

The Stairway of Doom:

Respect, Crime, and Justice in the Night-Time Economy

By Cameron A. Emond

A Thesis Submitted to
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts Honours Criminology

April 2016, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Copyright Cameron Emond, 2016

Approved: Dr. Randle Hart
Associate Professor
Sociology and Criminology

Date: April 1st, 2016

The Stairway of Doom:
Respect, Crime, and Justice in the Night-Time Economy

By Cameron A. Emond

A Thesis Submitted to
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts Honours Criminology

April 2016, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Copyright Cameron Emond, 2016

Approved: Dr. Randle Hart

Associate Professor
Sociology and Criminology

Date: April 1st, 2016

The Stairway of Doom:

Respect, Crime, and Justice in the Night-time Economy

By Cameron A. Emond

Abstract

Bouncers are private security personnel enlisted by nightclub owners who are tasked with the protection of physical property, maintaining order, and ensuring that provincial alcohol regulations are met. Often regarded as over-aggressive bullies, bouncers work in an occupation where drunken violence and criminality are unavoidable. Using the concept of the night-time economy¹ to describe the after-dark downtown leisure industry, this paper qualitatively explores the stories of bouncers in this alcohol-fueled environment. Based on in-depth interviews and a focus group with 10 current or former bouncers, this paper presents the thoughts, feelings and experiences of those tasked with maintaining order in the night-time economy. The interviews and follow up focus group revealed interesting realities of bouncer culture: the important network of respect, a prevalence of crime and extreme violence, and the night-time economy's own vigilante justice system.

Keywords Bouncers, Night-time Economy, Violence, Crime, Justice, Respect

¹ Lister, S., Hobbs, D., Hall, S., & Winlow, S. (2000). Violence in the night-time economy; bouncers: The reporting, recording and prosecution of assaults. *Policing and Society: An International Journal*, 10(4), 383-402

After a violent altercation, an intoxicated patron is escorted off the premises. Outside, he argues to re-enter the bar to find his jacket, despite losing his coat-check ticket.

Patron- 'My dad is a lawyer, I know my rights... I have every right to go inside and get my coat!'

Bouncer- 'You have every right to fuck off!'

Introduction

Most people who have spent an evening downtown in a particular East-coast Canadian city can attest to a simple fact: it can get pretty wild. This is especially the case in one of the many nightclubs that are open to enormous crowds of up to a thousand people; and where the serving of copious amounts of alcohol well into the early morning hours to this crowd only adds to the disorder. This environment aggravates the risk of aggressive incidents and crime. In order to ensure that these nightclubs do not descend into complete chaos, some kind of protection is required: enter bouncers. Bouncers are private security personnel enlisted by nightclub owners who are tasked with the protection of physical property, maintaining order, and ensuring that the provincial alcohol regulations are met. This paper provides an in-depth glance at the occupation of private security in the night-time economy, and presents findings from in-depth interviews and a focus group with 10 current and former bouncers. From the interviews, three common themes emerged: the importance of respect, the abundance of crime that takes place, and the night-time economy's informal justice system. This paper begins by examining some of the relevant literature related to bouncers. Next, this paper presents the author's personal experience in this industry and the methods used to conduct this research. The paper then discusses the findings of the research: beginning with the multifaceted relations of respect, followed by the abundance of criminality, and concludes with the importance of the night-time economy's own justice system.

Literature Review

Hobbs et al. (2002: p355) argue that when day gives way to night, the states' enforcement responsibilities are taken from the local police and put in charge of private security guards.

Throughout the night-time economy, bouncers are tasked with maintaining order, preventing crimes, and remaining the guardians of the bar (Fox & Sobol 2000; Hobbs et al. 2002; Lister et al. 2000; Graham et. al 1980; Homel & Clark 1994; DeMichele & Tewksbury 2004; Geoffrion et al. 2014; Monaghan, 2004; Sanders 2005; Wells et al 1998; Winlow et al. 2001; Rigakos 2008). According to Roberts (2009: p65), bouncers are the most capable, and the most efficient protectors of order within bars and nightclubs. Without bouncers, it would not seem too far-fetched to say that the night-time economy would dissolve into complete anarchy.

Scholars commonly note the prevalence of violence that occurs throughout bars and the night-time economy (Roberts 2009; DeMichele & Tewksbury 2004; Finney 2004; Forsyth et al. 2005; Fox & Sobol 2000; Geoffrion et al. 2014; Graham et. al 2006; Graham et al. 1980; Graham & Wells 2003; Hobbs et. al 2002; Hobbs et al. 2007; Homel & Clark 1994; Homel et al. 1992; Leather & Lawrence 1995; Quigley et al. 2003; Wells et al. 1998; Winlow et al. 2001; Rigakos 2008). This prevalence of aggression is a fascinating phenomenon: why does so much violence take place throughout the night-time economy? Scholars have given countless explanations in an attempt to answer this question. Some attribute this violence to unruly patrons who break rules, drink excessively, and antagonize bar staff (Graham et al. 1980; Homel & Clark 1994; Fox &

Sobol 1994; Graham & Wells 2001; Van Brunschot 2003; Quigley et al. 2003; Graham et al. 2006; Roberts, 2007). On the other hand, several scholars attempt to explain and predict this prevalence of violence by attributing it to a complicated mix of causal environmental factors, such as overcrowding, noise level, décor, and cleanliness (Finney 2004; Forsyth 2005; Graham et al. 2006; Graham et al. 1980; Homel & Clark 1994; Leather & Lawrence 1995; Quigley et al. 2003). These scholars address the problematic environment that are nightclubs, and not the delinquent activities of the occupants or the bouncers tasked with regulating them. While acknowledging the violence that permeates the night club scene, these authors describe a number of different variables that can lead to violence in bars: the most dangerous rooms and times in a bar (Geoffrion et al. 2014); over-serving of alcohol (Homel & Clark 1994); and smokiness and ventilation (Forsyth et al. 2005), to name a few. While a little focus is given to the role of bouncers and their culture, these authors look at bars in a broad scope and argue that a great combination of factors leads to violence in the night-time economy.

While not always explicitly mentioned, there are a number of theoretical approaches to explaining this violence and chaos that appear throughout the research. As demonstrated through the work of Hobbs et al. (2002); Lister et al. (2000); Winlow et al. (2001), the overarching theme is that of violence in the night-time economy. In this sense, the theoretical tone that underpins this research is a sort of economic theory of deviance. This approach seems to assume that the crime and violence prevalent throughout the night-time economy can be attributed to one umbrella factor: the sale of alcohol. As demonstrated above, the sale of considerable amounts of alcohol and the need to hire

private security to deal with the consequences may not be the only approach to understanding this phenomenon.

On a different note, there were two studies conducted that explicitly mentioned their theoretical approach to studying violence in the night-time economy: the work of Fox & Sobol (2000) and Geoffrion et al. (2014) use a routine activities theoretical approach. For these authors, the routine activity in question would be crime and violence in nightclubs; the capable guardians being bouncers; the victims being bar patrons; and the motivated offenders being other bar patrons. The assumption inherent in this approach would be that the phenomenon of violence occurring around bouncers can be explained with a general criminological theory that has been subject to much criticism; relying heavily on a quantitative approach, this approach neglects some qualitative data that might be very important to understanding how this works.

Despite the long list of variables that may lead to violence, as noted by Roberts (2009: p66), there is a concerning trend among scholars to place the blame for violence and criminal acts on bouncers and bar staff themselves (also see Finney 2004; Hobbs et al. 2002; Lister et al. 2000; Winlow et al. 2001; Fox & Sobol 2000; Homel et al. 1992; Forsyth et. al 2005; Graham et al. 2005). Mostly, this has been attributed to the poor training of bouncers, the lack of accountability, and the illegal means of dealing with unruly patrons (Hobbs et al. 2002; Lister et al. 2000; Monaghan 2004; Winlow et al. 2000). The argument for blaming bouncers is that they are the obvious perpetrators in their paid role as agents of social control, using threats and physical violence as their primary tools for achieving this social control (Lister et al. 2000). As is commonly told, the physical size and weight advantage, and their sobriety certainly creates a power

imbalance between drunken clients and bouncers. Additionally, Hobbs et al. (2002) and Lister et al. (2000) highlight the lax accountability of bouncers, and argue that they will continue to meet the needs of the industry but not those of local laws. With the combinations of power, aggression, and lack of accountability, scholars argue that bouncers are able to act as agents of social control by using any means necessary.

The stigma associated with the occupation and culture of bouncers starts with regular bar patrons and extends to criminologists examining their pervasive aggression and violence. Often, the level of physical intervention methods used by bouncers is considered by some to be assaultive. Not only are bouncers accused of assault, it is presupposed that they often get away without criminal charges (Lister et al. 2000; Monaghan, 2003; Hobbs et al. 2002). Bouncers are all too often criticized for taking justice into their own hands; what is consistently overlooked are the terrifying instances of crime that bouncers must deal with, and often fall victim to. Working as a private security guard for the night-time leisure industry not only puts one at risk of negative stereotypes, but also a pervasive amount of alcohol induced-crime.

Many scholars believe bouncers' methods of internal regulation to be criminal (Fox & Sobol 2000; Hobbs et al. 2002; Lister et al. 2000; Monaghan 2004; Winlow et al. 2000). For example, Hobbs et al. (2002: p355) and argue that bouncers use over-aggressive and mostly illegal means of enforcement, subscribing only to the needs of the industry and not that of laws or ethics when it comes to dealing with unruly patrons. Other scholars claim that bouncers simply follow the unwritten norms of the industry. Most often, these rules are not clear to patrons who may be breaking them (DeMichele & Tewksbury 2004; Lister et al 2000; Monaghan 2004; Van Brunschot 2003).

If bouncers are causes and perpetrators of criminal aggression, the literature suggests they mostly get away with it (Lister et al. 2000; Hobbs et al. 2002; Finney 2004; Winlow et al. 2001; Graham et al. 2003; Monaghan 2004). Several scholars describe a variety of reasons that bouncers seem to be immune from assault and other criminal charges. First and foremost, the majority of assault cases aren't dealt with by the police because the police never hear about them. The lack of police involvement is not only because of the lack of state order (Hobbs et al. 2002), but the reluctance to call them; if bouncers need to take care of something, they do it themselves (Hobbs et al. 2002; Hobbs et al. 2003; Monaghan 2004; Lister et al. 2000; Finney 2004; Sanders 2005). Forsyth et al. (2005) even draw attention to a particularly interesting strategy: a reluctance to call the police is backed up by an inter-bar security alliance, where bouncers from neighbouring bars will scramble at the call of trouble that cannot be dealt with by one bar's bouncers alone. According to these scholars, the vigilante social control carried out by bouncers creates a culture where police help is unnecessary or unwanted. By dealing with incidents themselves, the police do not get involved. This, in turn, may decrease the chances of someone calling the police because doing so would break a cultural norm.

Lister et al. (2002) examine how overly-aggressive and violent bouncers evade prosecution. They find that violent crimes in bars fail to be reported to the police but when they are, police often fail to investigate. The authors conclude that much is needed to be done with the culture of bouncers that approves of violence and the culture of police that doesn't disapprove of it. If it weren't already difficult enough to lay charges, they present a host of difficulties faced if assault charges against bouncers ever make it to

court. This may include anything from the destruction of incident reports to the clouded memory of intoxicated victims.

A number of scholars comment on the existing training programs and registration schemes that are in place to dissuade bouncer violence, make bouncers accountable for their actions, and make bars safer for everyone. However, the literature is split; with some authors highlighting the success of these programs (Graham 2000; Graham et al 2004; Graham et al. 2005; Homel et al. 2004; Homel et al. 1994; Chandler-Coutts et al. 2000) while others make note of the massive pitfalls of such training and registration schemes (Lister et al. 2002; Forsyth et al. 2005; Graham et al 2006; Graham et al 2005). While scholars argue that most bouncers are not held accountable and not adequately trained in assault reduction approaches, they are certainly trained quite well in one area: the art of evading prosecution should the need arise. While some scholars may hint at the idea, there are some who explicitly detail the various techniques of evasion used by bouncers to avoid prosecution (Lister et al. 2000; Monaghan 2002; Roberts 2009); such as codes of silence and the destruction of end of night reports. As Roberts (2009: p63) notes, some bouncers even go as far as acting aggressively only when they know they are outside the view of security cameras. All in all, scholars attribute the lack of police intervention, the lack of accountability, and the use of evasion techniques to the ability for bouncers to get away with using hyper-aggressive means of regulating the leisure industry.

This paper fully supports the scholars who have argued for the extreme prevalence of violence and crime that occur throughout the night-time economy.

However, I present a number of challenges for the existing literature. First, scholars have demonstrated that throughout the night-time economy, there is a lack of accountability for

bouncers because of a regression of police involvement and state order. I argue that this is certainly not the case, and present a system of respect and a working relationship that bouncers and police officers have with one another. Secondly, other scholars argue that bouncers themselves are one of the factors that lead to violence throughout the night-time economy, and often use excessive forms of control that equate to criminal assault. While this may be case, scholars have consistently ignored the obvious crime and aggression that bouncers fall victim to. I present several stories of bouncer's victimization, and demonstrate how the perceived criminality of bouncers may just be instances of self-defense.

Personal Experience

In addition to the stories told by bouncers, this paper employs personal reflections from my own experiences as a bouncer. This experience provides an interesting auto-ethnographic aspect to the overall research. As outlined by Ellis et al. (2011), an auto ethnography mixes elements of an autobiography and ethnography to describe and analyze personal experiences in order to connect them to a wider sociological understanding. Auto ethnography involves a researcher using him- or her-self as a research subject, recording and reflecting on experiences in the field (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: p210). It is the process of gaining an in depth "understanding of how individuals in different cultures and subcultures make sense of their lived reality" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: p193), auto ethnography involves a researchers using themselves research subjects, recording and reflecting on their experiences in the field (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: p210).

The proposed research will use the author's experience in the field, reflect on and analyze this experience in order to contribute to the understanding of bouncer vigilantism as a masculine performance. Auto ethnography allows for a personal and insider glance at an exclusive field of study. It allows for the researcher to connect with the research subjects as the researcher himself is being researched. Additionally, "this kind of research can be empowering for the researcher-subject and raise our self-consciousness and reflexivity" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: p211).

While much of the existing literature paints bouncers as the criminals, my research aims to use an insider perspective to fill this tremendous gap in the literature. I have worked for many years without using criminal or hyper-aggressive tactics,. This topic interests me as I have been a victim of crime in the night-time economy and I have experienced bouncer culture first hand, long before any thoughts of an independent research project may have clouded my perception of events.

Before I ever had a chance to enjoy a bar as paying customer, I began working as a private security guard at a downtown nightclub. The hiring process did not entail very much scrutiny: a friend of mine managed a security company, recognized my size and physical ability, and asked if I was interested in some part time work. That same evening, I donned my black shirt and headed downtown. With no training and minimal instruction, I was told where to stand and thus began my career as a bouncer.

A few weeks into my calling as a bouncer was my most vivid experience of crime and violence that bouncers face regularly. One shift, I was working at a nightclub that has an upstairs patio overlooking a busy downtown street. I was on the very crowded patio,

and was obviously unable to keep my eye on everything that was taking place. At some point, a drunken male patron violently threw a large glass at the bouncers who were working the front entrance on the street below. Before long, one of my colleagues ran upstairs, grabbed me and said “Get ready to rock and roll”. Following him through the crowd, he eventually found the perpetrator (of considerable size and strength) whom we simultaneously grabbed. Without hesitation, the suspect began swinging his fists, and immediately connected with my face. Disoriented, I stepped back and knew that we would stand no chance boxing against this individual. My sports instinct kicked in, and I swiftly took him to the ground using a rugby-style dump tackle. Once he was on the ground, my colleague and I certainly had the upper hand, or so I thought. Almost as soon as I was sturdily on top of him, his girlfriend began hitting me and scratching my face. At this point, the rest of the bouncers became aware of this incident and ran to our aid. The first bouncer who responded happened to be the biggest and most experienced bouncer we had. He threw the suspect’s girlfriend across the floor, and used his giant hands to cover the suspects face. After a short amount of time, he removed his hands, and the suspect who had previously been fighting us intensely from the ground was now snoring. Though it seemed like an eternity, almost as soon as we took control of the situation, several undercover and uniformed police officers arrived on the patio, handcuffed both the man and his girlfriend, and took them away. I continued working on the patio that evening as if nothing happened. Incidents like this one, and my education as a Criminology student, are the inspiration for the following qualitative research.

Stories from the Front Line of the Night-time Economy

By working downtown and demonstrating my ability to handle myself, I have built a rapport with a number of bouncers in the city. Consequently, this provided a considerable convenience sample when it came to finding bouncers to participate in in-depth interviews. I conducted 10 in-depth interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. With the expectation of anonymity and their personal confidence in me as a bouncer, I was able to uncover a long list of intriguing instances of crime in the night time economy, many of which were much worse than my own experience.

To present a deeper understanding of bouncer culture, I also conducted in-depth interviews. As demonstrated by Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011: 94), ethnographies are often complemented by in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are a popular qualitative method that are issue-oriented and particularly useful when individuals may hold the answers to specific questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: p95). These interviews entail an open-ended list of questions, and a confidential, personal conversation between the participant and the researcher that can help uncover issues, ideas, and answers that the researcher alone may not have been able to uncover (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The strengths of in-depth interviews include the ability to gain personal accounts and opinions from the group of people who are being studied. This approach allows for the voices and needs of the respondents to be heard. Weaknesses lie within ethical concerns and the ability to coordinate the actual interviews.

In-depth interviews are of particular importance for this proposed research, as this study focuses on bouncers' perceptions of their own vigilantism and the experiences of

victimization that they have faced. By using in-depth interviews, this research project explains the prevalence of vigilantism, masculinity, and the dark figure of crime from the views of real life bouncers themselves. These interviews supplement the auto ethnography by giving the research a view that may differ or may align with the experiences of the author.

In addition to auto-ethnography and in-depth interviews, I conducted a focus group. While similar to in-depth interviews, focus groups are a method in which multiple participants are interviewed. While the focus group allows for a number of findings to be uncovered at once, it can be time consuming and difficult to arrange and coordinate a time and meeting place that is suitable for all respondents. This approach will potentially foster additional input by convening a group of bouncers together who will be collectively discussing the topics of vigilantism, masculinity and the dark figure of crime committed against them. By conducting focus group interviews, not only was I able to uncover unknown information regarding bouncer culture, but the bouncers participating in the focus group were inspired by the group effect; additional narratives that the researcher would have never uncovered without the use of this collective thinking may be discovered

The sample of bouncers used was 10 for in-depth interviews and 5 for the focus group. Some would consider this number to be non-representative in a methodological sense. Given that this research was conducted within one month and hoped to uncover personalized and detailed stories, this was the feasible amount. With this number of bouncers, I was able to sit down and have a productive in-depth interview without time constraints. However, this small sample may have presented the research from

uncovering even more about bouncer culture. This study used a convenience sample of bouncers that I have met through work or other relationships.

The sample of bouncers that were interviewed are among those who I would consider experience bouncers for this particular city. Each has worked in a variety of different bars. Most importantly, each bouncer has worked in what many would consider the busiest and most crazy bars/ clubs that this city has to offer. All of the bouncers interviewed were male ranging from age 20 to 30. Most of the bouncers interviewed have been the victims of serious crimes. Whether they were currently employed as a bouncer or retired, each respondent happily shared instances of crime that they have witnessed or been involved in.

Respect

“Something people wouldn’t know about us is that we are mostly just decent guys trying to make some money to survive. You hear about us beating someone up. You’ll never hear about us performing first aid, or stopping a girl from getting raped”- *George*

The paper starts by examining three constructions of respect throughout the night-time economy. The first form of respect is the perceived disrespect that bouncers face from bar patrons, and their reactions to it. The second is the respect that bouncers earn and hold for one-another, and how this is crucial to their functioning in regulating the night-time economy. Third is the respect that bouncers and police officers have for one another, and how their combined effort combats deviance. Next, the paper presents instances of crime and victimization that have occurred in the night-time economy from the voices of bouncers. Finally, the informal justice system of the night-time economy is outlined.

Interestingly, every one of the respondents stated that bouncers are not given enough respect from the patrons who frequent bars. As described earlier in this paper, Roberts (2009: p66) argues that there is a concerning trend among scholars to place the blame for the outstanding prevalence of violence and criminal acts on bouncers themselves (also see Finney 2004; Hobbs et al. 2002; Lister et al. 2000; Winlow et al. 2001; Fox & Sobol 2000; Homel et al. 1992; Forsyth et. al 2005; Graham et al. 2005). It seems as if bouncers feel the full brunt of this stigma from customers as well.

Responses to the open ended question all inferred a feeling of disrespect towards bouncers. Respondents explained feelings such as:

- “Bouncers deal with more shit than you realize... for every you hear about a bouncer being too aggressive, there have been 5 times where that bouncers has been assaulted”
- “The general public thinks we’re all fucking stupid, we’re all pieces of shit, we’re all judged to be assholes and this judgment is made way too quickly. We aren’t given the proper credit that we’re due for the amount of patience and tolerance we actually give.”

During the focus group session, I followed-up on this theme. The bouncers in the focus-group discussed a number of instances that they perceived as regular disrespect. These included acts such as blatant disrespect like back talk, not being friendly, threats, physical fighting, and trying to cheat the system like sneaking into the bar or sneaking drinks out. Other forms of disrespect included guests becoming offended when bouncers asked for ID, remaining in the bar for as long as possible after closing time, belittlement, obstinacy, and simply having no respect for the property or a bouncers role as a representative of the bar.

From my personal experience as a bouncer, I can attest to each and every one of these forms of disrespect. Initially, the overall negative attitude towards your position is very counter-intuitive. I was in charge of making sure these people had a safe night of drinking, but I was often looked at as if I was some kind of “other,” whose existence was to disrupt the possibility of having a good time at the bar. In reality, I was not very different from most of the people attending my bar. I just a student working a part-time job to get by. With a good attitude, a lot of this disrespect can be ignored and can certainly be considered part of the job. Unfortunately, this disrespect gets very old very quickly. I definitely had enough of this disrespect and internalized it. Instead of heading out for a night of working looking to make sure everyone had the best time possible, I would go to work expecting to have a bad encounter with a customer. Bouncers don’t forget, either: if someone showed me respect, follows the rules, and is generally friendly, this person may get a second chance at staying in the bar if they are too drunk. On the other hand, if someone has been rude, they won’t get a second chance and will be removed from the bar at the first sign of intoxication. Instead of asking this person to exit the bar, I may grab their arm and tell them they are leaving.

I argue that this lack of disrespect may be one of the reasons bouncers have a job in the first place. As demonstrated earlier, some scholars attribute the rowdiness and violence of the night-time economy to unruly patrons who break rules, drink excessively, and antagonize bar staff (Graham et al. 1980; Homel & Clark 1994; Fox & Sobol 1994; Graham & Wells 2001; Van Brunschot 2003; Quigley et al. 2003; Graham et al. 2006; Roberts, 2007). Because the air of disrespect exists, bouncers have very good job

security: as long as drunken guests cause trouble and disrespect the club and its employees, proprietors will have a role for bouncers.

As demonstrated by the respondents, most bouncers are not out to get anyone, and just want to keep everyone safe. When someone begins antagonizing you, and questioning your position as a representative of the bar, you begin to lose touch with this initial goal. It very much becomes a scenario of us versus them; the drunk versus the protectors of the bar. Sometimes, the ejection may not be the most pleasant experience. Dealing with the constant bullying of customers is considered by most to be just a part of the job, but a lot of it gets built up. Imagine working an overnight shift having to deal with the constant disrespect of customers, and you are in a position where you are supposed to protect the very same people that have belittled you. It is no wonder that the divide between bouncers and patrons grows, and the stigma against bouncers exist. This obvious disrespect influences the world of bouncers by weakening the bond between them and customers, and strengthening the bond between each other. In an occupation that is very teamwork oriented, disrespect towards one bouncer might be considered as disrespect towards to whole staff. Because of this, a person simply being a drunken idiot or talking back to a bouncer, though possibly unintended, will be considered as a direct insult to the bouncer. When an intoxicated person physically responds to a bouncer, this will be considered as a disrespectful attack and will be dealt with appropriate force.

Respect among Bouncers

“Some bouncers consider their job to be war. You can’t be a pussy if you want to earn respect” - *David*

Just as there exists a certain level of disrespect projected towards bouncers, there exists an equal level of respect that bouncers have for each other in order to function cohesively. When it comes to getting a job as a bouncer and keeping this job, in many cases respect is the only resume a person has. Personally, by demonstrating the ability to handle myself physically in particular situations and by earning the respect of the necessary people, I was recruited to work the downtown scene. After the fight in the story I detailed earlier, my direct involvement and “willingness” to help my supervisor earned me the respect to solidify my position at the highest paying bar with that particular security company. Many of the bouncers interviewed for this study expressed similar experiences.

The bouncers interviewed for this study expressed that in order to have any success as a bouncer, you needed to earn and keep the respect of your fellow bouncers. The interviews uncovered that there was a happy medium to follow in order to gain this respect: one cannot be too aggressive, but one cannot be not aggressive enough either. Respect from your fellow bouncers wasn’t only important to keeping a job, but it seemed essential for your own safety:

- “If they have my respect, I’m gonna back them up. If I didn’t like them, I wouldn’t help them. If someone has previously helped me, I’ve got them”
- “Some guys are just not about the life, I have no idea how they have jobs in the first place. I’m worried if I work with people who I know aren’t physical. At the same time, I don’t want to work with someone who beats people up for fun. At the end of the day I want to be safe, so I will do what I have to do”
- “You can lose respect by not doing what you should do, even the small things. People won’t feel safe working with you. Either you will lose your spot, get sent to a lower paying bar, or you won’t have any backup in a fight”.

I have worked in several bars with both extremes of bouncers. Sometimes you are afraid that someone can't handle themselves, and other times you are afraid that the guys you are with will cause harm for nothing. As George put it, "There is an unwritten code to follow. People will be mad if you don't have their back. We're a small team versus 1000 drunk idiots, so everyone has to do their part. Guys who can't hold their own don't stay around for long." This interesting relationship of respect has two very contending opposites: on the one hand, patrons have disrespect for bouncers, while on the other hand bouncers have a tremendous respect for one another. This respect allows bouncers to work without having to worry about the imminent violence and crime that will occur.

Respect between Bouncers and Police

Some scholars have argued that "As the day gives way to the night, the state relinquishes and devolves many of its policing duties to the bouncer" (Hobbs et al., 2002: p355). This paper contests this idea. As explained by bouncers themselves, there exists a strong relationship of respect and comradery between bouncers and the local police service. In my introductory story, I told the tale of how several undercover and uniformed officers responded within minutes to the fight that I was involved in. No questions were asked, and the police took the perpetrators into custody. Many, if not all of the bouncers I interviewed expressed similar experiences and relationships of respect with the police officers tasked with patrolling the downtown corridor at night.

In most of the extreme stories told, there was a sort of bouncer arrest, where bouncers would subdue a drunken criminal until the police arrived. Interestingly, 3 different bouncers described what is known as the "Police Wave". It works because of the

active patrol of the police and being in the right place at the right time. In one particular street of the city, dozens of nightclubs are next to each other, so the paddy wagon simply has to drive up and down. If there is an altercation or an action where a police response is needed, the bouncers working outside will wave down the police car making the rounds. Once they see the wave, they will know exactly what is going on. Without hesitation, they will arrest the suspects that the bouncers have taken control of and take them to the drunk tank for the evening.

Craig described a scenario in which one of his colleagues was savagely beaten outside the bar by 5 or 6 aggressive males. While some staff attended to the fallen bouncer, a group of several police officers and several bouncers ran down the street together to subdue the suspects. Abdul told us of a story in which he was working at a bar in a disadvantaged area of the city, far from downtown. Before long, the entire bar was full of opposing gang members. Because he had a bad feeling about the situation, he called the police as the crowd grew tense. Eventually, the crowd erupted into a massive 15 on 15 gang brawl. Working alongside the police, Abdul helped break up the fight, subdue several individuals, and even helped the officers in arresting and placing the gang members in handcuffs. George described a massive street fight that began in the middle of his club that eventually got moved outside. Amid the chaos, the police arrived on scene with guns drawn. He drew a vivid picture of police and bouncers on one side of the incident, with drunken civilians on the other side.

These events and my personal experiences challenge Hobbs et al. (2002: p355)'s argument that when day gives way to night, the states' enforcement responsibilities are taken from the local police and put in charge of private security guards. Every respondent

claimed that when bad went to worse, the police were there in force. These stories attest to fact that the state's policing responsibilities are not relinquished, but that everyone has a role to play. The state may have a different responsibility, but the state's role of maintaining law and order throughout the night-time economy certainly does not go away. Bouncers and police have different, but overlapping responsibilities when it comes to regulating the downtown scene.

Bouncers are responsible for the front lines of the night-time economy. They are found within the epicenter of violence and crime, in the middle of the establishments that serve copious amounts of alcohol to rowdy crowds. Bouncers make sure that this scenario does not descend into complete chaos. Part of the role is to identify and subdue those who pose a threat to the peace of the night-time economy. When a suspect listens to a bouncer, they are deemed safe enough to roam free throughout the streets of downtown. However, if someone is aggressive or responds violently to bouncers, they are identified as a threat and it is a bouncer's responsibility to ensure the safety of himself, the patrons of the bar, and the general public to subdue this person and hand them over to the police.

Because of the presence and pro-active patrols carried out by the police service in the city that this study took place, constables are able to respond quickly to either emergency calls or to physical wave-downs from bouncers working outside. The respect between bouncers and police is an important one. Because of the respect that bouncers and police have for each other, the police know that they will not be called or waved-down for no reason at all. When they are responding to a call from bouncers, they already know the details of the situation without any investigation. Because of this, bouncers get a fast and efficient helping hand from the police, they help each other

subdue suspects, and the police take them to lock up. With common goals and a common understanding, bouncers and police officers together are able to maintain peace and order within the night-time economy.

Crime and Violence in the Night-time Economy

“I would have more stories of violent situations that stand out to me, but I’ve become numb to the crazy shit that happens at work so I wouldn’t even notice it as exceptional.” – *Gordon*

A lot of bad things happen throughout the night-time economy. Violence and crime are a common occurrence. As noted above, scholars commonly place the blame for the outstanding prevalence of violence and criminal acts on bouncers and bar staff themselves (Roberts 2009: p66, also see Finney 2004; Hobbs et al. 2002; Lister et al. 2000; Winlow et al. 2001; Fox & Sobol 2000; Homel et al. 1992; Forsyth et. al 2005; Graham et al. 2005). Not only are bouncers accused of assault, supposedly they often get away without criminal charges (Lister et al. 2000; Monaghan, 2003; Hobbs et al. 2002). Bouncers are all too often criticized for taking justice into their own hands; what is consistently overlooked are the terrifying instances of crime that bouncers must deal with, and often fall victim to. Working as a private security guard for the night-time leisure industry not only puts one at risk of negative stereotypes, but also a pervasive amount of alcohol induced-crime.

When I asked the bouncers if they had ever witnessed, or been a victim of a, crime, several acted as if I was joking, as if the obvious answer was “duh, what else do bouncers do?” Every respondent was willing to share countless stories of crimes they had witnessed or experienced first-hand. Sucker punches in the middle of the ground were

common; someone in the middle of crowded punches someone out of nowhere, and usually gets away with it. The harassment of women was another common occurrence. Bouncers often protect intoxicated women. Drug use seems to happen a lot throughout the evening; respondents reported removing people from the bar who they found using cocaine or smoking marijuana. Of all the crimes bouncers witnessed, the one that came up in interviews more than others was the issue of drunk driving, and this seemed to cause some concern. While out of the bouncers' jurisdiction of the bar, they felt the responsibility to stop the patron before they got into their car. However, most of the time it seemed as if a drunk person would just leave the bar unnoticed and drive away.

In addition to the countless instances of crime that bouncers have witnessed, the respondents willingly told stories of when they had been the victims of some very serious crimes. George told the story of being seriously assaulted. They painted the picture of a very quiet evening of work, and it was almost at the end of their shift. The night, they were working outside on the street and everything was normal. "Out nowhere, a very large guy sucker punched me. I fell to the ground and smacked my head. This hurt like hell, and I was bleeding badly". George explained that during this particular evening, they had not even kicked anyone out or given anyone a hard time. Luckily, the police weren't far down the road and arrested the individual, sending him to the drunk tank.

Patrick told us of a time that they were nearly impaled with a wooden spike. Three drunken males were physically removed from the bar after causing several issues. Outside the bar, these three each ripped a wooden construction spike out of the ground along the parking lot outside, and re-entered the bar. The first male used the spike like a rifle with a

bayonet, while the other two through them as spears. After their attack, they sprinted to their car and drove away drunkenly.

David recounted an emotionally intense incident. At their bar, there had been a male who would come to the bar during the daylight hours, clearly intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. He would make inappropriate remarks and gestures towards the waitresses, and cause disturbances for no reason. Though this individual was banned from the bar, he returned on an evening when David was working. Immediately, David got a bad vibe from the guy and from experience, suspected he was high on something. After explaining that the individual would not be allowed to enter the bar, he looked at David in the eyes and asked “Do you believe in God? You will meet him tomorrow.” After laughing at the individual, he left but returned a short while later. He stood outside the bar listening to rap music playing from his phone, and continuously made gun symbols towards the bouncer. Eventually, this individual told David that he was going to blow up the bar, and that tomorrow would be his doomsday. The police were called, and the individual was subsequently sent to the hospital for a mental evaluation.

Thomas told me of the time that he was the victim of an online backlash for an incident he was involved in. At some point one evening, he had asked a very drunk female patron to leave the bar. After arguing with the bouncer, she refused to leave. Eventually, Thomas decided he would try their hand at gently physically escorting the female out of the bar. As soon as he went to do this, she spat in his face. After getting spit in the face, Thomas was obviously upset and began yelling and telling the female to “Get the fuck out of here!” After more yelling and profanity, the female finally began to leave. What he did not notice was the fact that the female had pulled out her phone and secretly

began recording Thomas yelling at her. This video, not showing the whole story, was posted on social media and the bar and Thomas received online criticism for the incident. Luckily, Thomas was not effected by any transmittable disease, though he was the victim of online bullying and discipline at his workplace.

Last but not least, was Craig's tale of experiencing a serious assault with a weapon. Craig was working in one of the city's biggest and craziest bar, when he noticed a large male stumbling and shoving people on the dance floor. They approached the male, grabbed his arm and began escorting him towards to door. Before he had time to defend himself, Craig was struck over the head with a beer bottle, presumably by one of the drunken male's companions. Craig was knocked unconscious and received a concussion. In the confusion that ensued, both the first drunken male and the one who struck the bouncer with a bottle escaped.

Though scholars have attributed the prevalence of crime and violence to bouncers themselves, the stories told by the 10 bouncers interviewed for this research tell a very different tale. From petty disrespect to serious assaults, bouncer have experienced it all, regardless of how they have treated those who have frequented bars. After speaking with these bouncers, one thing was clear: they would rather not deal with this kind of thing. For bouncers, there are a number of consequences of being victimized. Some bouncers, like Craig and Thomas, development a substantial fear of the occupation and eventually retired. A number bouncers reported an added level of stress on the job.

Ultimately, the reality of victimization that bouncers face certainly adds to the theme of respect in the nigh-time economy. In the eyes of bouncers, this creates a collectivity among them for they have all witnessed or experienced crime. It makes a

part-time security job more than that. When a small group of bouncers are on a team against a thousand drunk people, any of which might be willing to hurt you, there is no other choice but to act with comradery and respect with your fellow bouncers. Because they are working together to avoid victimization, something that can happen at any minute, there is certainly an elevated level of respect between bouncers. Likewise, this solidifies the respect among bouncers and police officers. There is a common goal against a common evil; it is the role of bouncers and police officers to make sure that drinking downtown can be a safe environment for everyone. Unfortunately, this is not always a safe place for bouncers; this is understood by all of them, and they respect each other for being brave enough to work there for a night.

The Stairway of Doom: Justice in the Night-time Economy

“No one who hurts us gets in trouble, no one gives a shit about bouncers. But at the same time, none of us get in trouble when we take things into our own hands”- *Benjamin*

The literature on bouncers suggest that some of the aggressive means of regulation they use are criminal, and they usually get away with criminal charges (Lister et. al 2000; Hobbs et al. 2002; Finney 2004; Winlow et al. 2001; Graham et al. 2003; Monaghan 2004). Some scholars even go as far as to say that bouncers uses “techniques of evasion”, or strategies specifically designed to avoid getting in trouble with the law (Lister et al. 2000; Monaghan 2002; Roberts 2009); such as codes of silence and the destruction of end of night reports. As demonstrated above, bouncers themselves are often the victims of crimes which never make it to court. However, the bouncers interviewed for this study were eager to share their explanations as to why criminal charges for anyone are avoided throughout the night-time economy, and how criminal charges wouldn’t be necessary after bouncers have dealt with the suspects.

After conducting interviews with the 10 bouncers, another clear theme emerged: that a great deal of crime occurs throughout the night-time economy, and most of it largely goes unpunished in the courts. In a follow-up focus group with several bouncers, this theme was brought up and the participants were asked if they had idea of why this may be the case. This question was answered eagerly, and several explanations were given. The answers included responses such as that what goes on downtown is sort of an unwritten code, and that violence should be expected by all parties. They saw the role of the police as mostly an extension of themselves; they take drunk people out of the bar, and the police take the drunk people to the drunk tank for the evening. Bouncer perceived this as being easier than actually charging someone for drunkenly assaulting someone. One bouncer stated what he thought to be obvious: if every case of drunken assault went to court, our already crazy wait time in the courts will be doubled. The discussion concluded with these remarks: “Is traditional justice even necessary? We know it’s not coming, so we deal with shit ourselves. Rest assured, someone will think twice about hurting someone in our bar again after we deal with them.”

Despite what appeared to be a lack of criminal charges, and a vast array of criminal acts taking place, the Bouncers who participated in this study were happy to talk about their cases of vigilante justice. There were many stories of how these Bouncers have taken matter into their own hands. Four of the bouncers we interviewed had each previously worked a particular bar with quite a sketchy exit staircase. The staircase has swing-open double doors at the top, about 20 very narrow stairs, and another set of doors leading to the street outside. These 4 bouncers all knew this staircase as *The Stairway of Doom*. To the researcher and the bouncers themselves, The Stairway of Doom was the

ultimate form of downtown justice. If someone ever attacked someone or committed another heinous act within the bar, the team of bouncers served as the judge and jury, while the Stairway served as the executioner.

One of the respondents told me of a case where someone was given swift and “fair” justice after striking his girlfriend in the face. Several bouncers surrounded the individual, hit him a few times, and then “wooden boarded” the individual –this is where one person secures each limb of the individual, so that they cannot move and are easily manipulated. Without a thought, the group of bouncers headed for the dreaded swing-open doors, and threw the individual head first down the stairway. As far as the bouncer who told the story knew, the man who struck his girlfriend did not receive any charges, and the bouncers were not disciplined in any way for their actions. Meanwhile, the Stairway of Doom remains standing in the same spot, ready consume the next person who commits an atrocity in the night-time economy.

Discussion and Conclusion

The environment created by thousands of rowdy, drunken individuals in a dark and crowded space certainly increases the risk of violent incidents and crime. Bouncers are tasked with facing this risk head on, and are in charge of the protection of physical property, maintaining order, and ensuring that the provincial alcohol regulations are met. This paper provided a qualitative look at the occupation of private security guards in the night-time economy, and presented findings from in-depth interviews and a follow-up focus group with 10 current and former bouncers. From the stories that these bouncers told, three common themes emerged: the importance of respect, the abundance of crime that takes place, and the night-time economy’s own justice system.

Respect throughout the night-time economy is essential. The night-time economy does not function without an intricate web of respect. As told by bouncers, they would not have a job if they were respected by all guests of the bar. Drunk people seem to hate bouncers, and bouncers expect and embrace this disrespect. At the same time, the respect that bouncers have for other bouncers is what helps these private security guards deal with the imminent disrespect. Inherent in this disrespect is the occasional assault or victimization of another crime. Because bouncers respect each other, they back each other up, and ensure that each other is safe. After bouncers have experienced the disrespect from drunk patrons and “dealt” with them, the third avenue of the respect trifecta appears: that of the police and bouncers. Police arrive on scene and ask no questions, they will take the bouncers words and actions at face value, as they should most of the time, and take the drunken criminals to lockup for the evening.

Crime occurs at a terrifying rate throughout the night-time economy; violent crime and assaults are no exception. Whether committed by drunk customers or by bouncers themselves, it seems to be unavoidable. How do bouncers deal with this unavoidable crime? Their own system of vigilante justice, of course. Bouncers face so much violence, nearly all of which goes unpunished by the country’s criminal justice system that many have turned to taking justice into their own hands. Of the many methods the respondents articulated, one method of downtown justice stood out considerably from the others: The Stairway of Doom.

This paper presented a number of challenges for the existing literature on bouncers and bouncer culture. First, scholars have demonstrated a gap in police involvement and state order. I argue that there exists a system of respect and a working

relationship that bouncers and police officers have with one another. Secondly, scholars have consistently ignored the obvious crime and aggression that bouncers fall victim to.

The dimension of respect that bouncers lack from customers, have for another, and have with the police are very important for understanding their role in the night-time economy. Bouncers face constant disrespect from drunken patrons and the imminent threat of witnessing or falling victim to crime in the downtown drinking scene. Because of this collective danger, bouncers have developed a tremendous system of respect for one another. Respect is what gets you in, helps you stay in, and keeps you safe during a dangerous night. Together, by facing the disrespect from patrons and working with the respect from police, bouncers develop a particular case of social solidarity between one-another. They have each other's back when the going gets tough. By spending countless evenings together battling the difficulties of the night-time economy, bouncers have a shared world of experience.

The social solidarity and shared experiences of bouncers combine to create a cohesive bouncer culture. This cohesive bouncer culture is what allows for the regulation and the informal justice system of the night-time economy to function without difficulty. Once a bouncer puts on their black shirt and mans their post, without even being told what to do they are ready for what is about to come. If you see someone else in a black shirt who needs help, you better be there to support them. If you see something developing, you can jump in with the confidence knowing that 3 or 4 others in black shirts will be right behind you. And, should someone make the unwise decision to strike one of your colleagues, without thinking you can be ready to serve justice in the name of the night-time economy.

References

- DeMichele, M. T., & Tewksbury, R. (2004). Sociological explorations in site-specific social control: The role of the strip club bouncer. *Deviant Behavior, 25*(6), 537-558.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T., Bochner, A. (2010). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1)
- Finney, A. (2004). *Violence in the night-time economy: Key findings from the research*. Home Office Research Findings 214. London.
- Forsyth, A. J., Cloonan, M., & Barr, J. (2005). Factors associated with alcohol-related problems within licensed premises. *Glasgow: Greater Glasgow NHS Board. GCCAAG (2006) Play Safe in Glasgow: Annual Report, 2006*
- Fox, J. G., & Sobol, J. J. (2000). Drinking patterns, social interaction, and barroom behavior: A routine activities approach. *Deviant Behavior, 21*(5), 429-450.
- Geoffrion, S., Felson, M., Boivin, R., & Ouellet, F. (2014). Systematic observation of barroom incidents in a large Montreal venue. *Security Journal,*
- Graham, K., Bernards, S., Osgood, D. W., & Wells, S. (2006). Bad nights or bad bars? Multi-level analysis of environmental predictors of aggression in late-night large-capacity bars and clubs. *Addiction, 101*(11), 1569-1580.
- Graham, K., La Rocque, L., Yetman, R., Ross, T. J., & Guistra, E. (1980). Aggression and barroom environments. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 41*(3), 277-292.

The Stairway of Doom: Respect, Crime, and Justice in the Night-time Economy

- Graham, K., & Wells, S. (2003). 'Somebody's gonna get their head kicked in tonight!' Aggression among young males in bars—A question of values? *British Journal of Criminology*, 43(3), 546-566.
- Graham, K., Coutts, C., Braun, K., Wells, S. (2000). Results of a pilot program for training bar staff in preventing aggression. *Journal of Drug Education*, (30), 171-191.
- Graham, K., Bernards, S., Osgood, D. W., & Wells, S. (2006). Bad nights or bad bars? Multi-level analysis of environmental predictors of aggression in late-night large-capacity bars and clubs. *Addiction*, 101(11), 1569-1580.
- Hesse-Biber, S. & Leavy, P. (2011). *The Practice of Qualitative Research*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hobbs, D., Hadfield, P., Lister, S., & Winlow, S. (2002). 'Door lore': The art and economics of intimidation. *The British Journal of Criminology*, , 352-370.
- Hobbs, D., O'Brien, K., & Westmarland, L. (2007). Connecting the gendered door: Women, violence and doorwork. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 58(1), 21-38.
- Homel, R., & Clark, J. (1994). The prediction and prevention of violence in pubs and clubs. *Crime Prevention Studies*, 3, 1-46.
- Homel, R., Tomsen, S., & Thommeny, J. (1992). Public drinking and violence: Not just an alcohol problem. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 22(3), 679-697.

Leather, P., & Lawrence, C. (1995). Perceiving pub violence: The symbolic influence of social and environmental factors. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 34(4), 395-407.

Lister, S., Hobbs, D., Hall, S., & Winlow, S. (2000). Violence in the night-time economy; bouncers: The reporting, recording and prosecution of assaults 1*. *Policing and Society: An International Journal*, 10(4), 383-402.

Monaghan, L. F. (2004). Doorwork and legal risk: Observations from an embodied ethnography. *Social & Legal Studies*, 13(4), 453-480.

Quigley, B. M., Leonard, K. E., & Collins, R. L. (2003). Characteristics of violent bars and bar patrons. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 64(6), 765-772.

Rigakos, G. S. (2008). *Nightclub: Bouncers, Risk, and the Spectacle of Consumption*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press.

Roberts, J. C. (2009). Bouncers and barroom aggression: A review of the research. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 14(1), 59-68.

Roberts, J.C. (2007). Barroom aggression in Hoboken, New Jersey: Don't blame the bouncers! *Journal of Drug Education*. 37, 429-445.

Ryerson University. (2015). *Research Ethics Board Guidelines*. Retrieved from www.ryerson.ca

The Stairway of Doom: Respect, Crime, and Justice in the Night-time Economy

Sanders, B. (2005). In the club: Ecstasy use and supply in a London nightclub. *Sociology*, 39(2), 241-258.

Van Brunschot, E. G. (2003). Freedom and integrity. Relationships and assault. *British Journal of Criminology*, 43(1), 122-140.

Wells, S., Graham, K., & West, P. (1998). "The good, the bad, and the ugly": Responses by security staff to aggressive incidents in public drinking settings. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 28(4), 817.

Winlow, S., Hobbs, D., Lister, S., & Hadfield, P. (2001). Get ready to duck. Bouncers and the realities of ethnographic research on violent groups. *British Journal of Criminology*, 41(3), 536-548.

