

Cellblocks to Mountaintops
Podcast Episode 2:
THE MAKING OF A “SUPERPREDATOR”???
Transcript

Host: The night of Saturday January 15th, 1994, Sterling Cunio was 16 years old. He was at a party house owned by an older woman. People were drinking and getting high, and on the TV was Menace to Society, a film about street life in LA; it has an intense carjacking scene.

Film Clip: Get your motherfucking ass up out of the car!

Host: Out of the blue Sterling blurted out that he'd done that once, back in Chicago. By that point Sterling had no stable home, no regular bed to sleep in, he hadn't been to school in years. His only friends were other abandoned kids like him—kids who live recklessly.

Sterling Cunio: These kids, they were fascinated with the culture of street crime.

Host: And he wanted more than anything for them to accept him, want him around, make him feel like he belonged.

Sterling Cunio: We idolized gangsters and hustlers, and I didn't come from that background, so I made shit up.

Host: Sterling is originally from a suburb of Dallas, Texas. But for years he bounced around; from a foster home, to living on the street, to juvenile detention. And that's where he'd met a lot of these guys. He had told them he was actually from Chicago, that he was still a member of a gang there. The truth was, Sterling had never even been to Chicago.

Sterling Cunio: We were all trying to be gangsters—and I was the furthest thing from it—so I was afraid of appearing weak. People knowing that I was this little square kid and that, you know, that I didn't grow up in a hood.

Host: He never stayed in any one place long enough to develop real friendships, much less join a gang.

Sterling Cunio: And there was one in particular, an individual that we looked up to him like a street life celebrity... I don't know. 24, 25 years old, somewhere in there been to the pen, you know; had the cars and the gold teeth and everything else, that we thought was cool at the time—his was kind of like the, the cat that we all looked up to. I tell lie, trying to impress somebody, and then suddenly this cat calls me on it. He's like, “Man you ain't never did nothing like that.

Host: And he was right. He saw right through him.

Sterling Cunio: And I stuck to the lie.

Host: This was the pivotal moment. He could have brushed it off. He could have said any number of things, but he didn't.

Sterling Cunio: Instead of just backing down, I feel like I have to protect this image. I done told this lie, now I have to ride it out, I have to defend it.

Host: And so, Sterling made a choice.

Sterling Cunio: I-I blurted out that I'll do it right now.

Host: The guy told Sterling's friend, Will, to go with him to see if Sterling would prove what he was worth, and, well, he took him up on it. Will was two years older than Sterling and much more experienced. They'd met at a MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility, Oregon's biggest youth prison. When they got out, they were sent to the same foster home, and Sterling got his first gun. As soon as he picked it up, he felt different.

Sterling Cunio: The gun was instant mechanicalized power. I wanted everybody to know I had it; carried it everywhere, brandished at every opportunity I got, I would try to provoke people just to pull it out. It was only a matter of time until I used it.

Host: When Will got kicked out of the foster home, Sterling followed him. Will didn't ask him, didn't have to—Sterling was attached to him and wanted to prove his loyalty. Will and Sterling left the party and headed out in Will's car. When they pulled up to an intersection, they saw their targets a man and a woman in a parking lot. He was standing outside her car saying goodbye. She was in the driver's seat.

Sterling Cunio: There was no plan. There wasn't even a plan for... where we were going to go once we got the car. This was to try to prove a lie. There was no plan beyond that.

Host: Will, pulled out his gun and told the man to get in the back seat. Sterling followed behind. He got in the front and took the wheel.

Sterling Cunio: I felt like I was in a movie. Like I was like, you know, how am I supposed to act?

Host: Sterling says things got hectic quickly; there was yelling pandemonium, the woman was crying, her boyfriend was trying to calm everyone down.

Sterling Cunio: The whole situation was out of control. I was scary. It was scary, but at the same time I was detached.

Host: Sterling and Will talked about dropping the couple off somewhere and driving away; but they risked having them call the police, give the details of the car, and they'd both be immediately arrested. They pulled on a gravel road, stop the car and tied the couple up. The idea was, by the time they freed themselves or were found, Sterling and Will would be long gone— but then they realized they didn't have enough rope.

Sterling Cunio: In my mind, I thought, if he shoots somebody, then I'm gonna have to shoot somebody that I didn't want to shoot the girl. And so I shot first. And after I shot, Will shot... Immediately right after, that was just like this surreal... nauseousness. We got back in the car, and we turned on some music, and we drove... in silence.

Host: Just four years earlier, Sterling Cunio lived in a stable home with a loving mother and dreams about his future. How did it come to this? He was only 16 years old, now he was a murderer. In this episode, we'll trace Sterling's journey from a good suburban kid to

a detached teenager on a dark gravel road—with a gun—and we'll see the key turning points where things might have gone differently, for both Sterling and for his victims. I'm your host, Phil Stockton, and this is Cellblocks to Mountaintops, episode two. Stay with us.

Host: How does a person get to the point where he's willing to murder someone for no other reason than to prove he was tough enough to do it? To attempt to answer this question. We're going to go back to Sterling's childhood.

Sterling Cunio: My concerns as a kid was bikes, football, being outdoors. I was really insulated from a lot of things. You know, growing up in Mama's house, I didn't see drugs, I didn't see violence of any type, I had faith—I had trust.

Host: Sterling never knew his father from as far back as he could remember. It was just him and his mother. He still calls her mama. The only thing that he knew about his father was that he must have been black since Mama and the rest of his family was white.

Sterling Cunio: I'm mixed race identify as black. I didn't really grow up exposed to a lot of the black culture beyond, you know, what you see in media.

Host: Sterling was happy. He loved Mama more than anything, and she loved him back. She cared about him and his ideas, his future.

Sterling Cunio: I won the Most Mannerly Kid Award, and I was so proud of that because of how proud she was. She instilled my love for learning. When I'd get in trouble, I had to write encyclopedia pages instead of getting spankings or grounding or any of that. I used to have to write at the table in front of the window, where I could see all the other little kids outside.

Host: Sterling would often spend some time in the summers with his grandfather in Arkansas, and it was there that he learned the truth about his family. The woman he thought was his older sister, Cathy, was actually his biological mother. She was incarcerated when she had him, and his grandmother adopted him when he was just a few days old. That's the woman he knew as Mama.

Sterling Cunio: When I came home from that summer and I asked Mama about who was my mom and who was my family and all this stuff, she said "I'm your mama". And that was kind of like the end of the conversation.

Host: Fine. He didn't ask many more questions. He was happy with how things were and didn't want them to change.

Host: But they did.

Host: That next summer, Sterling was visiting Arkansas when he spoke to mama for the last time.

Host: It was 3 days after the 4th of July. We'd still had a bunch of fireworks and stuff, and I had talked to her that afternoon and told her I missed her and was ready to come home. I wasn't supposed to come home for like another week or so, and she says she missed me too, and that she would come get me tomorrow.

Host: But that never happened.

Sterling Cunio: Grandpa got a phone call, and he answered the phone and he's like, "What? No, what? What?" Then he tells everybody to turn the music down. He hung up the phone and he just said, very matter of fact, your mom's dead.

Host: Later that week at the funeral, Sterling looked around and all the women in the family were crying. But none of the men were showing any emotion at all.

Sterling Cunio: I've just modeled the behavior that I was seeing. I felt like crying. I wanted to sob, but I stifled it and nearly choked. And later on, after we lowered her casket into the ground, when we was walking away, I heard my uncle tell my coach how proud he was that I was handling this like a little man I didn't even cry, and that was so impressionable.

Host: This was one of the first turning points in Sterling's life. His path was suddenly headed in another direction entirely. His aunt in Texas wanted to take him in, but the family decided it would be better for Sterling to live in Arkansas with his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend, Bonnie. They felt he needed to have a man to look up to, but things were different now. His grandpa had changed. He started drinking a lot more, and he beat Bonnie often.

Sterling Cunio: I didn't like being in a home. I felt the shame because when I would hear my grandpa beatin' on Bonnie, I would cry.

Host: He's now 12 years old, in sixth grade and living in an abusive home—grieving and alone.

Sterling Cunio: I was depressed. We didn't have language for depression at that time, but I was. And I tried to stay in contact with my friends in Texas. But the long-distance phone calls got me in trouble. I used to just go wander around in the woods and I would go to the river; I would cry, I would skip rocks, I would scream out to God, I would talk to mama as if she could hear me.

Host: There was something else too. This was rural Arkansas, and Sterling wasn't just the new kid at school, he was the only person of color—in school and at home.

Sterling Cunio: I was the most ethnic thing in that school. I was instantly a target. And so you tell the teacher somebody's calling you 'city monkey' or 'jigaboo' or something, and they tell you, oh, they just playing with you.

Host: One day, without any teachers around, the bullying turned physical.

Sterling Cunio: I went to just sit down by the benches and wait for the busses to come, and there was this kid and he come, and he said, "You can't sit here city monkey", and push me off the bench. So, I get up, and I walk away, I leave, right? I was outnumbered, I was scared, I was in a new place. So, I left, and then when the busses came, I'm going to get on bus, and he just comes and shoves me out the line tells me I can't get on the bus. I tell him I'm gonna get on the bus. I go to get on a bus, and he pins me against the side of the bus and spits in my face, and I just snapped and just started raining punches down on him while I'm crying.

Host: When the teachers arrived and broke up the fight, the kids all pointed to Sterling as the aggressor. The other child didn't face any consequences.

Sterling Cunio: They had this paddle. You go to the principal's office. They whip your ass with this paddle for being violent. Then I had, like, a week's worth of detention.

Host: His grandpa seemed to think the problem was with Sterling, too.

Sterling Cunio: I heard my grandpa talking to my uncle on the phone and, like, trying to convince my uncle, saying, you know, this is probably what's best for him. You might not be ready to be raising a boy, but he needs to be around men. They decided that it would be better for me to move to Portland, Oregon to live with my uncles. At that point I felt very alone, I felt unwanted, I felt misunderstood.

Host: And things would only get worse for Sterling in Portland. That's after the break.

BREAK

Host: To see our companion video series and find out more about the show, go to our website at cellblockstomountaintops.com.

Host: When Sterling arrived in Portland, he was still 12 years old and one of his uncles thought he needed toughening up.

Sterling Cunio: He felt I was a sissy. He felt I was soft. Called me a mama's boy. So, he give me these little fight lessons. That's what they was called. Teaching me how to fight. Teaching me how to be tougher. But really, he was just beating my ass.

Host: To be clear, this wasn't a lesson—this was child abuse—plain and simple.

Sterling Cunio: And I hated it. It was terrifying.

Host: His uncles didn't want to raise a kid, and they didn't have space for one. So, Sterling slept on the couch, or outside if they were having a party.

Sterling Cunio: I got woke up and said, "Hey, go outside for a little bit, the adults need the room." and I look up and they're in there with some women and you know, they're obviously drunk, smelling like whiskey and everything else. So, I go out on the porch, and I just sit on the porch. After a little bit, sitting on the porch, sometimes I'd go get in the cab of the truck and sleep in the cab of the truck until morning. That only lasted for a couple of weeks. After that, I started roaming; down the block, and then over a couple of blocks, and then next thing you know, I'm roaming around the streets of the whole city at 2, 3 in the morning. That was how I started getting introduced to the culture of street crime.

Host: Sterling was still only 12 at the time, but his uncles taught him how to drive so that he could be their designated driver when they were too drunk to drive themselves home. He would often see them in bar fights. It was no place for a child. His uncles weren't even sending him to school. Sterling didn't have any consistency or supervision. He had to fend for himself. One of his uncles took him, with him and his girlfriend, and they left Portland. They lived in a string of different cities over the next year or so. Sterling rarely had enough

time to make friends, until a year or two later. They were living in an apartment complex in Dallas, Oregon, and a kid there took him under his wing. Chris was another abused and neglected child. He was a year older than Sterling. He was in a gang, and he introduced Sterling to other, often older, gang members.

Sterling Cunio: I always had this conscious right? Like I always knew like, oh man, this might not be right. This might not be cool. But we was bonding. And that sense of friendship, that sense of connection. I valued more. I was proud of being known as down, right, like I was the down homie. My very first petty crime was stealing a bike. Somebody had stole my bike. I'm walking on foot, looking for my bike. And there was another bike in somebody's front yard, and Chris was like "Why don't you just go get that one." You know, he was like, "Get the bike." That was one of the very first times where I felt the tensions between what I knew and believed was right, but then also trying to meet the need for approval or connection and belonging with newfound friends.

Host: These were the first friends Sterling had in years, since fifth grade in Texas. He didn't really care if they were getting into trouble as long, as they were doing it together.

Sterling Cunio: I rode the bike around the same neighborhood that I stole it from, as if it was mine, and the kid's mom came screeching up in her car one day, snatches me off the bike, throws me in the car, throws the bike in the car, takes me to the house, calls the cops. POW! That was my very first contact with the police.

Host: The next time was for beating up a kid to impress a girl he met at a party. He was put in juvenile detention and eventually released to his biological mother, who was now out of prison and living in Oregon. Sterling says she and her boyfriend didn't have any interest in raising him either. They were drunk and stoned all the time.

Sterling Cunio: My contact with the police just started escalating after that. After the first couple of times of getting in trouble and releasing me somewhere, somebody clued in that maybe my home environment wasn't the best. So, they put me in foster care.

Host: Foster care was much safer for a now 14-year-old and sleeping on the streets. But after a couple of years of little to no supervision, he had a hard time adapting and he still wasn't getting any help dealing with his trauma from the abuse or mama's death. He says his first foster home was strict, religious and had an early curfew. They weren't allowed to use the phone either, and for Sterling, that was a problem.

Sterling Cunio: I was only there for like two three days and then just ran away. I had this little girlfriend, and I was in puppy love with, and I thought like, this is unbearable to be apart and we can't talk. Fuck you. I'm out of here. Right? My biggest fear was separation, exclusion, being alone. I didn't fear anything else. And so, I ran away and got caught like two days later.

Host: He was eventually sent to MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility, a large juvenile prison that at the time housed upward of 300 teenage boys and young men. This was the second major turning point in Sterling's story.

Sterling Cunio: Youth authority is where your criminal education really begins.

Host: MacLaren was a crowded and notoriously chaotic youth detention facility. In the decades since Sterling's time there. It's come under fire for extreme negligence and

lawlessness. There have been multiple allegations of staff sexually abusing kids. One former staffer is now in prison for a related offense. Employees have also been found to have been dealing drugs around the same time Sterling was there. A series of lawsuits have since forced a major overhaul of the facility, but they came too late for Sterling. For him, MacLaren was where he learned how to survive, how to defend himself and how to become a better criminal.

Sterling Cunio: You're in there with kids that have more sophisticated criminal networks. You're in there with kids that have committed more serious crimes: homicides, robberies, rapes, sold drugs.

Host: And now these were the kids Sterling wanted to have accept him, to respect him. Sterling's memories of the place are vague, but we wanted to know more about what life was like there. So, we spoke with Sterling's good friend Anthony Pickens, whose life mirrored Sterling's in many ways. Anthony was also at MacLaren around the same time.

Anthony Pickens: The fights break out every day in Oregon Youth Authority, every day, multiple times a day. If you're not a part of any group, you probably in trouble. If you are part of any group, there was times you better not be caught by yourself in what they called the flats, really the restrooms and where the showers are at. People went in there to fight and sometimes the fights over spilled into small riots. There's been times kids got stabbed or a jumped real bad to where, you know, people got to go to the hospital. Yeah, I mean, it's an extension from the violence that's going on in the streets. You're only changing the territory. It's the same kids with the same problems, and you're putting them all in one space together. It's going to explode.

Host: Researchers have since found that it isn't uncommon for children to develop mental health disorders at large facilities like MacLaren as a result of the stress of the environment. Sterling's first stint at MacLaren was brief, but after his release, his crimes became more dramatic, more potentially dangerous; car theft, robbery, and he landed right back at MacLaren within months. It was now 1993 and the facility was more crowded than ever. The crack epidemic of the 80s, combined with greater access to guns, contributed to a feeling that crime was spinning out of control—and in a way, it was. From 1984 to 1994, teenage homicide rates more than doubled, but the fear and loathing was directed disproportionately towards black and brown kids. They were vilified, dehumanized. Princeton professor John Dilulio famously called them “superpredators”. Here he is on CBS in '96.

John Dilulio: A superpredator is a young juvenile criminal who is so impulsive, so remorseless, that he can kill, rape, maim without giving it a second thought.

Host: Anyone paying attention knew these kids had been neglected, had slipped through gaping holes in any kind of safety net. They were often victims themselves of poverty, neglect, often abuse. But that was beside the point for tough on crime politicians they were already a lost cause.

Bob Dole: Kids that once stole hubcaps, now rape and murder. No fair punishment. Experts call them “superpredators”.

Host: That's former Republican senator Bob Dole.

Bob Dole: It doesn't matter whether or not they're the victims of society.

Host: And then Senator Joe Biden was on the Senate floor arguing for the passage of the '94 crime bill.

Joe Biden: The cadre of young people, tens of thousands of them; without parents, without supervision, without any structure. So, I don't want to ask, what made them do this? They must be taken off the street.

Hillary Clinton: They are not just gangs of kids anymore.

Host: That's Hillary Clinton.

Hillary Clinton: They are often the kinds of kids that are called superpredators. No conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first we have to bring them to heal.

Host: Ironically, she said that in 1996, the same year she released her book, *It Takes a Village*. In it, she lays out the profound impact institutions outside the home have on a child's development. She argues that we all need to step up and take care of our nation's children, for the sake of everyone's future. But instead, at that point, kids were being subjected to greater surveillance than ever before, more police in the streets, in schools. Things that used to be addressed by parents and principals were now criminalized. Kids who caused problems were funneled into rapidly expanding juvenile justice systems. At the same time, several states, including Oregon, made it easier for minors to be tried in adult courts and sent to adult jails and prisons. Child psychologist Carly Baetz researches juvenile criminal psychology at New York University and spent years as a public defense attorney. She says this punitive approach to youth violence misses the point.

Carly Baetz: If we look at the population of kids who are in juvenile justice settings, upwards of 90% of those kids have experienced at least one event that could be considered traumatic, and the average number is around six different types of events, which is really high. Things like traumatic loss or separation from a caregiver, particularly at earlier ages. Maltreatment in the form of physical abuse, particularly when that's at the hands of a caregiver. And domestic violence exposure also, and community violence exposure.

Host: Baetz says that more than anything. Kids who get in trouble need help. Researchers have only recently begun to recognize that the systems kids come into contact with, juvenile prisons and foster homes, often exacerbate preexisting trauma, when instead, they could be helping them heal. It's part of a shift towards trauma informed care.

Carly Baetz: Trauma informed care really encourages us to really see kids through a different lens. So, we're shifting from what's-what's wrong with this quote unquote bad kid, to really: What might have happened to this child? How is that impacting their behavior? And now we have an entirely new set of tools that we can use to help.

Host: Baetz says those tools can include intensive counseling, small support groups to help fulfill a child's need for connection and community, and consistent educational services. All of which are usually unattainable to kids who bounce around from home to home, with the occasional stop at a youth prison. Rosemary Brewer is the victim's

advocate and former prosecutor we heard from in the last episode. She says she's seen it firsthand.

Rosemary Brewer: These kids who are in these cycles; they need a therapist, they need a caseworker, they need counselors. We won't do that, and I can't-I can't explain it. It seems so obvious. The kids who are witnessing domestic violence, they're the ones that I'm going to see in a parole hearing in 20 years. You know, that's where it all stems from.

Host: Today, as it stands, more than half of the kids in the foster care system will end up incarcerated as an adult. It's a real missed opportunity with enormous societal and economic costs. In recent years, researchers have discredited the superpredator theory, even John Dilulio himself. Biden and Clinton have apologized for the harm caused by the rhetoric and the punitive policies they helped legitimize.

Hillary Clinton: I think it was a poor choice of words. I haven't used it since. I would not use it again.

Host: They've both acknowledged the devastating impact those policies have had, particularly in low income and black communities. But for those caught up in the system during that time, the damage was already done.

Sterling Cunio: When I got out of the Youth Authority, I was aggressive.

Host: Sterling says at MacLaren. the services were, quote, a joke, and the kids ran the prison. He was beaten up and targeted again. This is where he made up the story about belonging to a gang in Chicago.

Sterling Cunio: I figured out real quickly that if you developed a reputation that that would increase your inclusion, and I begin focusing all my energy in towards increasing my reputation.

Host: And eventually he became numb to all the violence. By the time Sterling got out of MacLaren in November 1993, he was 16 years old. He was sent to a foster home that housed 7 or 8 guys, including Will. He got his first gun. He felt powerful and he wanted people to know it. In December, he was in a car with Will and another kid from the foster home, Ryan, when it flipped over. Will and Sterling were thrown from the truck; Sterling shattered his ankle and broke some bones in his foot. Ryan died at the scene. Sterling went to Ryan's funeral. He no longer had tears to hold back. At this point, he wasn't feeling much of anything.

Sterling Cunio: I started to shut down emotionally. I didn't care if I lived or died, really like, the only thing I really cared about was not being alone, or left alone, or being excluded.

Host: And that is how we found him in the beginning. On the night of January 15th, 1994; a 16-year-old runaway with a gun at an adult party wanting to fit in, and he threw out that lie about carjacking someone in Chicago, a place he'd never even been. And then went to horrific lengths to prove just how down he could be.

Sterling Cunio: Then went and told people what we had done because...e we felt it was cool somehow, we felt like it had validated us, like we'd gained our street cred. That's...that's how it happens.

Host: That's how it happens. None of this excuses what Sterling did in any way, but tracing his path one can start to understand how he got there. How his story could be one of many, how these patterns are often repeated again and again, and how at so many different points along the way, things might have turned out very different for Sterling and for his victims.

Host: Next time on Cellblocks to Mountaintops. Coming of age in a maximum-security prison.

Sterling Cunio: You say what are you. I said, what do you mean, what am I? You know, it's like what race are you? I'm like a mix, I'm Mulatto he's like. Whoa. What's that? Black and white. Is that we can't be in here. I only cell up with white dudes.

Host: To see our companion video series and find out more about the show, go to our website at cellblockstomountaintops.com

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