southern Portugal with his mother who "wanted to get me away from the bad company in Lisbon. Without realizing that I was bad company myself." There he worked for a time delivering pizzas and enrolled in a course in administration, which would give him the equivalent of a 9th grade diploma. But the years he had spent institutionalized made him feel like a latecomer: "At 17, I was on an administration course with kids aged 13, 14, 15. I looked at them and thought: What am I doing here?" After a year, he returned to Lisbon, staying with his stepmother, as his father had died in the meantime. Intermittently employed in construction work and dedicating himself to small-scale drug dealing and occasional burglaries, he eventually committed the homicide which, at the age of 19, brought him to Linhó.

Growing up in the *bairro*: Negotiating violence and respect

In his account of his life, Ivo was far from casting himself as a victim. On the contrary, he repeatedly emphasized that he had not taken advantage of the opportunities available to him during his youth: "There are opportunities for everyone. Only those who don't want them don't take them." However, he also considered that his trajectory was to some extent moulded by the social environment of the places where he grew up:

> Growing up in a neighbourhood like that, in a children's home, on the street, or wherever… You feel alone. Whoever comes along, you cling to them. These people automatically become your family. […] They're the people who accept you, and they're the people you have to deal with. (Ivo)

For the residents of Portugal's suburban periphery, the characteristics of their milieu are a matter of both problematization and identification. Growing up in the "most fucked-up neighbourhood of the capital", as Tomás termed it, means not only being confronted with a range of difficulties, but also learning how to face and ultimately overcome them. In their narratives, this often translates into meeting violence with violence: "In this life you have one choice, especially as a child. Either you're a victim, or you're the aggressor" (Ivo). Not wanting to be a victim is a leitmotif that runs through the life stories of many young people from the *bairro*. While it is challenging to deal with domestic violence, conflicts with other youths from the same or adjacent "problematic" neighbourhoods are fought out on equal footing and offer an opportunity to demonstrate one's courage and steadfastness. Violence in the *bairro* therefore represents simultaneously a threat to one's identity and a means of reaffirming it:

> An example: I once went to work. […] I took the train from Mercês. Suddenly, four guys came towards me. I was alone. […] They were about to surround me. I pulled out my knife, and they all ran away. Imagine if I hadn't had a knife… They'd have killed me right there. In the middle of the train. (Duarte)

> I don't like people standing up to me or challenging me. That's how I live in the *bairro*, that's how I've learned to live. People challenge me, so let's fight. And if we fight, it's either me or the other person [who prevails]. (Maria)

The above quotes from Duarte and Maria are reminiscent of Winlow and Hall's (2009) account of the role of violence in marginalized neighbourhoods in north-east England. The authors argue that for young men who persistently engage in violence, it is not usually the violence itself that is valued, but rather "the ability to retain some sense of dignity and respect in the face of it" (2009: 288). Consistent with their observation that these youths often "retaliate first" to avoid being victimized (2009: 297), many Portuguese *bairro* residents regard a certain degree of aggressiveness as the most effective form of self-defence (see also Reid, 2023; Sandberg, 2008). However, as the second quote (from Maria) shows, the willingness to use violence to assert oneself in the Portuguese *bairro* is not confined to the male population. Though often couched in an idiom of ostensible manliness, violence is conceived primarily in instrumental terms, as something that must occasionally be used to defend both one's physical integrity and one's standing within the community.

Growing up in the *bairro* inevitably brings with it a mounting awareness of one's inferior social status, which is closely tied to the poor public reputation of certain neighbourhoods, rooted in the low purchasing power of their residents, the actual or perceived high crime rate, and the latent disapproval faced by those who live there, by virtue of their nationality or

phenotype. As Bakkali notes, structural inequalities do not only exist "out there", but also leave an imprint on the self, becoming "part of our internal worlds, entrenched in the fine grain experiences of those on the margins" (2019: 5). For young people in particular, structure "operate[s] continuously in their lives, working to devalue" them and "inhibit the development of meaningful selfhoods" (Bakkali, 2019: 13).

Ivo from Lisbon, for example, who had spent much of his adolescence institutionalized, recalled being bullied at the childcare facility when he was about 10 years old because of his curly hair: "Because I was different from the other boys, a white boy with weird hair." As he explained, his early strategy for dealing with such attacks on his self was twofold, closing himself off, on the one side, and counter-attacking, on the other:

> Only those I let get close to me can affect me. If I let you go beyond a certain limit, then you become someone who can either do me good or affect me in some way. But if I don't let you get close to me, you can never affect me. […] Then, when they tried to make me a target, I always reacted. I've always been aggressive, ever since I was a kid. (Ivo)

Ethnic stereotyping is, of course, no less prevalent in Portugal than elsewhere, but here too being poor is, as Hayward and Young termed it, the "ultimate humiliation" of liberal consumer society: "an intense experience, not merely of material deprivation, but of a sense of injustice and of ontological insecurity" (2012: 123). For the young household members at the bottom of the Portuguese income pyramid, defending their self-image against the structural contradictions they encounter while growing up thus also means demarcating themselves from their parents' lifelong affiliation with the working-class precariat:

> Today I see my father's side. My father is a great man. Now I understand why he was like that. Maybe he didn't want us to live in shit like he did all his life. He worked all his life and had nothing. He died with nothing. He died loaded with debts. (Tomás)

However, looking around in the *bairro*, most kids find it difficult to envisage a promising future for themselves, particularly if they feel held back by their migratory background: "Young African from a social housing estate", Allen Halloween asks rhetorically in another song ("Marmita Boy"), "What are your chances, brother, in Portugal?" Halloween's answer – "A shitty job would already be cool / Take a gal and be happy" – reflects the life motto adopted by the majority. Generally, this means taking up a job in the secondary sector or, as a local saying goes, "men build, women clean" (Machado, 2008: 123). Almost 60% of male children of Cape Verdeans (the largest immigrant group) find their first job in the construction industry, and more than a third of Cape Verdean women are still working as domestic servants or cleaners a year after their arrival (Machado and Abranches, 2005: 81; Machado, 2008: 134). Social mobility in Portugal remains remarkably low: more than two-thirds of Cape Verdeans employed in construction are the sons of immigrants who work in the same industry (Machado and Abranches, 2005: 76).

Yet there are others who seek to break away from the well-trodden path of precarious, mostly temporary and generally poorly paid labour offered by Portugal's legal economy. As Wacquant puts it in his critique of potentially romanticizing ethnographies, "there are plenty of […] youths who seek subsistence and success in the illicit economy rather than submit to the ignominy of substandard wage labor" (2002: 1520–1521). The following quote from António, an inmate at Caxias prison, suggests that, in some cases, refusing to work in jobs that barely cover the cost of living in Portugal's metropolis (the minimum wage in 2023 stood at €760 per month and the average rent in Amadora, Lisbon's largest satellite town, was €995),[3] is a conscious choice:

> To be honest: I'm not going to work here in Portugal. It's not worth it here in Portugal. It's really not worth working. Because of the salary, the working hours, the jobs they give you. (António)

António's calculus, juxtaposing working hours, job characteristics and salary, appears to endorse the image of the rational offender, or the belief that "all crime is a function of its perceived pains and pleasures" (Exum, 2002: 957). Indeed, of all my interlocutors from the Lisbon prisons, António was one of the most level-headed delinquents. Born in Portugal to parents who had emigrated from Guinea-Bissau, he grew up in a neighbourhood flanked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the west and Lisbon's then largest drug-trafficking area to the east. Taking advantage of his home's proximity to the latter, he began dealing drugs at the age of 18. Yet, it was only after dropping out of school that he "got serious" about it, as he put it, hiring others to sell on his behalf. Never a drug user himself, he organized his local, medium-scale trade in cocaine, heroin and a variety of cannabis preparations like a true businessman:

> We had hours to be there. From 6 o'clock in the morning until midnight. That's how we opened. We had to have certain hours so that we could work properly. […] We had the street [to sell] and we had a house [to store the drugs], we had the people on guard. (António)

As he summed up the prospects of his venture, "if you have something in your head, it'll work out." Unlike most of his peers, António had clear objectives when he turned to a life of crime: "My goal was to have money to support myself and my family." He drove an unassuming car and kept putting his earnings aside, spending "more on my cousins and my sister, on my family" than on himself, as he insisted. In reality, however, his life/business calculations failed early on. By the time I met him, he had already received two suspended prison sentences totalling seven and a half years, and was now awaiting trial for possession of half a kilo of cocaine. Anticipating a long prison sentence with no chance of parole, he said he was ready to accept whatever his legal fate was to be:

> It's the life I have chosen. That's what I think. I know that you get wet walking in the rain. Now I have to put up with it. […] Whether it's been worth it to be here for what I've done? I think it's been worth it. I think I got a lot out of it. On the other hand, I know it's a waste of

> time. Time standing still. Being here for years and years, if necessary, without doing anything. (António)

António's stoic acceptance of imprisonment betrays the fact that his rationale for crime was not quite as measured as his sober discourse suggests. All of my interlocutors at Caxias and Linhó were well aware of the risks involved in their actions. Francisco, for example, another Portuguese-born drug dealer with a migrant background, acknowledged that in his *bairro*, "most of the drug dealers I know […] have all been arrested". António, in the course of our conversation, made it clear that behind his economic calculus stood a deep desire to earn respect and "make it" in Portugal, in one way or another:

> I like being in this environment. They know who I am. To be respected by people. […] Meanwhile, I'm still in here, yes. But I have a business out there. And without me doing anything, they still have to give me something. Because that out there, it's me who has achieved that. (António)

Standing trial, therefore, did not detract from what he saw as the considerable achievements of a second-generation migrant of humble origins. Imprisonment, in his view, was not a personal failure but part of the game and, although burdensome and challenging, just another opportunity to prove one's resilience. "It's complicated," he affirmed, referring to the wing of the prison where he was held in Caxias, which was notorious for frequent outbreaks of violence. "But only for people who don't know how to handle things," he continued. "Those who know how to handle things, they don't have any problems here."

The phenomenology of crime: Joys and frustrations

António's life story, albeit underpinned by rational discourse, can hardly be understood from the perspective of an instrumental criminology or "explanations of crime which are constituted around notions of opportunities, on one side, and lack of controls, on the other" (Young, 2003: 390). Although drug dealing is in fact an easily accessible source of income for those growing up in urban areas where this trade is ubiquitous, crime control in Portugal is particularly strict in these neighbourhoods, and sentencing for drug offences by the courts is widely described as "draconian" (Cunha, 2002: 61). At the same time, even those inmates who thought they would get away with their offences reported a recurrent feeling "that one day it could go wrong" (Francisco). As Ulisses, who had been dealing considerable quantities of drugs in Lisbon, put it: "Hasn't Pablo Escobar been killed or arrested? Isn't El Chapo, the world's biggest drug lord, in jail? […] There's always an ending."

Cultural criminology has insisted that criminal behaviour must be examined in relation to the sub/cultures of offenders and wider society, proposing that both crime and its control should be approached as "creative constructs" (Hayward and Young, 2012: 113). As Hayward notes, "one of the central lacunae in the criminological tradition has been a failure to provide a satisfactory account of the phenomenology of the criminal act" and, in

particular, its emotional dimensions (Hayward, 2001: 205). Katz, one of the first to explore the "lived experience of criminality" in his study on the *Seductions of Crime* (1988), mapped out the affective processes that underlie behaviours that violate the penal code, pointing to their often deliberately irrational nature (1988: 139; 25).

Their interest in the phenomenological dimensions of crime has led cultural criminologists to explore the sensational, communicational and aesthetic aspects of offending. Hayward, for example, suggests that the "seductiveness of crime may […] derive, in large part, from the new kinds of sensations it offers" (2007: 239). Consistent with this, Lyng has anatomized the nature of voluntary hazardous behaviour ("edgework"), noting that "some people place a higher value on the experience of risk taking than they do on achieving the final ends of the risky undertaking" (1990: 852). Ferrell and others have explored the "communicational power" of crime, manifest, for example, in the symbolic nature of pain-inflicting violence (Ferrell et al., 2015: 11). Ferrell has also addressed the ways in which the aesthetic aspects of crime interlock "with the political economy of criminality" (1992: 119–120).

Most importantly, however, cultural criminology has elaborated on the non-instrumental nature of transgression. Breaking the law can be satisfying in itself, notably for young offenders, and may serve no further purpose whatsoever. As Hayward observes, "in many cases, individuals are seduced by the existential possibilities offered by criminal acts – by the pleasure of transgression" (2001: 211). The "thrill of transgressing the rule", as Hayward calls it (2001: 211), coupled with the excitement inherent in criminal offences, has been noted in numerous ethnographic accounts of deviance. Bourgois, for example, repeatedly mentions the delight of his New York interlocutors in "just being wild" (2003: 194). Similarly, Allen Halloween from Portugal identifies two basic motivations among his peers from the *bairro* for indulging in delinquency: "Some for the glory, others for the adrenaline" ("Crescer"). The tenor of Halloween's lyrics is reflected in the words of some of Lisbon's prison inmates: Guilherme, for instance, recalled that "I did the crimes I did because it was this thing, it had adrenaline in it."

As regards the financial enticements of the illegal economy, their crimes certainly provided the *bairro* youth with an important source of income. Those involved in small-scale drug dealing reported earnings of "100 euros in a day" or €2000–€3000 a month (Francisco), or €300–€400 a week (William), roughly three times the Portuguese minimum wage. Income from burglary, the other mainstay of Lisbon's delinquents, was erratic but guaranteed access to consumer goods for which they normally had to toil long hours. As Guilherme explained:

> I had no need to steal. I did it because I saw… Imagine, I wanted to buy that motorbike, it was four thousand euros. I'd set off, I'd do one robbery, two robberies, and I'd have the money to buy the motorbike. And I'd buy the motorbike, fuck it. Now, to save up four thousand euros when you earn eight hundred and fifty euros, how many months would I have to work? It would take me a year to buy the motorbike! In less than a month, a week, two weeks, [with burglaries] I could buy the motorbike. If I had to, I could buy it in a day. (Guilherme)

With such considerations in mind, cultural criminology has drawn attention to the link between crime, relative deprivation and consumerism (e.g. Hayward, 2007: 232; Ferrell et al., 2015: 15; Zoettl, 2022). Young has suggested that the propensity to commit offences is less "dependent on absolute levels of deprivation" and has to be understood in the context of the exclusion of the lower income classes "from the 'glittering prizes' of the wider society" (Young quoted in Hayward, 2001: 175). The Lisbon narratives largely corroborate this view: Duarte, for example, recalled that "[w]hen I was younger, I used to steal mobile phones. My mum couldn't afford to buy me one. My friends at school had good phones, but I didn't. That's it." Other youths, however, were not merely trying to catch up with their schoolmates, but aspired to the life of a true "gentleman of leisure" (Matza and Sykes, 1961: 715):

> Until I was 21 and got arrested, I spent a lot of money. A lot. In the casino. I don't regret the money I spent, because I had fun. I had fun. I can die happy because I did a lot of things. I treated myself to a lot of luxury. I've been to Casino Estoril, to VIP parties. I'd pay the security guards, give them five hundred euros, a thousand euros, to let me in. It was all VIPs, not people like me, thieves. (Kevin)

Kevin's account largely aligns with Mercan's (2020) portrayal of Turkish career criminals, who took delight in becoming "profligate consumers of nightlife culture, spending all their money recklessly in radical contrast to their poverty and deprivation" (2020: 177–178). However, for most of the Portuguese offenders, the pleasures of unbridled consumption soon proved fleeting. Not only did their wants grow at least as fast as their illicit incomes. There was also a growing awareness among them that the lifestyle provided by crime money was of an ephemeral, insubstantial nature. Lucas, for example, reflected: "It's an illusion. […] The more you have, the more you spend. Cause it's easy money. If it was money earned with [the] sweat […] of honest labour, then of course you'd value it much more."

Echoing Hayward's observation that "what people are now feeling deprived of is no longer simply the material product itself, but, rather, the sense of identity that products have come to bestow on the individual" (2001: 198), it was not so much the consumer goods themselves (such as fancy trainers or branded clothing) that sparked their desires, but the status and latent possibilities of the unfettered consumer. While for some, like Kevin, this meant living the life of a VIP rather than that of a "thief", others were content with the prospect of eating out like the average Joe. For the former, it wasn't so much the money of the rich they craved, but the feeling that such wealth was presumed to bestow on its owner. For the latter, it was simply a matter of escaping the wretchedness of poverty. Having lunch at the corner shop or ordering a burger and chips without hesitation provided them with a touch of luxury worth risking the contempt of society and punishment by the criminal justice system:

> I spent my money on eating out, on not having breakfast at home. In the morning, I'd take the little one to kindergarten and have breakfast at a grocery store in the 6 de Maio neigh bourhood. Then I'd have lunch there straight away. (Francisco)

> Then there was a time when I started taking out the envelopes of money [from the offertory]. Why? I took some money from them, but it was just for my brother and me. We would go to Mass, and when the Mass was over, we would go to catechism class. We left catechism, and where did we go? […] We went straight to the café down there and had a burger that was so… I'll never forget it. A burger like that [raises his hands], with loads of fries. (Tomás)

However, the offences that allowed them to live out the identities to which they aspired soon began to make unwelcome inroads into their social lives, compromising both the pleasure of transgression itself and the light-hearted consumption of its monetary proceeds. Looking back on their early careers, many recalled almost nostalgically the mindlessness of their teenage misdeeds. César, who began by snatching gold chains from passers-by, mused: "I didn't know what life was. I was a kid. […] I had no idea what life was about." Cristiano, who had started out with unarmed mobile phone muggings, described his first offences as "childish crimes". As they grew older, the insouciance of their youthful deviance vanished, giving way to a host of concerns that their lives as habitual offenders inevitably engendered. As they became known in their neighbourhoods for their acts, their social relations shifted even before they got into trouble with the authorities, as the following quotation of Rodrigo from Amadora illustrates:

> It's impossible to remain unknown. Once you reach a certain level, it's impossible to remain unknown. Even people I didn't know, they knew me. […] It's about always having to look back. Over your shoulder, without trust. I don't trust anyone. I don't have friends. The people around me, I knew why they were there. They were there because I had pot and they wanted to smoke. (Rodrigo)

Becker's observation that deviant careers often "develop in [an] orderly sequence" (1963: 23) is reflected in the life stories of many *bairro* youths. Drugs often, though not always, play an important role in these trajectories. As Miguel, born in the Cova da Moura neighbourhood near Lisbon, summed it up:

> Later, as time went on, it got worse. I started smoking dope. Then I started selling. Then I started stealing. That's when it got worse. (Miguel)

As their offences grew more serious, confrontations with the police became inevitable. Policing in Portugal has traditionally focused on economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods and marginal/ized social identities (Bastos, 2019; Cunha, 2002). Being frisked by the police is a routine experience for young people growing up in what the police classify as "red zones" of the urban socioscape (Zoettl, 2025). Among the youths from Caxias and Linhó, some stated they had been detained "many times" (António), others claimed to have been taken to the station more than 20 times (Afonso) or even "more than 100 times" (Bruno).

Although the figure given by Bruno is probably not to be taken literally, it is supported by Durão's observation of the administrative incentives for police arrests in Portugal: "Whoever produces more arrests to a greater or lesser extent becomes more authorized

[…] to withdraw from other tasks and duties normally falling to any officer" (2017: 236–237). Many youths recounted episodes of violence while in police custody. Afonso, for example, recalled that when he was 14 or 15, the police would often arrest him and then "call my grandmother to pick me up. At three or four [o'clock] in the morning." As he said, he "got beaten up a lot" on these occasions:

> It was almost always like that. Only when I went to the line up, when I went to the court stuff, they didn't beat me. […] Here, they broke my jaw [points to his face]. When I was handcuffed, they hit me against the head with something from the car. Because I didn't want to get in, they hit me. (Afonso)

Misuse of force by the Portuguese PSP is commonplace, as has been observed by human rights organizations, supranational monitoring bodies, and social scientists alike (see, for example, AI, 2024; CPT, 2023; Durão, 2006). Police violence is employed as a means of investigation and to extract confessions, but also as an ad hoc punishment for juveniles known or perceived to be delinquent. Miguel, for instance, had his first contact with the PSP at the age of 16, when he and a friend were stopped in a stolen car. They were both beaten, "but it was no big deal", he asserted. At the time, the violence they were subjected to seemed to be mainly symbolic in character: his friend was hit in the face with a mop, to "humiliate him and stuff. They do that a lot" (Miguel).

Violent encounters with the police, often starting at a very young age, played a pivotal role in the criminal careers of many inmates from Caxias and Linhó. A study conducted in a juvenile prison in Lisbon found that the majority of inmates reported recurrent confrontations with the police prior to their first referral to a juvenile court (Zoettl, 2017b). Their narratives bear witness to the deep resentment generated by such early brushes with law enforcement:

> I've been beaten more than once. But the first time they hit me, I really got indignant. (Maria)

> When we arrived [at the police station], it was slaps in the face until we went in. I was beaten out of the car. A kick in the arse. Do you know the truncheon? They wrapped it up in a newspaper and beat me with it so as not to leave any bruises. […] I'll never forget that day! I cried more that day than I ever cried in a police station before. If I could, I'd kill all policemen, one by one. (Enzo)

Naturally, the constant clashes with the police considerably dampened the young miscreants' "joy of transgression". As time went on, police investigations against them kept piling up. However, due to the slowness of the Portuguese criminal justice system, it often took years for the frequent arrests to result in formal charges and court proceedings. The accumulation of a series of minor offences and, in some cases, the revocation of previously suspended sentences, eventually resulted in lengthy cumulative sentences, equivalent in duration to a felony conviction such as murder (see Zoettl, 2025). Miguel, for example, was sentenced to three years for burglary at his second criminal trial. But because he had already received a four-year suspended sentence for a robbery committed

five years earlier, he suddenly found himself facing an effective sentence of seven years' imprisonment.

Prison sentences in Portugal are among the longest in Europe (Cunha, 2002; Zoettl, 2025). Prison conditions are challenging: in 2024 alone, the country recorded 10 convictions for violations of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits torture and inhuman or degrading punishment.[4] In the stories of the *bairro* youth, prison features as an experience that is attritional, but also one that can be transformed into a source of self-affirmation. Tomás received his first prison sentence of 10 years at the age of 16 or 17 for a series of thefts and robberies, which he initially served in Lisbon Central Prison. Due to ongoing issues with fellow inmates and guards ("I don't know of any other prison where inmates are beaten up more than by those [guards] there"), he was transferred to Leiria, a so-called "prison-school" for offenders aged 16 to 24, also built during Portugal's dictatorship. There, he was placed in what was known among the inmates as the "Pavilion of the Forgotten":

> There was only the shit that was good for nothing. The other wings were shit too, but that place was for the ones nobody wanted to know about. The ones who talked back to the guards, who were aggressive. I went there. I ended up a thug like them. You have to fit in, in prison. You can't let anyone get to your arse. You can't let anyone come, ok, I'll drop my trousers. Yeah, fuck me here all you want, yeah, I'm a faggot. No, brother. […] You can fuck my arse, but I'll kill you for it, brother. (Tomás)

What Tomás learned in the near decade he spent behind bars was, first and foremost, how to deal with prison itself. Released on parole at the age of 25, he found a job as a subcontracted delivery driver for a DIY store, only to be sacked a few months later when his employer went bankrupt due to accumulated tax debts. Unable to pay the rent on his flat, he lived in his car for half a year, so he would not have to tell anyone what had happened: "This shame… Look, Dad, look. I have failed. I lost my wife, I lost my apartment […]. I had this thing, that I didn't want to be the weak one, I didn't want to say: I've ruined everything, I've ruined my life." Where Tomás had never failed, however, was in prison: "Thank God I never had a bad time in prison. I always knew someone, someone from the outside. That's because I dealt with a lot of boys from different *bairros*, showed them the ropes and helped them with robberies."

Conclusion: Violence, resistance and the end of youth

Much like Ivo's aforementioned perception that "in this life […] you're [either] a victim, or you're the aggressor", Tomás's refusal "to be the weak one" is crucial to understanding the life trajectories of those imprisoned at Caxias and Linhó. Having grown up in marginalized, low-income and often ethnically diverse neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city, where they frequently experienced violence at the hands of their parents, their peers, or agents of the state, the Portuguese delinquents were determined not to give in and remain lifelong "victims".

The youths' own reflections on their lives – on their past experiences, present opportunities and future prospects – remarkably mimic the structure–agency debate in the social sciences. While many scholars have emphasized the impact of structural factors on the lives of those on the margins of society, it has also been noted that the same life circumstances can give rise to what is often described as a culture of the street, which endows individuals with specific forms of agency-conferring capital. This dialectical relationship between structure and agency has been examined, for example, by Sandberg (2008) among ethnic minority youths in Oslo. As he shows, these youths embody socio-economic structure through their street habitus, but also draw upon street capital (e.g. in the form of mastery of criminal activity) to navigate the structural constraints they face.

However, the narratives of Tomás and his fellow inmates illustrate that the "joy of transgression" that has been charted by many scholars within the cultural criminological tradition – and which indeed also characterizes the early careers of many of the Portuguese offenders – is short-lived and normally quickly eclipsed by the physical/emotional distress associated with deviance. Though some of their stories conveyed a whiff of adventure, often their narratives appeared more exciting than the crimes themselves. Drug dealing in particular soon turned out to be a rather dull activity, a business that was all too easy to get into for those growing up in the *bairro*, yet laborious, competitive and difficult to turn into a stable source of income. And while some made big bucks with burglaries, none of them managed to save up enough money to fulfil their modest or ambitious dreams.

Striving, like Ulisses, for the fortunes of El Chapo or, like Tomás, for a burger at the coffee shop, they soon realized, deep down, that their crimes would never substantially change their lives and that, unless they found a way out of the maze they had entered, they were bound to keep shuttling between their *bairro* and prisons that seemed to cater exclusively for *bairro* youths. In many respects, the inevitable consequences of their criminal activities, even if they did entail significant suffering, did not pose too great a challenge for them. And like Tomás, who moved from the "most fucked-up neighbourhood of the capital" to one of the worst prison wings, exchanging the violence he suffered at home for that meted out by prison guards, most of them quickly learned to cope with the adversities of their incarceration, much as they had learned to deal with those of the *bairro*. Though they all naturally longed to regain their freedom as soon as possible, the years spent in captivity cemented their willingness to come to terms with a life on the edge of society, turning prison into a home away from home.

In many cases, their will to transgress was nourished less by the prospect of money or joy than by a diffuse sense of revolt and an increasing acquiescence to their ascribed otherness. Often, the narratives from Caxias and Linhó were imbued with a "kind of inflammation or protective rash" (Baudrillard, 1996: 146) that appeared to have left emotional scars during early childhood, as a result of the rejection, abandonment and other pains they had experienced at the hands of those who were supposed to care for them. In their stories, a distinct yearning for retribution surfaced, formed long ago yet still guiding their actions. Kevin, for example, described himself as "a good person. But if you step on my toe, I won't say anything for now, I'll answer later. I'm very vengeful, I don't know why." He did, however, remember a number of incidents from his early life, such as

when his aunt kept hitting him with a broomstick until the handle broke off. "I said to my aunt: You can beat me as much as you like, it doesn't hurt me any more. The beatings no longer hurt me, they were routine for me."

The same applies to the way the state dealt with the youths' deviance. Neither police beatings nor the degradation they were subjected to in prison deterred them from doing what they had always done. If anything, these experiences only added to their grievances, so that even those few who had grown up in a "normal" family eventually accumulated profound rancour. In terms of their criminal careers, while the proceeds of offending were obviously not unwelcome, they became of rather subordinate importance over time. Their transgressions were propelled, as Young puts it, "by the energies of humiliation" (2003: 408). Instrumentally, they were aimed at making the gains that would permit them to live a more comfortable and less precarious life. Emotionally, however, they sought to compensate for past and present deprivations, and to enable them to taste, if only fleetingly, the honours of true citizenship that had never been granted to them.

Sooner or later, however, their initial belief that the returns of crime would allow them to redeem their false start in life evaporated, turning their efforts into a profitable but ultimately unpropitious activity that had somehow lost its deeper purpose. While their street smartness helped them to navigate both the *bairro* and the prison, it did not assist them in finding their feet in the mainstream economy. As Ilan (2013) and others have pointed out, street culture/capital empowers individuals to navigate exclusion, but it can also reinforce the mechanisms that sustain marginalization and thus hinder broader social inclusion. Sandberg recalls that street capital is specific to street culture and "having street habitus will be disadvantageous on other social arenas" (2008: 157). Accordingly, Reid has demonstrated that although drug dealers' "trap life" functions as a "key strategy […] to escape the structures of marginalization", it also diminishes their "opportunities for engagement with mainstream socio-economic life" (2023: 170; 176).

The Portuguese narratives corroborate such observations: the knowledge acquired, inside and outside prison, by the youths from Caxias and Linhó, helped them to get by and maintain a sense of agency. However, their approach to dealing with their marginalization ultimately proved self-destructive. As Baudrillard argues, "all subversion of and resistance to" the highly integrated system of consumer capitalism is "reciprocally, by its very nature, suicidal" (2017: 176). The trajectories of the Portuguese *bairro* youth illustrate the impossibility of breaking free from the mechanisms of control that perpetuate an economy which produces "goods and needs at the same time, but does not produce them at the same rate" (Baudrillard, 2016: 63). Those who "went to Caxias", as alluded to in the lyrics of Halloween, did not do so because they were "bad" criminals, but because their attempts to escape marginalization through a marginal lifestyle were intrinsically futile. It is this surrender to a self-contradictory mode of social beingness, known to be incapable of fulfilling the desires it was originally intended to satisfy, that ultimately constitutes the "culture" of crime among the youths of the *bairro*.

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Notes

1. Quotations originally in Portuguese have been translated by the author, and the names of interlocutors have been changed.
2. Senra da Costa, Relatório da visita ao Centro Educativo Dr Alberto Souto Aveiro, see: https://www.oa.pt/cd/Conteudos/Artigos/detalhe artigo.aspx?sidc 31690&idc 5&idsc 44025&ida 25786 (accessed 15 June 2025).
3. See https://www.imovirtual.com/noticias/imoblog/barometro anual 2022 2023/ (accessed 24 June 2025).
4. See https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/ (accessed 14 June 2025).

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