



# Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor

*Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh*

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In this revelatory book, Sudhir Venkatesh takes us into Maquis Park, a poor black neighborhood on Chicago's Southside, to explore the desperate, dangerous, and remarkable ways in which a community survives. We find there an entire world of unregulated, unreported, and untaxed work, a system of living off the books that is daily life in the ghetto. From women who clean houses and prepare lunches for the local hospital to small-scale entrepreneurs like the mechanic who works in an alley; from the preacher who provides mediation services to the salon owner who rents her store out for gambling parties; and from street vendors hawking socks and incense to the drug dealing and extortion of the local gang, we come to see how these activities form the backbone of the ghetto economy.

What emerges are the innumerable ways that these men and women, immersed in their shadowy economic pursuits, are connected to and reliant upon one another. The underground economy, as Venkatesh's subtle storytelling reveals, functions as an intricate web, and in the strength of its strands lie the fates of many Maquis Park residents. The result is a dramatic narrative of individuals at work, and a rich portrait of a community. But while excavating the efforts of men and women to generate a basic livelihood for themselves and their families, *Off the Books* offers a devastating critique of the entrenched poverty that we so often ignore in America, and reveals how the underground economy is an inevitable response to the ghetto's appalling isolation from the rest of the country.



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