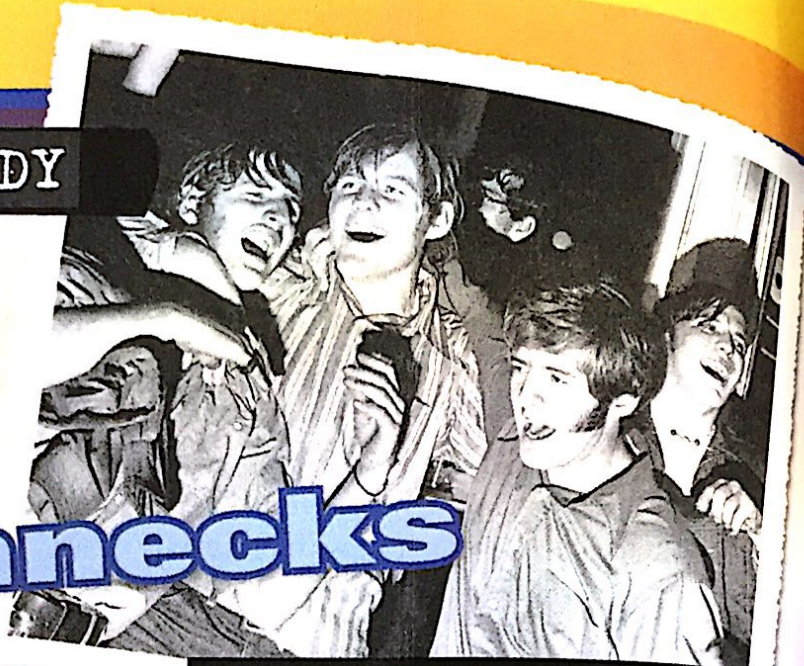


## CASE STUDY

# The Saints and the Roughnecks



Both the Saints and the Roughnecks enjoyed rowdy nights out on the town.

In 1973 sociologist William Chambliss published "The Saints and the Roughnecks," an article documenting the two years he spent observing two groups of delinquent teenage boys. One group, which he called the Saints, was made up of young men from upper-middle class families. Despite frequently skipping school, the Saints got good grades, participated in school activities, and were liked by students and teachers. The local police saw the Saints as good boys and leaders in the youth community. Chambliss described his observations.

*Eight promising young men . . . were some of the most delinquent boys at Hanibal High School. While community residents knew that these boys occasionally sowed a few wild oats, they were totally unaware that sowing wild oats completely occupied the daily routine of these young men. The Saints were constantly occupied with truancy, drinking, wild driving, petty theft, and vandalism . . .*

*Every Friday and Saturday night most of the Saints would meet . . . and would go into Big Town. Big Town activities included drinking heavily in taverns or nightclubs, driving drunkenly through the streets, and committing acts of vandalism and playing pranks . . .*

*Abandoned houses, especially if they were located in out-of-the-way places, were fair game for destruction and spontaneous*

*vandalism. The boys would break windows, remove furniture to the yard and tear it apart, urinate on the walls, and scrawl obscenities inside.*

Unlike the Saints, the other group that Chambliss observed, the Roughnecks, had a reputation for being delinquents. They were less well-to-do than the Saints, and their grades were not as good. Although they attended school more often than the Saints and were not particularly disruptive, teachers saw them as troublemakers. According to Chambliss, the police shared this view.

*Hanibal townspeople never perceived the Saints' high level of delinquency. The Saints were good boys who just went in for an occasional prank. After all, they were well dressed, well mannered, and had nice cars. The Roughnecks were a different story. Although the two gangs of boys were the same age, and both groups engaged in an equal amount of wild-oat sowing, everyone agreed that the not-so-well-dressed, not-so-well-mannered, not-so-rich boys were heading for trouble . . .*

*The community's impression of the degrees to which this group of six boys (ranging in age from 16 to 19) engaged in delinquency was somewhat distorted. In some ways the gang was more delinquent*

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than the community thought; in other ways they were less . . .

Although community members perceived that this gang of kids was delinquent, they mistakenly believed that their illegal activities were primarily drinking, fighting, and being a nuisance to passersby. Drinking was limited among the gang members . . . and theft was much more prevalent than anyone realized.

Chambliss explored why the community saw the Roughnecks as troublemakers but did not see the Saints that way. He explained that the Saints' delinquent behavior was less visible because access to cars allowed them to leave the community. The Saints were also more contrite and respectful when caught. Perhaps most important was that once a group had been labeled as "good" or "bad," the labels stuck:

*Selective perception and labeling—finding, processing, and punishing some kinds of criminality and not others—means that visible, poor, nonmobile, outspoken, undiplomatic "tough" kids will be noticed, whether their actions are seriously delinquent or not. Other kids, who have established a reputation for being bright . . . , disciplined, and involved in respectable activities, who are mobile and monied, will be invisible when they deviate from sanctioned activities. They'll sow their wild oats—perhaps even wider and thicker than their lower-class cohorts—but they won't be noticed.*

In this chapter, you will learn more about how society typically responds to such delinquent behavior.

## What do you think?

1. How did community members view the Saints and the Roughnecks differently?
2. What factors do you think influenced their views?