

Street-rats and gutter-snipes: Child pickpockets and street culture in New York City, 1850-1900.

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Street-Rats and Gutter-Snipes: Child Pickpockets and Street Culture in New York City, 1850-1900

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Journal of Social History

Oxford University Press

Volume 37, Number 4, Summer 2004

pp. 853-862

[10.1353/jsh.2004.0044](https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2004.0044)

ARTICLE

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Abstract

For over half a century, the street child was an inescapable fixture of the nineteenth-century industrial city. Lacking formal education, adult supervision, and sometimes even a home, such youths were derided as "rats," "gamins," "Arabs," "urchins" and "gutter-snipes." In a country which identified geographic mobility and physical movement as freedom, the street kid represented the logical nightmare---the replacement of community, familial and even spiritual bonds with the rootless individualism of the nomad. Street children by necessity developed a confrontational and oppositional subculture relative to adult authority, while simultaneously adopting certain entrepreneurial behaviors as a survival strategy. Struggling to negotiate a

terrain between personal autonomy and adult authority, between self-sufficiency and economic dependence, child pickpockets thus cultivated their own conception of freedom and independence.



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