TOO MUCH, TOO FAST: THE TRIALS & TRIUMPHS OF POOR URBAN YOUTHS IN THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

by

Julie K. Lee

A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland
July, 2017

© Julie K. Lee 2017
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is about the trials and triumphs of low-income youths from Baltimore City as they came of age in urban poverty. I provide a rich and detailed account of the transition to adulthood experience of inner city youth through inductive and thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with 64 low-income men and women from the Beginning School Study. I find that these youths experienced too much hardship and trauma in their communities, schools, and families while growing up. In response to overwhelming trauma and stress, the youths in my study took on adult roles and responsibilities and engaged in problem behaviors that cut their adolescence short and accelerated their adulthood. Their experiences of growing up too fast were also nuanced by gender and race. Given the many challenges in their lives, the people in my study were unable to attain upward social mobility as adults, which is typically defined as the standard of success. I discover, however, that these young people are not a homogenous group resigned to their fates of remaining poor. Though these youths did not climb the socioeconomic ladder, they did not consider themselves to be failures. Instead, they created their own definitions of success and navigated divergent pathways toward achieving their versions of success. This redefining of success is what I visualize as another type of ladder that inner-city youths are climbing, which I call the “latent ladder.” The men and women in this study demonstrated resilience and self-efficacy and drew upon varying levels of strengths and resources to ascend, some higher than others, on the latent ladder. The external resources that the youths engaged to achieve success are conceptualized through a framework that I created – the components of this framework are “people” or relational bonds, “place” or exile from an environment or
circumstance, and “potential” or the strengths, skills, and talents of the youths activated by constructive diversions.

**Committee of Dissertation Readers**

Dr. Katrina Bell McDonald - Associate Professor, Sociology

Dr. Karl L. Alexander - Emeritus Professor, Sociology

Dr. Timothy J. Nelson - Senior Lecturer, Sociology / Senior Scientist, Public Health

Dr. Katherine Clegg Smith - Professor, Public Health

Dr. Norma Day-Vines - Professor, Education
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, praise and glory belongs to Christ, my source of strength, hope, and comfort on this long and arduous journey to accomplishing this dissertation.

I could not have finished this dissertation without the help of so many caring supporters along the way. I express my deepest gratitude and heartfelt thanks to the following people.

To Dr. Katrina McDonald, who is my role model of a strong and brilliant woman professor. Katrina gave me more academic and emotional support than I could ever give her credit for – consoling me during the tough times, answering my countless questions related to coursework or this dissertation, sharing her wisdom (“analytic nerve!”) and other great stories that brought much needed laughter (“don’t faint!”) and reassurance, and giving me that final and necessary push to complete this Ph.D. Thank you for always being there for me every time I needed help, whether in person, over Skype, phone, or email – you were always available.

To Dr. Karl Alexander, who remained by my side and advised me for many years, even after his retirement. Over the years, I witnessed first hand Karl’s passion and dedication to our field. He critiqued and edited countless versions of this dissertation with refreshing frankness and keen insight that challenged me and stretched my mind. Karl not only demonstrated the sincere posture and intelligence of a scholar, but also the compassion and thoughtfulness of a generous and kind person. Thank you for always being so understanding and patiently mentoring me through the ups and downs.

To Dr. Timothy Nelson, who joined my advising committee at the perfect time. Without Tim’s encouragement and motivation, I would not have been able to write about a topic that I was truly passionate about in this dissertation. I was wandering and struggling, but Tim stepped in and helped me to develop focus. Each time I doubted myself, Tim gave me the courage to pursue my desired objectives and continue forward. He was the “game changer” who inspired my turning point. Thank you for believing in me.
To the other two faculty members of my defense committee, Dr. Katherine Smith and Dr. Norma Day-Vines, for their insightful questions and thoughtful feedback. To Dr. Andrew Cherlin, who provided valuable guidance during the proposal stage of my dissertation. To our wonderful Sociology staff, Linda Burkhardt, Jessie Albee, and Terri Thomas, who takes amazing care of us “kids” and helps us in every way possible.

To my friends and colleagues, for all your prayers and encouragement throughout this journey. Thank you in particular to Dr. Deanne Samuels, who gave me direction, provided constructive feedback, and counseled me through my difficult times.

Last but not least, to my family. Thank you to my brave, loving, and sacrificial parents for raising me and encouraging me through this process. By God’s grace, I am what I am, and by God’s grace I was blessed beyond measure to have you as my mom and dad. To my husband, Phil, you are the best thing to happen to me in my life. Thank you for standing by me faithfully, patiently, cheerfully, and lovingly through this long haul. There’s no one else I would have rather had by my side than you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................... vii

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. viii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1
  Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................................ 1
  Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................................... 6
  Chapter Organization ............................................................................................................. 6

CHAPTER 2: THE LIFE COURSE THEORY ............................................................................. 9

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................................................... 17
  Urban Poverty ........................................................................................................................ 17
  The Transition to Adulthood .................................................................................................. 26

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY .............................................................................................. 31
  Data ........................................................................................................................................ 33
  Interview Protocols ............................................................................................................... 39
  Coding Analysis ..................................................................................................................... 42

CHAPTER 5: “TOO MUCH” .................................................................................................. 61
  Community ............................................................................................................................ 61
  Family ................................................................................................................................... 65
  School .................................................................................................................................... 85

CHAPTER 6: “TOO FAST” .................................................................................................... 95
  Women and Accelerated Adulthood ...................................................................................... 96
  Men and Accelerated Adulthood .......................................................................................... 127

CHAPTER 7: “LIFE ON THE STRAIGHT ROAD” ................................................................. 148
  Exile ...................................................................................................................................... 151
  Constructive Diversions ......................................................................................................... 170
  Relational Bonds .................................................................................................................. 180

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ........................................ 199
  Curtailed Adolescence .......................................................................................................... 201
  The “Latent Ladder” ............................................................................................................. 207
  Looking Ahead ...................................................................................................................... 236

REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................... 245

APPENDIX A .......................................................................................................................... 261
  Additional Details on Methodology ....................................................................................... 261

APPENDIX B .......................................................................................................................... 279
  List of Pathways Interviewees from All Chapters ............................................................ 279

BIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................................................... 283

vi
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Poverty Status of Whites and Blacks in the United States, 1999 .............................24
Table 3.2: Poverty Status of Whites and Blacks in Baltimore City, 1999 ..............................25
Table 4.1: Summary of the BSS, YAS, and MAS......................................................................35
Table 4.2: Low-Income Interviews (64) by Race, Gender, and Education Status ....................38
Table 5.1: Family Traumas (%) by Race and Gender .................................................................66
Table 6.1: Parenting Status (%) by Age 30, by Race and Gender .............................................114
Table 6.2: Parenting Status (%) by Age 24, by Race and Gender .............................................115
Table 6.3: Average, Minimum, and Maximum Age at First Birth among Interviewees with
   Children by Age 24, by Race and Gender .................................................................120
Table 6.4: Criminal Involvement (%) by Age 30, by Race and Gender .....................................130
Table 6.5: Age at First Arrest, by Race and Gender ...............................................................130
Table 6.6: Ever Used Drugs (%) by Age 30, by Race and Gender ............................................133
Table 6.7: Reasons for Arrests ..................................................................................................134
Table 6.8: Educational Status of Arrestees, by Race and Gender .............................................135
Table 7.1: Dropouts, School Transfers, and Last School Attended .........................................154
Table 7.2: High School Graduates, Transfers, and School of Graduation .............................156
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1: Network of Codes for the Code Group: Too Much - Family ........................................54
Figure 4.2: Network of Codes for the Too Fast Code Groups..................................................56
Figure 8.1: The “Latent Ladder” – A Redefining of Success .................................................. 208
Figure 8.2: Variations in the Standard of Success on the Latent Ladder ............................. 210
Figure 8.3: The People, Place, and Potential Framework ......................................................... 224
Figure 8.4: Constructive Diversions by Education ................................................................. 229
Figure 8.5: Example of People, Place, and Potential Resources: Joseph ............................. 231
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

This study explores how low-income whites and blacks who grew up in Baltimore’s inner city between the 1980s and early 2000s navigated their trials and triumphs as they transitioned into adulthood. First, these young men and women faced a multitude of challenges as they grew up at an accelerated pace in Baltimore’s impoverished neighborhoods. Second, their experiences and how they managed them are quite varied and far from one-dimensional, unlike how the lives of inner-city youth are often portrayed. That is, the worst outcomes did not always occur, despite these youth having come of age in urban poverty.

Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) studied the same group of men and women as this current study and reported a sobering finding: Most of those who grew up in low-income families, burdened by instability and hardships, failed to escape poverty as adults. The statistics are depressing: Only four percent of children born into poor families obtained a college degree versus approximately 45 percent of children with middle-class parents. Almost half of the higher-income men and women attained executive-manager or other professional jobs as young adults versus five percent of the poor. Urban disadvantages infiltrated every part of their lives – social isolation, joblessness, crime, and violence among other social ills.
On one hand, today’s young people are often, as Jeffrey Arnett (2014) distinctly describes, “emerging adults.” Their ages range between 18 and 29 years old. Unlike those of preceding generations who, in a predictable sequence, graduated from school, left their parents’ homes, got married, and had children, these emerging adults regularly ventured “off course” from the traditional path toward adulthood. Now, emerging adults linger somewhere between the end of adolescence and the start of self-sufficient, mature adulthood – an “age of feeling in-between,” according to Arnett (2014).

Emerging adulthood became a new life stage wherein young people find their identities; explore possibilities in “love, work, and world views;” and pursue meaningful dreams before settling into enduring adult roles (Arnett 2014). In our society, today’s emerging adults are commonly known as “millennials” or “boomerang kids” – the 20-somethings who graduate from school but move back into their parents’ homes (Sandberg-Thoma, Snyder, and Jang 2015). They are characterized as footloose, with a greater proclivity toward transience and self-exploration than rigid commitment to adult roles.

On the other hand, impoverished youths, like the ones in this study, lack the time or resources necessary for exploration. That is, critics argue that the emerging adulthood model does not account for socioeconomic inequality (Hendry and Kloep 2007). Indeed, middle- and upper-class youths have the time, resources, and support to encourage adventurous pursuits. This isn’t to say that privileged emerging adults are invulnerable as emerging adulthood is a tortuous journey rife with stresses and anxieties (Arnett 2014). But advantaged youths have the flexibility that allows for in-between time to refine skills, gather knowledge,
and establish networks. The “gap year,” for instance, is the time that young people, especially those of privileged backgrounds, “take out” or break from formal education or the workforce to enjoy activities such as traveling for leisure or volunteering (King 2011). In contrast, the foremost priority of disadvantaged youths is to survive. For example, higher-income youths obtain a greater self-concept through career exploration. For the poor, however, work is a means to survive (Blustein et al. 2002). Their difficult life circumstances restrict their luxuries. Their impoverished families cannot support their potential endeavors.

In this study, I determined that these men and women experienced a curtailed adolescence, which refers to how their adolescence was cut short because of the hardships in their lives that encouraged precocious maturation. Adolescence became a distinctive life stage in the 20th century, and much research has since highlighted the biological, social, and behavioral development of adolescents. Adolescence was traditionally portrayed as a time of “storm and stress,” (Hall 1904) though scholars criticized this negative depiction of adolescence as a troubled and volatile life phase (Arnett 2007). Adolescents are also generally isolated from the social and economic world of adults because of their status as full-time students (Furstenberg 2000).

The men and women in this study, however, were often thrust into the adult world out of necessity, for example, working to provide for their families, becoming parents, and moving out of the home at an early age. Though adolescents in age, these individuals did not act like adolescents because of the life challenges that curtailed their adolescence. Thus, rather than an emerging adulthood, accelerated adulthood is a more fitting description of the coming of age
experience among the young people in this research. Emerging adulthood delays the onset of mature adulthood and accelerated adulthood hastens the transition to adulthood.

As part of the ongoing debate about the relevance of the emerging adulthood model to the lower strata, Arnett (2014; Arnett and Tanner 2011) countered this criticism with findings from a national poll of 18- to 29-year-olds from varying racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Arnett concludes that low-income youths, like their high-income counterparts, are “optimistic” and “positive” about their lives. Similar to their better-off peers, low-income young adults also feel a sense of “freedom,” and “fun” during those in-between years.

While the men and women in this study missed their adolescence and rushed into adulthood unlike their emerging adult peers, I too, observed that many of them were optimistic about their potential. Hence, a balanced view of both the strengths and challenges facing this vulnerable population is necessary. That is, not all poor individuals from this research ran counter to the law or failed to follow what might be thought the normative, mainstream path to adulthood (e.g., having children before marriage or schooling completion).

There were men and women in this study who dropped out of high school and gave into “the streets,” however, many of them, especially high school graduates and high school dropouts who returned to school, mentioned “beating the odds.” In their own words, they were “successful,” despite remaining poor and being unable to move into the upper echelons of society. The high school graduates in this study proudly obtained their diplomas, found stable employment that was personally rewarding, became responsible parents, and saved
money to buy a house. Dropouts who went back to school received GEDs and were on their paths to “success” in their perspectives. Like emerging adults, these men and women expressed optimism and harbored big dreams about the future. Hence, I also examine the factors that aided the success of high school graduates and dropouts with continued education in the midst of accelerated adulthood.

This research also highlights the nuances in the stories of men and women by race and gender. Differences and similarities existed in the unfolding of their lives by race and gender. Most of poverty research appropriately focuses on the black urban poor, as black poverty is more concentrated and deeper because of systemic discrimination and racism (e.g., racial segregation, white flight, etc.). But the plight of the white urban poor cannot be ignored in this study, as they also came from similarly tough backgrounds. Distinctions by gender are also important as gender inequality persists; and historically, the traditional pathways to adulthood prescribed different timelines and roles for men and women (e.g., women as caretakers versus men as breadwinners).
Purpose of the Study

The overarching purpose of this study is to explore how low-income men and women from Baltimore City navigated and diverged in their accelerated paths into adulthood. The following three goals motivate this research:

1. To examine the life events and challenges that accelerate adulthood for poor black and white youths living in inner-city Baltimore.
2. To investigate the protective factors that help high school graduates and high school dropouts with continuing education obtain success, despite the struggles of accelerated adulthood.
3. To highlight the nuances by race and gender in the transition to adulthood among the urban poor.

Chapter Organization

In the next chapter, I review the main theoretical construct that guides this study: the life course theory. Specifically, this theory addresses the experience and intersection of life course events as the young men and women transitioned into adulthood. In Chapter 3, I discuss the literature on urban poverty by race and the associated stresses and traumas of inner-city life. From there, I explore previous research on the transition to adulthood, especially among the poor. Chapter 4 details my qualitative research approach, as well as the data (the “Pathways” interviews) and the analytical methods that I used.
In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I examine the themes and findings that emerged from my analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 explore two salient themes that capture their accelerated maturing process: “too much” and “too fast.” In Chapter 5, I detail the “too much” aspect, which refers to how the urban poor from this study experienced too much trauma in their community, family, and school.

Chapter 6 examines how the young people in this research grew up “too fast” in response to seeing and experiencing too much too soon. That is, overwhelming community, family, and school distress curtailed the adolescence life stage of these young men and women and hurried them into adult roles. Specifically, I delve into how they detached from their childhood institutions such as their schools and childhood family because of hardship, and got involved in the criminal justice system and early parenthood.

Though from similar backgrounds of urban poverty, the young men’s and women’s roads diverged as they grew up. More than a third of the interviewees graduated from high school, while about a third of the dropouts went back to school after leaving and became self-described “successful” adults, despite facing the same challenges of “too much, too fast” as their peers who dropped out permanently. Chapter 7 is about the high school graduates and dropouts with continuing education who lived, as one interviewee put it, “life on the straight road” toward success. Specifically, I investigate the protective factors that helped high school graduates and dropouts with continuing education gain success in the midst of accelerated adulthood.
In Chapter 8, I wrap up with a discussion on the meanings of these themes of trials and triumphs in the lives of the urban poor, specifically focusing on their definitions of success. I end with concluding thoughts on what more we can learn about, and also, how we can help low-income youths based on my findings.
CHAPTER 2: THE LIFE COURSE THEORY

In this study, I do not only examine the snapshot of an event, a situation, or a relationship at a particular time but the whole picture of a person’s life. Thus, the life course theory is appropriate here. The life course perspective considers how aging, social role and status changes, and life events affect a person’s life from birth to death. Furthermore, variations across time influence outcomes in a life span (Elder 1994; Elder 1998). This chapter reviews the four core concepts and assumptions of the life course paradigm that are foundational to this study.

The first core concept is that historical, cultural, and social contexts and locations shape an individual’s life course. For instance, Elder (1999) investigated cohorts of youths born in the 1920s in Berkeley and Oakland. These young people grew up during the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War. As expected, these historical, cultural, and social forces affected and constrained the life opportunities and circumstances of these cohorts as they transitioned into adulthood.

Likewise, the location and context also mattered for the men and women in this study, as I will review in later chapters. Specifically, these men and women came of age as poverty, crime, and deterioration peaked in their inner city neighborhoods during the late 1980s and 1990s. This backdrop of urban poverty, which I explore in the next chapter, molded the life circumstances and events of the people in this study.
Second, the “timing of lives” is an important principle of the life course theory. The path to adulthood consists of life events and transitions, which are discrete, short-term, age-graded life events or changes within the life course (e.g., getting married, having a child, etc.). The occurrence and timing of these transitions and life events vary and significantly affect, adversely and positively, the life course of individuals.

For instance, problematic role transitions and life events may occur on the transition to adulthood, such as becoming a teenage parent out of wedlock or going to prison. For certain groups such as the men and women in this study, these negative life events are common and present numerous challenges as they enter adulthood. Furthermore, the people in this study experienced the accelerated timing of life events and role transitions, in contrast to the delayed timing of transitions among their emerging adult peers.

Life course researchers also debate the order or sequence of role transitions. In the past, the traditional entry into adulthood followed a set of ordered transitions based on socially normative patterns. Specifically, the process of exiting out of childhood and entering into adulthood is traditionally marked by these transitional milestones: finishing school, getting a job, leaving home, marrying, and having children (Winsborough 1978; Hogan 1978). These role transitions often associate with subjective feelings of adulthood (e.g., “feeling like an adult now that I’m married”) (Settersten and Mayer 1997; Shanahan et al. 2005).

Based on the prescribed order of traditional markers, an individual would finish education, leave home, enter the labor force, marry, and have children (Hogan 1978). This traditional
sequence of events traces back to societal trends in the early and mid-twentieth century. That is, life events and transitions were orderly after World War II. Most young people married and had children in their early twenties, following the completion of schooling (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005). More youths also gained financial and social independence from their parents at a young age because of the post-war economic boom. They were seen as adults because they were self-sufficient and capable to care for their families.

In the 1960s, however, the timing of life transitions stretched out. First, more young people obtained higher education thereby lengthening the time spent in school. Both men and women delayed marriage, although many of them still left their parents’ homes by their late teens or early twenties. In 1950, the median age of marriage was 20 for women and 22 for men compared to 25 for women and 27 for men in 2000 (Arnett 2014). Changes in the timing and circumstances of childbearing also contributed to non-traditional pathways. That is, more women either had children at later ages or outside of marriage. Today, there is greater variation in the sequencing of life events and diversity of pathways into and through adulthood (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld 1987). Mouw (2005) reports that only about 25 to 29 percent of young adults follow the traditional sequence to adulthood.

Though fewer youths, like those in this study, follow a normative sequence, researchers continue to examine the effects of how these traditional life course transitions are negotiated. Studies compare the adult outcomes between the “disordered” and “normative” pathways with findings running the gamut from negative and positive to no difference (Mouw 2005). Take, for example, the numerous studies on educational attainment in the
context of the life course. Traditionally, completing school precedes employment and marriage. But in modern times, participation in schooling often overlaps with employment, e.g., college students who work while studying part-time or full-time (Horn and Maw 1994). Other studies highlight the negative repercussions of not fulfilling these transitions in a normative sequence; for instance, teen pregnancy (Furstenberg 2007).

The interdependency of life or “linked lives,” is another key concept of the life course perspective pertinent to this research. This tenet of linked lives, suggests that social relationships to family and friends influence human lives across the life course (Elder 1994). A common example of linked lives is how relationships perpetuate intergenerational poverty or wealth. That is, wealthy parents give an inheritance to their children, who then pass it down to the following generation of family members. As I will explore later, relationships to others were significant in the lives of the men and women in this study. The people around them adversely and positively shaped their experiences growing up, and later life chances.

Linked lives also refer to how individuals exchange social support and social control through interactions with kin, friends, and others. A strong attachment to other people and society, for example, “control” people from running afoul of the law (Hirschi 1969). Sampson and Laub (1990) too theorize that crime occurs when social bonds are weakened or broken. To test and develop their theory, Sampson and Laub used the Glueck project, which followed Boston-based samples of 500 delinquent boys and 500 non-delinquent boys until they were 70 years old. One of Sampson and Laub’s findings was that individuals with weaker social bonds were more likely to commit crimes as adults. On the other hand, those with stronger
social ties (such as a quality marriage and stable work) were more likely to desist from crime as adults.

Sampson and Laub (1990) also considered the quality and strength of social ties – not merely the presence of bonds. Here, Sampson and Laub investigated the role of social investment in the institutional network or relationship (e.g., in a family, in work), based on Coleman’s notion of social capital (Coleman 1988). According to Coleman, social capital exists in the relations among persons. Similar to human and physical capital, social capital is productive as it “facilitates certain actions of actors … within the structure” (Coleman 1988:102). In essence, people gain certain resources from social relationships.

Coleman argues that social capital exists in the following three forms. First, obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures are “credit slips,” where “people are always doing things for each other” with the trust that obligations will be repaid (Coleman 1988:102). Second, information channels provide data that facilitates action. Third, norms and effective sanctions provide rewards or constraints for certain actions. In essence, those involved in extensive and connected social networks are more likely to obtain social capital.

Hence, Laub and Sampson (1993:311) reported that social ties are an “interdependent system of obligation and restraint,” which deters criminal propensity. That is, the lack of social capital or investment indicates weak social bonds. Those with greater social capital have stronger social control, and hence a lower likelihood for criminal offending than those with less social capital (Sampson and Laub 1990; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). As I will
discuss later, the social bonds of the men and women acted as social control by keeping them out of trouble.

Finally, “human agency” is also a theme of the life course framework and is germane to this research. As discussed, individuals are subject to the constraints of their social and historical settings and their interactions and networks. But people, like the ones in this study, have human agency (Elder 1994). Namely, they have “planful competence,” which refers to how individuals recognize their strengths and weaknesses, assess their options and possibilities, and pursue those goals with competence (Clausen 1995). In essence, individuals have “considerable latitude in making decisions about most aspects of their lives” (Crockett 2002:7).

For example, individuals set goals for themselves and try to reach them (Kiecolt and Mabry 2000). People also have “self-efficacy” by which they exercise some control over the circumstances of their lives. Moreover, individuals are capable of carrying out actions that will produce intended outcomes (Bandura 2001; Gecas 2003).

In brief, the life course theory provides the theoretical foundation for studying the transition into adulthood among the men and women in this research. The timing of lives is key here given that curtailed adolescence reorders and expedites transitions. The life course approach further emphasizes the importance of linked lives, which is especially pertinent to my later discussion on social ties that supported achievement among high school graduates and dropouts with continuing education. Lastly, human agency is relevant in this study, especially
as many men and women, especially those who saw themselves as successful, often made planful choices and set goals.

In the next chapter, I continue exploring the topic of the transition to adulthood as part of my review of the literature and the contexts of urban poverty to detail the backdrop that shaped the lives of the men and women in this study.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Poverty

The discourse on urban poverty is relevant as I examine the lives of poor black and white men and women who grew up during the decline of Baltimore City. The people in this study experienced the steep rise in crime, drugs, and poverty in their city that was once a desired and prosperous destination. This section explains how Baltimore became the embodiment of urban blight and describes the milieu in which these men and women grew to maturity.

Baltimore was once a booming industrial metropolis in the 1930s through the 1950s. Jobs were plentiful within the manufacturing, shipping, and steel industries. The thriving and bustling city attracted a horde of migrants from the South and the Appalachia belts. By 1950, it was one of the largest cities in the United States (Durr 2003).

These prosperous times, however, did not last. Starting in the 1960s, the deindustrialization of Baltimore resulted in the significant decline of industrial, trade, and manufacturing jobs. Baltimore’s population fell drastically as jobs disappeared. The city’s population dropped from 949,708 in 1950 to 736,014 in 1990 (Forstall 1995). By the time the men and women reached young adulthood in 2000, more than 300,000 residents had left the city (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Their departures left thousands of homes vacant. To this day, these deserted homes are somber reminders of the city’s deterioration.
Baltimore’s downturn also led to rising poverty and the physical and social decay of its communities. Approximately 17,000 middle- to upper-income households abandoned the city in the 1990s. Consequently, Baltimore’s median household was the 87th lowest among 100 cities in 2003. The percentage of children (under age 15) in distressed neighborhoods soared from nine percent in 1970 to 37 percent in 1980 (Annie E. Casey Foundation 1997). Overcrowded homes, violence and crime, and residential segregation commonly characterized these depressed neighborhoods (Durr 2003).

The Black Urban Poor

The black urban poor, in particular, suffered the greatest loss during the city’s deterioration. Baltimore’s economic slump deepened the existing racial divide between blacks and whites. When Southern whites first migrated to Baltimore during the economic boom, they united with native Baltimore whites and formed a new white working class. Many whites held skilled positions, unlike their black counterparts who were frequently assigned to unskilled, low-paying jobs. But even skilled black workers still received lower wages than their white peers (Durr 2003). Discrimination during the “good times” was a harbinger of the “worse times” to come for the already oppressed and exploited blacks.

Eventually, better-off whites, followed later by middle-class blacks, moved out of the failing city into flourishing bedroom communities and other suburban areas. Higher living standards and abundant employment opportunities attracted privileged whites to the suburbs. This exodus is commonly known as the “white flight” (Massey and Denton 1993).
The movement dramatically changed the demographic makeup of the city. In 1960, roughly 35 percent of the city’s population was black. By 1990, Baltimore City was almost 60 percent black (Gibson and Jung 2005).

Urban poverty among blacks intensified over the years in cities across the United States. William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* (2012) depicted a grim world for the black “ghetto poor.” As Wilson pointed out, poor urban blacks increasingly stand in striking contrast to mainstream American society. Blacks are disproportionately poor compared to other racial/ethnic groups. National poverty rates for 2009 show that approximately 26 percent of blacks are poor compared to about nine percent of whites (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2010).

Studies such as Wilson’s illustrate that not all poverty is the same. First, blacks experience deeper poverty than whites. That is, blacks are systematically consigned to the lower strata following a deep-rooted history and tradition of racial discrimination. Historical and current discriminatory practices in employment, housing, and segregation purposefully relegated blacks to less privileged positions. For instance, racism came in the form of housing policies that targeted minorities and blocked them from buying homes in certain zones across cities in the United States (Spence 1993). These intolerances isolated low-income blacks and distinguished black poverty from white poverty. Blacks bear the continuing burden of racism, while whites, even impoverished ones, find the road to economic and social improvement less challenging due to the existence of “white privilege” or whiteness as a social and economic advantage (McDermott 2006).
Second, black poverty is more concentrated than white poverty. Blacks live in poorer, more segregated neighborhoods than their low-income white counterparts. The number of highly concentrated areas of poverty, particularly among blacks and Puerto Ricans (Nathan and Adams 1989; Massey and Eggers 1990), increased during the 1980s. These concentrated pockets of poverty exist in predominantly urban areas (Hughes 1990). Wright and Montiel’s (2007) study of the urban hardship in 86 cities across the United States found a positive relationship between the residential segregation of blacks and whites and extreme poverty (40 percent or more residents who are under the poverty level as defined by the U.S. Census). In 1990, almost 2.7 million people across 100 central cities lived in extreme poverty – approximately 24 percent of them were black versus three percent white (Kasarda 1993).

A horde of social and economic problems and high racial segregation characterize these concentrated areas of poverty (Hughes 1990). For example, economically disadvantaged blacks from inner-city Baltimore have greater exposure to violence and crime, lower employment, and higher single-parent households than their white peers. Impoverished blacks also experience greater hurdles to upward socioeconomic mobility (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014). Thus, the black urban poor must overcome a wide array of social ills in their neighborhoods, families, and schools.

There is a high prevalence of crime and violence in poor, segregated black neighborhoods of the inner city. Krivo, Peterson, and Kuhl (2009) found a close relationship between segregation and violence in 79 cities across the United States. Segregation increases violence among blacks and Latinos who live in distressed parts of the city by compounding
disadvantage (Feldmeyer 2010). The limited spatial, interpersonal, political, cultural, and institutional isolation of poor urban blacks strongly predict black violence (Shihadeh and Flynn 1996).

As for the family structure, a common feature of urban black poverty is the high rate of single, female-headed households. Over the past few decades, the family structure changed partly because of the decline in marriage rates. Demographic changes in the age structure also resulted in a large population of children born out of wedlock in single, female-headed homes. In 1997, approximately 69 percent of black women versus 26 percent of white women were single mothers (Cancian and Reed 2001).

In particular, the “feminization of poverty,” or women making up a large proportion of the poor, was an ensuing problem (Starrels, Bould, and Nicholas 1994). In 2010, the overall rate of poverty for female-headed households was nearly 41 percent versus close to nine percent for two-parent households (National Women’s Law Center 2011). In the 1950s, approximately 18 percent of economically disadvantaged families were female-headed, but that doubled by 1998 (Burtless and Smeeding 2001).

Relatedly, the absence of black fathers has become a topic of great concern. Absent black fathers are often negatively characterized as “deadbeat,” irresponsible, and “invisible” stemming from statistics and studies showing the high prevalence of black fathers who are in prison or unable to take on parental obligations (Coley 2001; Connor and White 2006). On the whole, close to 80 percent of black children will experience the absence of a father for at
least part of their childhood (Brown et al. 1999). In 2007, approximately 35 percent of black children (ages 0-2) and 42 percent of black children (ages 12-17) lived in single female-headed households versus six percent of white children (ages 0-2) and 17 percent of white children (ages 12-17) (Kreider and Elliott 2009).

On the other hand, Edin and Nelson’s (2013) investigation of these so-called “deadbeat dads” showed that there is a “refashioning” of fatherhood among low-income men. The researchers’ detailed and nuanced examination of fatherhood found that the involvement of black fathers was higher than for white fathers, especially when the children are young. Black fathers also articulated stronger “ideals” about good fathering (e.g., “love, communication, and quality time”). In essence, they claimed “new roles” traditionally assigned to mothers (e.g., investing quality time with the children), which replaced fatherhood roles in the traditional sense of providing financially as the breadwinner of the family.

Consider also the link between segregated schools and black poverty. That is, black children from the inner city are more likely to attend predominantly black schools instead of integrated schools. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) reported that low-income blacks from the same sample as the current study attended schools that were 83 percent black, while poor whites attended schools that were approximately 17 percent black. Most black students from this study, regardless of family income levels, went to segregated high-poverty schools versus whites of all income levels who more often attended middle-income schools (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014).
Various studies also consider and debate how neighborhood segregation and school socioeconomic and racial/ethnic composition contribute to the black-white educational achievement gap (Rumberger and Palardy 2005; Borman and Dowling 2010). For instance, black students from segregated schools had lower scores on achievement tests than their black peers from integrated schools (Bankston and Caldas 1996). Sharkey (2010) also reported that black children from Chicago recently exposed to a homicide (less than a week before the assessment) have lower vocabulary and reading achievement scores than other children. Furthermore, school segregation may affect the availability of resources (e.g., human and social capital within schools) and teachers (Reardon and Owens 2014). Poor, segregated schools often struggle to obtain and retain teachers (Seafidi, Sjoquist, and Stinebrickner 2007).

The White Urban Poor

Baltimore’s decline has certainly affected the black urban poor most profoundly, but the white urban poor were also victims of the economic slump and abandoned when their higher-income peers fled the city. Poor whites have since become “America’s truly, truly invisible citizens” (Moss 2003). Historically, the situation of poor urban whites was on the forefront of academic and public debate. For instance, Michael Harrington’s enormously popular and influential book, The Other America (1962) helped elevate the issue and, importantly, shaped its contours. Americans were shocked by Harrington’s revelation of the 40 to 50 million “invisible poor” comprised of blacks, whites, and other ethnic groups living in inner cities.
While poor whites are largely concentrated in rural areas across the United States, a significant number also reside in central cities. Whites from all socioeconomic levels make up approximately half of the population in urban areas inside central cities. Approximately 41 million whites live inside central cities (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). Of whites who are considered to be poor, 45 percent of them dwell in central cities, with a quarter of them living in high-poverty areas (Rusk 1999).

In 1999, around the time of the men and women’s interviews, the rate of poverty among blacks (25 percent) was nearly three times higher nationally than among whites (nine percent) (See Table 3.1). The difference was not as high in Baltimore City though blacks still had approximately twice the rate of poverty (27 percent) than whites (13 percent) (See Table 3.2). Though relatively smaller in overall percentage compared to blacks, a significant number of poor urban whites still exist.

Table 3.1: Poverty Status of Whites and Blacks in the United States, 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poverty Status</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th></th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All individuals for whom poverty status is determined</td>
<td>206,259,768 (x)</td>
<td>32,714,224 (x)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income in 1999 below poverty level</td>
<td>18,847,674 9.1</td>
<td>8,146,146 24.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2000*
### Table 3.2: Poverty Status of Whites and Blacks in Baltimore City, 1999

| Poverty Status                                      | Whites |   | Blacks |   |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------|--|--------|--|---|
|                                                      | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| All individuals for whom poverty status is determined| 197,470 | (x) | 402,540 | (x) |
| Income in 1999 below poverty level                  | 26,483  | 13.4    | 110,022 | 27.3 |

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2000*

As these numbers reveal, impoverished whites reside in the metropolis, yet knowledge and research on the nature and conditions of poor urban whites are minimal. What is known, however, is that low-income whites, while better-off than their black peers, are not entirely immune from the social ills associated with urban poverty. Poor whites also confront elevated stress in their neighborhoods, families, and schools compared to their privileged peers. For example, health statuses of whites suffer comparably when they are exposed to similarly disadvantaged communities as their black peers (LaVeist et al. 2011). Based on data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, Harrell et al. (2014) found that the rate of violent victimization is similar between poor urban blacks (51.3 per 1,000) and poor urban whites (56.4 per 1,000).

Consider again the historical situation of Baltimore City, which experienced a decrease in industrial jobs, the physical and social deterioration of communities, and the shoehorning of residents into overcrowded homes. As a result, the white working class in Baltimore also suffered from the economic and social distress of living in the inner city (Durr 2003). In fact, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) reported comparable socioeconomic situations for
poor whites and blacks in Baltimore City circa 1980. Comparisons of neighborhood conditions show similar rates of male unemployment, median family income, and high school graduation. Furthermore, poor urban white men have lower educational attainment and higher drug involvement than their black peers (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014).

Nevertheless, white privilege mitigates the negative circumstances of poor urban whites (McDermott 2006). That is, whites from the inner city are not spatially or socially isolated like their black counterparts (Chaisson 1998). Thus, certain resources, such as kinship networks outside the inner city, insulate whites from some of the harmful effects of poverty (e.g., unemployment, homelessness, etc.). Inner-city whites also have access to helpful familial and social networks that facilitate job attainment (Sullivan 1989; Royster 2003). Moreover, low-income white men also dominate the industrial and construction sectors (e.g., plumbers, welders, etc.), which pay higher wages than their black peers in mostly service and labor positions (e.g., janitors, barbers, truck loaders, etc.) (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014).

The Transition to Adulthood

These structural disadvantages of poverty affect the life course of the black and white urban poor. That is, inner-city residents encounter numerous obstacles when making or attempting to make transitions in the life course growing up in seemingly hostile environments. The troubled environment in which the urban poor live adversely molds their experiences of life events and thus make their entry into adulthood especially burdensome and complicated.
A great deal of research examines the struggles of achieving certain transitions among the poor. Consider, for instance, employment as a problematic transitional stage. Obtaining and maintaining a stable job and achieving financial independence are overwhelmingly more difficult for those who live in poverty-stricken and highly isolated areas. In particular, young and less-educated men from the inner city contend with significant employment issues.

Overall employment rates, especially among young black men, continually have declined – a steady downward progression spanning several decades. Between 1979 and 2000, the employment rate of black men fell from 62 percent to 52 percent. In 2000, when the interviewees were around 24 years old, the employment rate among young black men from inner cities was 16 percentage points behind the rate of their counterparts in the suburbs (Offner and Holzer 2002). Criminal involvement and drug use among poor men further exacerbated job instability and unemployment (Henkel 2011; Lageson and Uggen 2013).

The disadvantages of poverty also complicate the timing of the men’s and women’s transitions into adulthood. Recall from Chapter 2 that the “timing of lives” is an important principle of the life course theory. A life transition is “on time” when it is made at the appropriate age (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe 1965). Age norms in our society dictate what is considered “on time” and enforce the familiar expression: “act your age!” In contrast, an “off time” transition is when an event occurs earlier or later than is prescribed in generally accepted social timetables. Teen pregnancy is a common example of being “off time” (Settersten 2003).
Poor urban youths often enter into certain adult roles off time, specifically at an accelerated pace. They are frequently more precocious and handle more responsibilities at a younger age than their advantaged peers and hence, experience “child adultification” (Burton 2007; Roy et al. 2014). An example is children who grew up with money in short supply and began toiling at an early age to provide for their destitute families. In contrast, wealthier children receive financial support from their families (e.g., parents paying for college) (Kendig, Mattingly, and Bianchi 2014). Another example is underprivileged women who become mothers sooner than advantaged women who in contrast, delay childbearing to pursue a career or further education (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014).

In this study, I call this early transition into adulthood, the “accelerated adulthood.” But past studies diverge on the labels assigned to the rapid jump into adulthood, such as the “rush to adulthood,” “off/on timing,” “expedited adulthood,” “precocious transitions,” “precocious role exits” or “precocious development,” and “premature” transition (Hogan and Astone 1986; Hagan and Wheaton 1993; Wickrama and Baltimore 2010; DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). Despite the variations in labeling, the following is a summary of prior research that more or less inquired into the problems of early transitions.

Earlier studies on the life course focused on the timing and ordering of life events and the significance of age. For instance, Marini (1984) examined the role of social norms in the sequencing and timing of life events. Prior findings also discovered the interplay of social class and the timing of transitions (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe 1965; Settersten and Ray 2010). For instance, low-income men and women have “earlier deadlines” than their higher
income counterparts for leaving the parent’s home, working, marrying, and having children (Settersten and Ray 2010).

Previous research also addressed precocious transitions and events with an emphasis on what drives precocious development. Community disadvantages, for instance, increases the risk of precocious life events (Wickrama, Merten, and Elder 2005). Adolescents who use alcohol and drugs are more likely to make precocious transitions (Krohn, Lizotte, and Perez 1997). Exposure to violence raises the risk of having a child, attempting suicide, running away from home, and dropping out of school (Haynie et al. 2009). Furthermore, poor urban youths commonly enter the labor markets at an expedited pace out of economic necessity. Also, inner-city youths who believe that “life is too short” after having observed repeated instances of tragic early deaths in their rough neighborhoods, “hurry to get out on their own and gain financial stability” (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016:146).

In short, the historical and socioeconomic contexts in which the men and women grew up were similar yet differed by race. Both blacks and whites came of age as Baltimore City continued to deteriorate, but blacks fared worse as they faced deep and persistent poverty. White privilege, however, differentiated white urban poverty from black urban poverty. Both blacks and whites faced challenges as they entered into adulthood “off time” and become precocious adults.

In the next chapter, I discuss the data that I used to investigate this transition to adulthood process for poor youths from Baltimore City. I also detail the analytic method I used to
inductively draw out central themes of this research, which are later explored in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The objective of my research is to explore the process of accelerated adulthood among poor black and white youths from Baltimore City. I am further interested in how some of the men and women in this study achieved success, despite coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is, many of the people in this study, especially those who graduated from high school or dropped out but went back to school, saw themselves as “successful” people though they grew up poor and remained poor as adults. Thus, I aim to know what factors helped them to obtain “success” despite their adversities growing up. I asked the following questions:

1. What do the data suggest pattern the life events and transitions of poor, urban youth that accelerates their adulthood?
2. What are the protective factors that help low-income youth achieve success, despite the constraints of their lives?
3. What are the nuance by race and gender in the unfolding of their lives

To respond to these research questions, I used the methods and tools of qualitative research. The qualitative approach was appropriate as it allowed for the in-depth exploration and interpretation of the coming of age experience among low-income men and women. The following three features of the qualitative approach guided my research.

First, qualitative inquiry encourages rich and thick descriptions of the contexts of the lives of the men and women in this study. That is, these young people came of age in deindustrializing Baltimore during the latter decades of the 20th century and into the 21st
century. As children and adolescents, they witnessed firsthand the decline of Baltimore City. As young adults by the early 2000s, they experienced the harmful repercussions of their deteriorated communities. Their stories, therefore, cannot be separated from their historical, social, and cultural settings.

Second, qualitative methods examine the processes and meanings of people’s experiences over the life course. In this study, I explored the lived experience or the process of maturing among low-income individuals from similar backgrounds. I aimed to understand how these poor, urban youths grew up, by first examining their contexts or backdrop of poverty that cannot be separated from their accounts.

Qualitative researchers also “seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are” (Bogdan and Biklen 1997:38). Hence, I delved into the meanings that the men and women assigned to both negative and positive events and transitions, which influenced their actions and choices. Through systematic analysis that I detail later in the current chapter, I paid careful attention to the men’s and women’s statements and descriptions that reflected their interpretations and perspectives on the coming-of-age experience.

On a related note, the qualitative approach also considers the subjective feelings (and reasons for them) among the people I studied. Through their interviews, I gathered their thoughts and viewpoints as they navigated the paths to maturity. How did they depict, in their own words, the unfolding of their life scripts?
As Creswell (2012:40) writes,

Researchers conduct qualitative research because we need a complex detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study.

Third, I took an inductive approach. Namely, the researcher generates theories or hypotheses and concepts or themes from the data in an inductive investigation (Thomas 2006). In deductive analysis, set preconceptions or hypotheses guide the research. In contrast, inductive analysis allows the findings and themes to naturally emerge from raw data, specifically from interviews in this study (Thomas 2006).

I also employed a thematic analysis during the process of inductive exploration. The purpose of thematic analysis is to recognize patterns within the data and to organize them into themes. The research themes surfaced through repeated readings and coding of the data (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

Data

This study used qualitative interviews with 64 men and women from the Beginning School Study (BSS) project. The BSS is a panel study of 790 Baltimore City children and their educational and social development starting in 1982 and continuing for over 20 years. The project covered a broad range of issues as it followed the experiences of the BSS panel over
many years. Topics included academic retention and dropout, family structures, and students’ expectations and goals.

The BSS followed a representative, random sample of children from the first grade (at six to seven years old). The initial two-stage stratified, random sample consisted of 838 first-grade students attending Baltimore City public schools in 1982. The principal investigators of the BSS, Alexander and Entwisle (2010), randomly selected a sample of 20 schools in Baltimore City, stratified by race and socioeconomic status. Then, the researchers randomly chose students from first-grade classrooms in each school. The goal was to sample first-time, first-graders, but the initial interview revealed that 48 of the students had repeated first grade. Excluding these 48, the sample comprised 790 first-graders. At the time, the Baltimore City public schools enrollment was predominantly black (77 percent). To sustain comparisons by race, the BSS over-sampled white respondents. As a result, at the outset, the panel consisted of 216 black females, 215 black males, 185 white females, and 174 white males.

Two additional postsecondary surveys are also part of the BSS: the Young Adult Survey (YAS), and the Mature Adult Survey (MAS). The YAS is a survey administered between April 1998 and January 2002 among students from the BSS who were approximately 22 to 23 years of age. The principal investigators probed in detail themes such as substance use, dating behavior, and other adolescence/young adulthood topics. Between October 2004 and March 2006 (students ages 28 to 30), the principal investigators administered the MAS to follow up on topics such as relationships (e.g., marriage), employment, housing, finances,
and other important markers of adulthood. See Table 4.1 for a summary of the BSS, the YAS, and the MAS.

Table 4.1: Summary of the BSS, YAS, and MAS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Years Administered</th>
<th>Approximate Age of Respondents</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Sample Coverage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning School Study (BSS)</td>
<td>1982-1995</td>
<td>Ages 6-7 to 18-19</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adult Survey (YAS)</td>
<td>April 1998 through January 2002</td>
<td>Ages 22-23</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature Adult Survey (MAS)</td>
<td>October 2004 through March 2006</td>
<td>Ages 28-30</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on BSS documentation from Alexander and Entwisle (2010).

The primary data source for this study is from a third postsecondary component of the BSS project: qualitative interviews conducted with 162 men and women from the BSS. The collection of these 162 interviews came from two subsets of the BSS cohort at three different time periods. The first subset, the “Dropout” subset, took place in 1995 and 1996 with 82 high school dropouts when they were 18 to 19 years old. The second subset, the “Pathways” subset, collected interviews in 2000 from 80 men and women (including some who were dropouts from the Dropout subset) at ages 23 to 24.

The Pathways interviews are the main source of data for analysis in this study, as these interviews covered relevant topics on adulthood. At times, I referred to the interviews from the Dropout subset to fill in any missing information from the Pathways interviews. For
instance, if an interviewee did not elaborate on his or her reason for dropping out of school in the Pathways interview, I went back to the individual’s dropout interview to understand his or her reasons for leaving school.

While I primarily used interview data for analysis, I also used survey data from the BSS, YAS, and MAS to obtain percentage data on certain markers in their transition to adulthood (e.g., schooling, parenting, and criminal involvement). The tables throughout my chapters are based on a combination of data from the BSS, YAS, MAS, and the qualitative interviews. See “Using the BSS, YAS, and MAS Data” in Appendix A for more details.

Data Collection (Qualitative Interviews)

In this section, I detail how the BSS researchers collected the Dropout and Pathways interviews. The BSS investigators identified and selected individuals for the Dropout subset based on three criteria. The first was the “reasons for dropping out of high school” and the second was the “timing of dropping out.” The third was based on demographic characteristics. See “Criteria for the Dropout Subset” in Appendix A.

Using these three criteria, the collection of interviews (82 total) for the Dropout subset took place at two different times. First, 41 interviews with dropouts were conducted in the summer of 1995. A year later, in the summer of 1996, the BSS investigators conducted 41 additional interviews with the dropouts.
The second subset of qualitative interviews, the Pathways interviews, took place between April and November of 2000 as part of an initiative by the late Dr. Jennifer Johnson (former associate research scientist and lecturer at Johns Hopkins University) to explore the pathways to adulthood.

The sampling process of this second phase used the following classifications:

- Permanent Dropouts; also interviewed as part of the Dropout subset
- Permanent Dropouts; not interviewed as part of the Dropout subset
- Dropouts who went on to further education; also interviewed as part of the Dropout subset
- Dropouts who went on to further education; not interviewed as part of the Dropout subset
- High School Graduates with no further education
- High School Graduates who went on to further education

The above identification and selection criteria, in addition to balancing by race and sex, resulted in a total of 80 interviewees consisting of 19 white men, 20 black men, 20 white women, and 21 black women. These 80 interviewees were also classified by four groups: 20 high school graduates who continued postsecondary education (e.g., attended or completed college), 20 high school graduates who did not obtain further education, 20 dropouts who continued education (e.g., completed a GED or returned to high school for a diploma) and 20 high school dropouts who did not return to school (“permanent dropouts”).

Since I investigate only low-income whites and blacks, I excluded 16 high- or middle-income individuals from the 80 total Pathways interviews. Using Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson’s (2014) measure of socioeconomic status (SES) that was available in the data, I kept only those considered “low SES” (See “Measuring Socioeconomic Status (SES)” in Appendix A
for further details). Thus, I analyzed the Pathways interviews of 64 men and women. Of the 64 low-income whites and blacks, 28 were men (14 blacks, 14 whites) and 36 were women (18 blacks, 18 whites). The men and women were also classified by their education status at the time of the Pathways interview. Table 4.2 shows a breakdown of the gender, race, and education characteristics of the low-income Pathways interviewees.

Table 4.2: Low-Income Interviews (64) by Race, Gender, and Education Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Men</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Women</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dropout Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Dropouts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts who Continued Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dropout Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Dropouts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts who Continued Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HS Graduate Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Diploma Only</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Graduates who Continued Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HS Graduate Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Diploma Only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Graduates who Continued Education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on their education status at the time of the Pathways interviews (ages 23-24).*

38
Interview Protocols

Both the Dropout and Pathways interviews were semi-structured, wherein interviewers used guides but also had freedom to follow the natural flow of the conversation. Confidentiality statements were read and signed at the start of the interview. As a token of appreciation, the participants were compensated with $50.00 in cash. Each interview took place at the individual’s home.

The Dropout interviews used a standardized life history calendar as a guide to explore key milestones and events in each participant’s life. The life history guide encouraged interviewers to cover various key issues around the dropout experience; for example, grade retention, suspensions and expulsions, and pregnancies and parenting. The life-history calendar also delved into the interviewee’s reactions, reflections, meanings, and feelings surrounding those landmarks. For instance, an interviewee indicated in his life history that he was once placed into special education classes. The interviewer followed up with questions such as: “Did being in special education help and in what ways?” and “How (did) you feel about being in special education? Was it good or bad for you? In what ways?”

The BSS interviewers also probed into other topics initiated by the participants. Furthermore, the interviews recorded personal reflections on broader questions. Some personal reflection questions included: “What are your best memories about school?” and “What are your biggest satisfactions?”
The Pathways interviews highlighted the experiences of individuals as young adults. Hence, interviewers followed a “Pathways to Adulthood” interview guide for each conversation. This particular interview schedule addressed major transition to adulthood themes. See Appendix A to view the “Pathways to Adulthood Interview Guide.”

During the stratified sampling of the Pathways interviews, the BSS researchers attempted to, when possible, select Pathways interviewees who had dropped out from phase one’s pool of 82 dropouts. This strategy allowed interviewers to also delve into changes in each interviewee’s developmental pathway between 1995 and 2000. This approach was helpful in my analysis because I referred to the interviews from the Dropouts subset for some dropouts who participated in both interviews, if necessary. Interviewers were also encouraged to investigate why and how one group of high school graduates continued in school (e.g., obtaining college degrees, professional certificates, etc.) versus high school graduates who did not.

Recording and Redaction Process

For the purposes of my study, these previously conducted interviews are secondary data since I did not directly conduct the interviews. However, the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Fortunately, transcriptions of audiotapes are lasting records, as they preserved the interviewees’ words verbatim. The interview transcripts also noted emotional responses (“laughs”), pauses (or breaks, for instance, due to a family member interrupting), and “small talk” between the interviewers and the interviewees (e.g., discussion about what
happened in previous BSS interviews, about plans for the day, etc.). While some interviewees may have been cautious of their words and vocal cues being recorded, I noticed that most were very open with their stories and thoughts. The interviewers reassured the individuals about the confidentiality of their conversation to obtain more honest answers. For example, one person admitting to cheating on his spouse after the interviewer reminded him about the confidentiality of the interview.

The principal investigators and their team of interviewers also wrote several helpful “interview impressions” that gave me insights into the general mood and tone of some of the interviews. The impressions provided colorful descriptions about the interviewees’ physical and personality attributes and responsiveness (or lack of) during the interview. The following is an excerpt from one interview impression:

Janice is a pretty young woman, with a heart-shaped face framed by straight, dark brown hair cut in a pageboy style. At first, she was rather stiff, but as the interview progressed, she relaxed and became talkative. Her speech was both soft and rapid-fire, so much so that at times she was hard to understand. When we began to talk about topics that excited her, she began to puff nervously at a cigarette and emphasize her points with dramatic gestures.

To maintain confidentiality, the researchers had redacted all transcripts by removing any identifying information. Abbreviations and digits replaced people’s names and identifiable places. Baltimore City and other school numbers were recoded. Interviewer IDs were also replaced with standard abbreviations. I analyzed the redacted transcripts.
Coding Analysis

As previously discussed, my research strategy is inductive and thematic – inductively drawing out recurring and significant themes from the data. I followed a systematic research process, which included multiple readings of the data using computer software, developing categories, and consolidating themes that highlighted the experiences of low-income men and women growing up in the inner city. Findings emerged from multiple cycles of coding or the application of meaningful codes (tags/labels) to sentences, words, or paragraphs in the interview transcripts.

I used ATLAS.ti, a Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), to analyze, organize, and code the interviews. ATLAS.ti does not automatically analyze or assign meaning to the data. Rather, it is a supporting tool to consolidate and manage data and to facilitate analysis. This software also bolsters the credibility of the research, as the research process, the researcher’s thoughts and feelings, and other developments are easily documented and tracked in the program (Friese 2014).

A particular qualitative analytic approach guided my computer-assisted analysis: the model of “Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking about Things” (NCT). The NCT model, originally proposed by John Seidel (1998), was further refined and adapted for computer-assisted analysis by Susanne Friese (2014). The purpose of the model, according to Seidel (1998:1), “is to show that there is a simple foundation to the complex and rigorous practice of qualitative data analysis.”
The NCT model proposes three aspects to qualitative data analysis. The first is that the analysis is iterative and cyclical. A researcher applying this model begins to think about the content in the data. At the same time, the researcher also notices, collects, and thinks about other new information from the data. Seidel calls this process an “infinite spiral.” The NCT approach also encourages recursive analysis, “where you move back and forth between noticing and collecting” (Friese 2014:1). For instance, in the process of collecting, the researcher notices other content to collect. A third characteristic of the model is that analysis is holistic in that noticing, collecting, and thinking occur simultaneously as an entire process.

The NCT model has two phases of analysis. The descriptive level of analysis is where one begins noticing and collecting in the initial stages of reading, coding, and finding relevant codes in the data. The other phase is the conceptual level, where the researcher thinks about how the codes come together to create patterns and relations in the data. As I will show later, visualization tools in ATLAS.ti are also useful at this level as they help the researcher to understand relationships by drawing out links between codes.

ATLAS.ti has two important features that help track the researcher’s analytic process and that are an integral part of the NCT process: comment sections and memo fields. In the comment sections, I wrote short summaries about each individual’s life story (See Appendix A to view a “Sample Comment”). My summary profiles described key attributes, events, and issues associated with the interviewees. Since my study included 64 interviews covering a wide range of life course information, these comments reminded me of any facts that I failed to recall at a later time.
Also, I wrote analytic memos for each interview that I coded (See Appendix A to view a “Sample Memo”). Memos are crucial in qualitative research because they provide transparency into the research, and “ensure the retention of ideas that may otherwise be lost” (Birks, Chapman, and Francis 2008:69). Again, as I could not rely on my memory alone, memos were where I jotted ideas that came to mind while coding, that I wanted to follow up on later on my own or share with my research committee. I collected and wrote comments and questions about the emerging findings in my memos. I also referred to my memos to notice the questions I was asking, and I dug back into the data to collect more information. Thus, memos were as much part of the thinking process as the actual work of coding. In these memos, I also wrote lists of project tasks to complete in the future.

Most importantly, memos were spaces for rigorous self-reflection. Though my approach was inductive, it would be remiss of me to say that my bias or preconceptions did not shape interpretations given my personal experiences and knowledge. Hence, the memo was where I recorded my subjective feelings or personal thoughts in response to the data. In essence, the memo was a space for reflexivity – reflecting on my reactions to the interviews that are shaped by my background and perspective.

For instance, I discovered that as a woman, it was easier for me to relate to and connect with the women than the men. Another example is how I felt about the rearing styles of some of their parents. I had the good fortune to be raised by parents who immigrated to the United States with close to nothing, so they could provide a better life for me. They were extremely strict, but also highly involved, sacrificial, and loving. Given my personal experiences, I
caught myself judging (often negatively) the parents of interviewees who supposedly neglected or failed to care for their children. Thus, introspective memos were where I addressed these sorts of subjectivities.

Related to this topic of self-reflective memos, I bring up another instance where I needed to take a moment of introspection. During the process of drafting this dissertation and receiving feedback from my research committee, I was rightfully challenged about several value or assumptive statements that I had subconsciously made about the men’s and women’s life stories. For example, in my discussion of their “negative” schooling experiences in Chapter 5, I used language that criticized the school, the teachers, and the officials – as if I had also been present when these supposedly aversive situations took place. As one of my research advisors wisely pointed out in their feedback: “You don’t know yourself what went on in these schools.”

Jerolmack and Khan (2014:179) argue that people act differently than their expressed attitudes, and also “routinely provide inaccurate accounts of their past activities”. Thus, Jerolmack and Khan claim this limitation of in-depth interviews: the “attitudinal fallacy,” which is the error of inferring actual behaviors or actions from the accounts of the interviewees. Certainly, retroactive recollections are not always perfectly exact as human memory is flawed. But overall, I regard the accounts of the men and women to be true: that their life events did indeed unfold in the way described by them. This fact, however, remains: I was not present in those stories. Thus, I took care to remove judgmental language about the people or situations portrayed in their anecdotes.
Next, I review the three cycles of coding to show how I analyzed the interview transcripts and drew out the major themes of this study: “too much,” “too fast,” and the “straight road.” In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I discuss these three themes in greater detail. But briefly, I captured the process of accelerated adulthood among the men and women in this study as “too much, too fast.” That is, the first theme I discovered through coding analysis was that there was “too much” trauma in the lives of the men and women. The second theme was “too fast” or how these youth transitioned into adult roles too soon in response to their stressful contexts. The third theme was about the “straight road,” that is, how some people in this study stayed on the “straight road” to success.

*Iteration One of Coding*

My first cycle of coding was at the initial or descriptive level. A variety of first cycle methods are available to use depending on the researcher’s strategy (Saldana 2013). The first cycle methods that I used are “initial coding” and “in-vivo coding.” Initial coding generates “first impression” codes from every line of the data. Since I did not conduct these interviews, I started with very little knowledge about the men’s and women’s perceptions of growing up in poverty. Initial coding was a useful way to dig into the data without preconceptions, allowing the information to freely and inductively emerge by going line by line and collecting first impressions. I read each line, noticed, and coded almost every sentence with the first thought, word, or phrase that came to mind.
Examples of initial coding are as follows. One person stated: “Oh, it was very important for me to finish school. Because I know that you can’t get too far without that.” Here, “determination to finish school” was the first phrase that came to mind. In another interview, the individual said: “I found my father, who I hadn’t seen in years, and found that he was disabled, so I had to go right to work. And I take care of him, took care of him, and I still take care of him financially.” For this data segment, I initially assigned the codes: “parent(s) with health issues/disability” and “reconciling with absent father.”

I further combined initial coding with “in-vivo coding.” Other names for in-vivo coding are “verbatim coding” or “literal coding” because codes come from the literal word or phrase said by the interviewee. Saldana (2013) calls these terms “folk or indigenous.” In-vivo coding compelled me to be considerate and respectful of the interviewee’s voice.

To illustrate, the term “turning point” is often used in scholarly research, which refers to an event or happening that caused a usually favorable change or a turn in someone’s life (Laub and Sampson 1993). But through in-vivo coding, I noticed that the interviewees often called events that researchers might term “turning points” as “realization points.” Unlike the turning point, the realization point demonstrated self-reflection. That is, the self-awareness process involved realizing that a change or redirection in the life path was necessary versus simply allowing a key event or experience to happen and turn their lives around. Through in-vivo coding, I captured their words and discovered that they were not passive but active agents of self-change. Another in-vivo code example was “running wild,” a phase often used
by women to describe getting into trouble. As I will discuss in later chapters, this term turned out to be an important distinction between men and women.

My initial iteration of coding resulted in over 400 codes. There is no consensus on what is the “right” number of codes in qualitative research. Some researchers recommend generating between 150 and 300 codes (Friese 2014), while others believe 80 to 100 codes are sufficient (Lichtman 2010). In my situation, I found that dealing with over 400 codes was overly cumbersome. Many of my initial codes were repetitive or extraneous. Therefore, I kept only the codes with high groundedness (frequency of the code). Specifically, I deleted codes with a groundedness number less than five (applied less than five times throughout the 64 transcripts).

Next, I aggressively deleted codes that I determined as irrelevant to answering my research questions. For example, I erased the code “relational history” because I was not going in-depth into the interviewees’ cohabiting or marriage history. Finally, I merged codes redundant in meaning. For instance, I merged “resisting bad peer pressure” with “not giving into peer influence.” Frankly, this exercise was difficult because I did not want to inadvertently lose any important detail. I printed out copies of my entire code list several times to review over and over again. Ultimately, it was a necessary discipline to efficiently organize codes into coherent categories in the following coding iterations.

Keeping a codebook was also an essential step in the analytic process. ATLAS.ti maintains the code list, but defining the codes is the researcher’s responsibility. Hence, I wrote
definitions for each code. The definitions included a description of the code, an “inclusion criteria” (what the code is referring to or includes), an “exclusion criteria” (what the code is not referring to or excludes), and an example quotation, if necessary (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch 2010). See “Sample Code Definitions” in the Appendix A for some examples of how I operationalized certain codes.

As codes continued to emerge, it was demanding and time-consuming to stop and write definitions each time. This was particularly true during initial coding when I was applying codes to almost every line. But keeping a codebook, too, is part of the iterative process. Code definitions are revised as the researcher gains more insights (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch 2010). I found this to be true in my analytical process as well.

After the in-vivo and initial coding, I organized the codes into two broad categories (also called “code groups,” or “code families”) based on the transition to adulthood theme. That is, I initially organized codes under two age-related categories: Early Childhood (e.g., childhood family, childhood schooling experiences and childhood events, etc.) and Adulthood (e.g., employment, postsecondary schooling, marital status, and adulthood events). Under each code group, I also created subcategories. See Appendix A to view a “List of Code Groups and Subcategories for All Cycles.”
Iteration Two of Coding

After organizing and reducing codes, I began the second cycle of coding. Like the first cycle methods, there are various types of second cycle coding that cater to different research orientations. Other examples of second cycle coding include “longitudinal coding,” which examines the qualitative increase, decrease, or constancy of life events. “Elaborative coding” has a completely different focus to elaborate on or further a theoretical construct through an analysis of data (Saldana 2013). Since my research approach is thematic, my second cycle method of choice was “focused coding.”

Focused coding is usually done after in-vivo or initial coding, with the primary goal to create categories and develop themes. Thus, I reorganized the codes, which were initially organized under Early Childhood and Adulthood code groups, into three different code groups. To elaborate, my research questions inquire into the life events and transitions in the men’s and women’s lives as they came of age. Given that the men and women in this study experienced both negative and positive life events, I shifted the codes into three broader categories:

- The Negatives code groups, which included subcategories and corresponding codes reflecting all the negative life events, issues, and transitions in the lives of the men and women;
- The Positives code groups, which comprised subcategories and codes reflecting the positive occurrences, transitions, and issues in their lives;
- The Structural code group, which consolidated codes that reflected the structural constraints in their neighborhood and in larger society.

Some examples of codes in the Negatives categories were “cutting/messing up at school,” “getting into fights,” and “drinking problems.” Positives code groups included codes such as “content with current work,” “resisting alcohol/drugs/smoking,” and possessing
“plans/desires for further education.” Examples of codes from the Structural category were “Racial Tension & Discrimination” in the neighborhood and “Rough & Dangerous Neighborhood.”

After reorganizing, the total number of codes was 106. See “Second Cycle Coding: Categories and Codes” in Appendix A for the full list of these code groups and their associated codes.

**Iteration Three of Coding**

The intent of this last iteration of coding (iteration three) was to draw out the main themes of this research. During this final round of coding, three overarching themes emerged from the interviews. Again, these three themes were: “too much,” “too fast,” and the “straight road.” The following is an explanation of how I identified these themes.

I focused my coding (“focused coding”) applying three techniques for identifying themes. The first method was to search for “repetition” in the interviewees – when a concept or an idea repeats in the text. As Ryan and Bernard (2003:89) suggests, “The more the same concept occurs in a text, the more likely it is a theme.” The second strategy was to look for key “verbatim statements” or words, which also later became themes. Finally, I applied “pattern coding,” which is coding that identifies “patterns” within the data. According to Saldana (2013), patterns are not simply characterized by similarities found in the data.
Pattern coding is also about identifying patterns of differences, sequences, and causations, etc.

After returning to the data for the third time, I applied these techniques to reorganize the codes and code groups thematically, first for the codes in the Negatives categories. In iteration two, I had grouped codes applied to data on negative life events, issues, or situations under the Negatives categories. But in iteration three, I discovered a repetition, verbatim statement, and a pattern of similarity: many men and women repeated that these negative life events contributed to having “too much” (using the words of some interviewees) trauma in their lives.

For instance, the code “abuse by family” was often mentioned in the context of dealing with overwhelming threat and pain in life. To illustrate, the victims of abuse similarly and repeatedly talked about how dealing with abuse caused “screaming,” “a lot of hurt,” and “deep” pain. They also spoke of how their tragic experiences with abuse consumed them and “blocked up” their heads. I, therefore, renamed the code group from Negatives to Too Much to capture this pattern of interviewees dealing with an overabundance of hardships in their lives.

Additionally, I noticed that the codes from the Too Much code group could be reorganized into subcategories that reflected the three domains of their lives: (1) the family, (2) the

---

1 See “Third Cycle Coding: Categories and Codes” in Appendix A for the full list of codes and code groups.
school, and (3) the community. Hence, I divided the Too Much code group into the following three subcategories: (1) Too Much-Family, (2) Too Much-School, and (3) Too Much-Community.

To establish patterns and to sort the codes into appropriate code groups, I also used visualization tools from ATLAS.ti. One visualization tool is the “Network” tool, which links codes together. ATLAS.ti does not automatically create networks between codes. It is the responsibility of the researcher to make meaningful connections. In this study, I did not explore links of causation; therefore, the ATLAS.ti network tool was utilized more for thinking, analyzing, and drawing out themes, rather than drawing conclusions of relationships.

Figure 4.1 is an example, showing the networks of codes that fall under the Too Much-Family code group. Using this tool, I took several unlinked but similar codes from the Too Much code group, and placed them onto the network chart. Example codes are “absent or neglectful biological mother,” “absent or neglectful biological father,” and “abuse in family.” Then I figured out how the different codes linked to one another by going back into the data for deeper context.
To illustrate, some interviewees mentioned that the reason for their biological father’s absence was because of his involvement in drugs and alcohol. Hence, I connected these two codes together as associated or related: “Absent or neglectful biological father” and “Parents with drug and alcohol problems.” I also moved all of these negative family-related codes to the code group: Too Much-Family, since they all indicated life events and problems that contributed to excessive hardship in the family.

The three domains of the Too Much code groups included codes applied to data on the men’s and women’s schooling, family, and neighborhoods stresses growing up. I created another code group called Stresses in Adulthood, which is not one of the main themes. The codes in this group, however, refer to the hardships that these individuals faced as adults, at the time of the Pathways interviews.
In Chapter 8, I refer to the data assigned to *Stresses in Adulthood* codes to highlight some of the challenges that the men and women still confronted as adults. For instance, “current financial difficulties” was a code applied to statements that expressed feeling overwhelmed about their bills. To illustrate, I applied this code to a statement by one of the permanent dropouts: “I been going through so much stuff with my bills and everything, and it just stresses me out. It really stresses me out.”

The next theme “too fast” also emerged from recurring and verbatim statements or words, and patterns of similarity. While coding, I noticed repetitive statements by the men and women of “growing up too fast” in response to the deluge of hardship in life. Thus, “growing up too fast” (shortened to “too fast”) became an in-vivo code that ultimately turned into a theme.

This too fast theme, however, was not only from indigenous words. While coding for patterns, I also discovered indirect expressions of accelerated growth. Specifically, I noticed two patterns of similarity: many men and women indicated that they were growing up too fast by first, speaking of precocious actions and transitions, and second, discussing their early involvement in and repercussions of their problem behaviors.

For example, the interviewees commonly spoke of working at an early age, which is a kind of precocious action or transition. Other code examples of precocious actions are “moving out fast” and “family responsibilities from an early age.” Problem behaviors, too, are linked to growing up too fast, according to the men and women. For instance, criminal involvement
or getting into trouble often was the reason for dropping out of school and transitioning out of their role as a student too early.

Thus, I reorganized the codes (related to growing up too fast) from the Negatives code groups, into a separate, overarching Too Fast code group. Figure 4.2 is an example of a network chart that I created to organize codes under the code group of Too Fast.

Figure 4.2: Network of Codes for the Too Fast Code Groups

After reorganizing the Negatives code groups into Too Much and Too Fast code groups, I turned my attention to the codes in the Positives code groups. While analyzing their transcripts, I noticed that despite the many obstacles growing up poor, the interviewees mentioned the many positives in their lives. Thus, the codes in the Positives code families reflected the “good” in their lives. These are some examples: “Content with Current Work,” “Fatherhood as influence / joy,” and “Positive parental rearing / expectations.”
“Constant comparing” also helps find patterns of “similarities and differences” in the data (Glaser and Strauss 2006). For instance, grounded theorists, who generate theory from data, often ask these sorts of questions while scrutinizing text line-by-line: “What is this sentence about? and How is it similar to or different from the preceding or following statements?” (Ryan and Bernard 2003:91). I, too, asked broader questions of comparisons as I explored the interviews: Who are the interviewees with recurring statements of optimism versus those who did not express as much contentment? And what helped those who supposedly obtained success, despite all the adversities in their lives?

Hence, after careful scrutiny, I discovered patterns of difference between high school graduates and high school dropouts. In this cycle of coding, for instance, I noticed that there were certain Positives codes higher in groundedness among high school graduates than dropouts. That is, certain codes, in particular from the Positives code groups, recurred more frequently in interviews with the high school graduates than with high school dropouts.

An example of this, is the groundedness number for one particular code from the Positives code group, “hobbies/interests as outlets,” which was 68, meaning that this code was applied 68 times throughout the transcripts. This code was assigned to sentences or paragraphs where the interviewees mentioned hobbies or special interests that kept them preoccupied and content.

Relevant here is another tool in ATLAS.ti called the “Code Document Table” that is used to create comparison tables of groundedness across various code groups or codes by document
groups (typically based on demographic characteristics). In ATLAS.ti, I grouped the documents (or the interview transcripts) by race, gender, and education; for example, all transcripts for white dropout men were grouped as “White Men-Dropouts.”

In this particular instance, I generated a code document table comparing the groundedness of the code “hobbies/interests as outlets” between two document groups – high school graduates and high school dropouts. The output showed that “hobbies/interests as outlets” code was applied more frequently in the transcripts of high school graduate interviews (49 times) than in dropout interviews (19 times).

Finally, in the same way that I rearranged, relinked, and renamed the Negatives categories, I also re-categorized the Positives code groups. First, I renamed the Positives code groups to the Straight Road, which is a verbatim phrase. That is, an interviewee described living a positive life of achievement and success as “life on the straight road.” Like the Too Much and Too Fast code groups that I described above, the overarching category of the Straight Road also included subcategories.

Again, I looked for repetitions, verbatim statements, and codes that seemingly “look-alike” and “feel-alike” (Lincoln and Guba 1985:347). For example, the sub-code group, Straight Road-Self-Change, included codes such as the “realization point,” “motherhood as an influence,” and any other similar codes that indicated the undergoing of self-change on the straight road. Another example is the sub-code group Straight Road-Social Support. As I was coding, I noticed that many of the men and women expressed having social support and
close ties with family and friends. Thus, I grouped codes about relational ties under \textit{Straight Road-Social Support}.

In the next three chapters, I explore these themes that emerged through the repeated readings and coding, which I described above. Specifically, the next chapter explores the first theme “too much,” which refers to the overwhelming negatives in the lives of the men and women. The second theme, addressed in Chapter 6, is “too fast” points to the accelerated transition to adulthood among the people in this study. The third theme, examined in Chapter 7, is about the positives in the lives of the men and women that kept some on the straight word toward achieving success.
CHAPTER 5: “TOO MUCH”

Recall that I explore two themes that capture the accelerated maturing process of the men and women in this study: “too much” and “too fast.” This chapter examines the first theme – about how these young men and women saw and experienced too much trauma in their communities, families, and schools. While I discuss all three contexts, I focus on the men’s and women’s family backgrounds because their interviews centered on their family lives growing up.

Community

Our society purportedly values children as our “most precious commodity” (Ruane and Cerulo 2011). Protecting our children is of utmost importance; thus, the state of childhood is cherished in our society. Childhood is designated to be a time of carefree wonder, playfulness, and precious innocence. But for the majority of the people in this research, this was not the picture of their childhood. A myriad of tragedies and difficulties converged to negatively impact their young lives.

As children and youths, they lived in a milieu suffused with violence and fear, especially in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The crime statistics from that era are telling. In 1985, when the men and women in this study were about nine years old, the total violent crime rate was approximately 20.1 per 1000 Baltimore City residents. This rate steadily rose starting the late 1980s. The total violent crime rate per 1000 inhabitants rose to 24.4 by 1990 and jumped again to 30.2 by 1995 (Maryland Uniform Crime Reports). Contrast this rate with Baltimore
County, where the violent crime rate in 1990 was 10.1 and 10.7 in 1995, barely one third that of Baltimore City. Homicides were especially of concern in Baltimore City, peaking at 353 in 1993 when the students were in high school (Department of Maryland State Police 1995).

Not surprisingly, the threat of physical and emotional victimization was common and looming. Those from the poorest households have almost three times the rate of serious violent victimizations than higher income households (Thacher 2004). Witnessing violence often triggers depression, anxiety, and other posttraumatic symptoms (Lambert et al. 2012). Poor urban youths are also likely to feel unsafe and distrust the police (Farver, Ghosh, and Garcia 2000). Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) profiled the original 20 Baltimore City neighborhoods from the BSS, and found that violent crime rates are vastly higher in lower-income communities than in higher-income communities. In particular, violence is heavily concentrated in lower-income black neighborhoods.

To escape the violence of the streets, many of the men and women in this study stayed confined to their homes. To cope, they “telescoped” (Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). Telescoping is to believe that at least their block is secure versus around the corner, or in different parts of their neighborhood. Indeed, earliest recollections of their block were mostly described as fond and pleasant. Block parties, basketball games, and bike rides with neighbors were delightful memories. Their blocks were “close-knit,” “quiet,” and “pretty nice.” But the scene shifted dramatically when they walked down the street or turned the corner. “You go up and down streets to other areas around here, and it’s pretty rough, pretty rough,” one person recalled about his neighborhood. Telescoping also couldn’t help them
avoid the inevitable: neighborhoods that regressed during the young men and women’s formative years due to increasing drug presence and drug-related crimes.

Urban poverty is often associated with the high prevalence of drug use and trafficking, particularly during the 1990s when the study youths grew up (Ensminger et al. 1997). Centers and Weist (1998) reported one in six youths who lived in urban areas dealt drugs in the 1990s. In 1984, drug-related arrests accounted for approximately 15 percent of arrests for all offenses by both juveniles and adults in Baltimore City. By 1995, approximately 31 percent of arrests were for drug-related violations (possession and sale/manufacturing) (Snyder and Mulako-Wangota 2016).

The 1980s and 1990s were infamous for the crack epidemic that plagued cities across the US including Baltimore City. Spin magazine released a famous exposé about Baltimore City violence in 1986, depicting an epoch of terror. The writer vividly described drug dealers as “vultures on the corner” holding a “reign of terror” over the city (Cooper 1986). The drugs that invaded the city also had severe public health consequences: between 1990 and 1997, overdose deaths increased by 426 percent in Baltimore, the highest out of 27 cities in the US (Garfield and Drucker 2001). Heroin was and still remains the choice drug for abuse and related deaths (Baltimore City Health Department 2016).

Accordingly, the young people in this study grew up in neighborhoods entrenched in drugs during the 1990s. Drug addicts and dealers hanging in the streets upended any belief that
their blocks were no longer safe. As the young men and women grew through their elementary, middle, and high school years, their communities further descended into distress.

Marcus is a black man who grew up in a tight-knit neighborhood in South Baltimore. He spoke affectionately of his once close and communal block: “Everybody knew each other, just like a little circle.” But then the drugs overtook his block. The drugs were “everywhere,” so much so that Marcus casually dismissed the ubiquity of violence and drugs as “just how the world is.”

Consider another interviewee’s account of his neighborhood’s “demise” due to drugs:

Yeah, it was, at one time it was a community, and nobody would even think about coming through there, cause this neighbor knew this neighbor, and they communicated …. I remember, it was good then … All the kids rode their bikes, kids would, the girls would play jacks and jump rope, and we would tease them, you know? But, you started seeing things change, around the time when the ready-rock came. People who you respected, and who used to watch you as a kid, now had no, no respect for theirselves. They chasing this stuff, their lights getting turned out, the kids’ clothes aren’t being washed, and you know, you started seeing a demise, and then it became a thing where everybody was just trying to get money, or everybody was high. It was a dividing line, there, and with the coke came the violence, cause with that, a person, they have no problem putting a few bullets in you for a hundred dollar’s worth of cocaine. Twenty dollar’s worth.

As their neighborhoods deteriorated, some individuals from this study escaped to other safer parts of the city, or out of the city into other counties and states. Those who remained in the city bemoaned the present state of their neighborhoods and evinced strong desires to eventually move away from the city at the time of their Pathways interviews.

Similar transformations were evident too in these youths home lives; that is, too much family trauma. The rising violence and drugs outside also afflicted their personal spaces. When asked to give accounts of their childhood years, the men and women mostly spoke about
their woeful family experiences growing up. As youths, they tried to eschew the tensions and temptations of the streets by staying home. In the perspectives of the men and women, however, their homes weren’t safe havens. Instead, abuse, drugs, violence, and other adversities filled their unstable homes. Thus, the following is an exploration of the various layers of family trauma that forced the men and women to see and experience too much.

**Family**

The urban poor confront a mountain of challenges. But in the retelling of their life stories, the men and women in this study most often mentioned their struggles with experiencing too much violence, absence, and drugs and alcohol in their families. As shown in Table 5.1, approximately 55 percent of the 64 interviewees experienced the absence of their biological father while 16 percent experienced their biological mother’s absence. Furthermore, 22 percent experienced abuse from a family member, 23 percent witnessed intimate partner violence between their parents, and 38 percent had parents with drugs and alcohol problems.
Table 5.1: Family Traumas (%) by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Absent Father Growing Up</th>
<th>Absent Mother Growing Up</th>
<th>Victim of Abuse</th>
<th>Domestic Violence</th>
<th>Parents with Drug &amp; Alcohol Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Men (14)</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women (18)</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Men (14)</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women (18)</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (64)</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(35)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on data from the Pathways Interviews and the Mature Adult Survey for all 64 interviewees.

* Interviewee may have experienced one or more traumas.

b Percentages based on total (number of interviewees) per race and gender group.

Not surprisingly, the interviewees spoke of how constant exposure to such stressors adversely affected their life experiences and paths. In this section, I first identify the emotional toll that befell these young men and women because of excessive family trauma.

The emotional burden that even adults find hard to weighed heavily on their shoulders from an early age. Furthermore, childhood struggles continued to torment the young men and women at ages 23 to 24.

Family Violence

Consider their emotional responses to seeing too much family violence growing up. While nearly all youths have some exposure to violence, poor urban youths have heightened
exposure to violence (Gladstein, Rusonis, and Heald 1992). Likewise, the low-income men and women in this study recounted their exposure to abuse and violence within their homes. Both black and white men and women endured direct and indirect forms of violence and ill treatment.

Indirect exposure is when the individual witnesses traumatic events or situation, e.g., being a bystander to intimate partner violence between their parents. Domestic violence ranged in severity, from repeated intense verbal arguments to severe physical abuse. Growing up, the individual may have frequently overheard heated exchanges between the parents (e.g., cursing, insults, screaming, etc.). At times, the interviewees may not have directly seen the act of violence or the altercation but witnessed the aftermath of the incident, such as broken furniture or bodily injuries to the mother (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan 2008). More whites from the study (11) than blacks (4) reported domestic violence in their homes.²

Direct exposure escalates from observation to direct and active involvement or victimization, such as receiving abuse. Direct abuse is being the direct victim of sexual, physical, emotional or verbal abuse by a family member. Of the 64 interviewees, 14 were victims of abuse as children or youths. Of these 14 victims, 64 percent were white. More women (64 percent) were victims of abuse than men (36 percent). All of the men who were

² The BSS surveys with children and parents during school-age years (1st grade to 12th grade) did not directly ask about domestic violence or abuse situations. Thus, these abuse and domestic violence incidences were not apparent from the BSS surveys, only coming to light during later qualitative interviews with the men and women. The principal investigators would have been obligated to report any abuse or domestic violence instances, if they had encountered it while collecting the school-age surveys. This also shows how easily such instances can be overlooked in survey studies unless probed for explicitly as was done in the Pathways interviews.
abuse victims reported physical abuse, whereas women reported a combination of physical and sexual abuse.

The psychological and social damages of dealing with family violence are well documented in research. Children from abusive households are more likely to be aggressive and depressed. They struggle to build healthy relationships and are less secure (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan 2008). Victims internalize and externalize behavioral problems as a result of domestic violence (Moylan et al. 2010). The men and women in this study too, shouldered overwhelming emotional burden because of widespread violence from a young age.

Sherry, for instance, is a black woman who endured horrific physical abuse by her stepfather for many years. She also watched helplessly as her stepfather assaulted her mother. As an adult, she still wrestled with the past abuse and hesitated to talk about it. “It’s not something that a lot of people can really deal with,” she told the interviewer. But Sherry did as a child, from when she was seven years old until she was 13 years old. She expressed the agonizing emotional toll of direct exposure to violence and abuse:

But I’ve been, my mother, my family, we’ve been through a lot as far as abusive and, I had a[n] abusive family. My father, my stepfather was abusive to my mother, so it really wasn’t too much positive in my life at that time, so. It hurts—I have been through a lot, a lot of things that I don’t, I’m not really ready to talk about, because it still bothers me at times.

Allison’s story is equally heartbreaking and highlights the hefty emotional baggage that she carried since she was young. Allison is a white woman who grew up in South Baltimore. Growing up, she enjoyed attending school and actively participated in various school clubs and extracurricular activities, such as the student government, the newspaper club, and the
basketball team. For two years in a row, Allison was in the top ten percent of her high school. After obtaining her high school degree, she attended a two-year college. Allison’s lifelong passion was writing; she had big ambitions to someday publish books. The interviewer noted that she was full of “coquettishness and glee” throughout their conversation, especially when talking about the highlights in her life.

Beneath the gleaming layer of her accomplishments and aspirations, however, Allison harbored dark secrets about her life at home. Her cheerfulness turned to tearfulness as the full story of her life emerged. Allison recapped the chilling details of the heinous abuse she experienced at the hands of her stepfather. Allison’s stepfather beat her and her siblings, purposefully with a webbed military belt once owned by her beloved biological father (who died when Allison was three years old). Her stepfather also sexually molested her, forcing her into masturbation starting from when she was four years old until she was 12 years old.

Every day, he berated Allison about her body weight, and taunted her and her siblings with offensive nicknames. “We all went through depression, all of us, because we were all petrified of him … he had particular names for all of us. And [brother 1] was Retard, [sister 1] was Bitch, [brother 2] was Faggot, I was Sissy,” Allison recounted.

For many years, Allison suffered from suicidal thoughts and severe depression. In her Pathways interview, Allison mentioned that she was still full of pain and distrust after enduring severe abuse:

I don’t trust men. I don’t trust any man. I was petrified of all men growing up. I mean, a man walk by me, and I would just shake…. I even went to the point of, I couldn’t stand Puerto Ricans. He’s Puerto Rican. I would never date a Puerto Rican, I’m never going to Puerto Rico.
Parental Absence

Consider also the emotional toll of dealing with parental absence or neglect, a traumatic experience frequently mentioned by the young men and women. Parental absence refers to the absence of a biological father or a biological mother growing up. Absence can be intermittent (in and out of the child’s life) or permanent (as a result of complete abandonment or death). In some instances, both biological parents were absent. In other cases, parents were physically around, but otherwise negligent (e.g., leaving the child without supervision).

Refer again to Table 5.1. Approximately 55 percent of the men and women come from families with absent biological fathers.\(^3\) Of those who grew up without their biological fathers, nearly 69 percent of them are black. Ten interviewees grew up with an absent biological mother.\(^4\) All but one person who grew up without mothers are women. Six black women grew up with both parents absent; typically, their grandparents acted as their caretakers.

As the numbers show, parental absence was especially common for black women and men, regardless of education level. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, a prominent characteristic of the black urban family structure is the high number of absent fathers. But it goes deeper than numbers. The black men and women in this study spoke extensively about the distressing

\(^3\) Could be because of abandonment or the death of the biological father. A stepfather or a mother’s boyfriend may have been present at certain time points.

\(^4\) Because of abandonment or death of the biological mother. A stepmother or a father’s girlfriend may have been present at certain time points.
void of their fathers or mothers. Experiencing the vacant space of a parent, especially of
their biological fathers, bred tremendous emotional pain for the black interviewees. Their
words conveyed an intense yearning for the father’s presence, which persisted over the years.
We see this with Tasha who grew up with a deep longing for her absent father. Throughout
her interview, Tasha repeatedly expressed how much she missed her dad. Tasha’s mother
and grandmother raised her after Tasha’s father left the family. But Tasha had a hostile
relationship with her mother. They argued over everything. The stress from her conflict with
her mother, however, paled in comparison to her loneliness and yearning for her biological
father.

Tasha last saw her father was when she was five years old, but she had no recollection of
their final meeting. Growing up, Tasha daily sought her mother’s cooperation to find her
father. Her mother, vexed by Tasha’s pleas to find her father, usually shooed her away.

Tasha refused to give up. In desperation, she called 1-800-US Search (a provider that
searches for and provides background reports on people) for professional help locating her
father. Ultimately, Tasha’s search was fruitless. She was never able to get in touch with him.

Tasha articulated her desire to meet and establish a relationship with her absent father:

And it’s kind of hard, because I want to know him … I always wanted to see my
father, and I always wanted to… for him to want me. I always wanted a daddy,
period …. I wanted my father, really. I just couldn’t understand why he wasn’t there …
I felt like we could have had a wonderful relationship, I could have talked to him,
hewould have talked to me …. I even went as far as to lying about him. I wanted
him in my life so bad, I used to tell my friends, yeah, my father’s this, and that. And I
didn’t even know the man, but I created a wonderful father for myself, and I didn’t
even know who he was. But I told my friends that he was—the sweetest man, and he
took care of me, and… where did he work? He worked at, he had like his own
basketball court, cause I was into basketball at the time, so I was like, well, he and I
had a lot of basketball cards, let me get this one … my father, and I was thinking to
myself, you didn’t get that from your father. And I just couldn’t stop lying about it.
For the black men especially, their father’s absence shrouded their lives. Despite the presence of a loving and supportive guardian (in most cases, their mothers), their father’s absence still haunted them. Jason is one of those black men who grew up in difficult circumstances without his biological father. His parents separated when Jason was around seven years old. Afterward, Jason and his younger brother moved with their mother from Southwest Baltimore to a poorer neighborhood in West Baltimore, around the corner from his maternal grandmother’s home. The neighborhood was full of drugs, shootings, and homicides. But Jason leaned into his family members, stayed away from trouble, and graduated from high school. His mother also remarried. Jason maintained a warm relationship with his stepfather, who he fondly called his “real father.”

Despite Jason’s accomplishments and the support of his loving family, the void of his biological father elicited resentment and sadness growing up. After Jason’s family moved to West Baltimore, they were no more than ten minutes driving distance from his father. Jason however, recalled that his father never called or visited him and his brother. According to Jason, they lacked a father-son relationship.

Jason launched into a diatribe about his absent father:

He would never come see us. And that, and that kind of bothered me. It took me a long time to really understand what was going on. My mother used to always tell me—he’s always making promises, he doesn’t keep them. It took me a long time to understand that …. I used to sit there, and I used to be always looking for him, he’d say, I’m going to come and get you, and I was still excited, to come see him, and to do things with him. But as I got older … I started realizing, hey, you know, he said this and that and he lied to me… And it hurt. It was hurting me, because he wasn’t, my mother was always there for me, struggling, and it was his job, too, to help her, he wasn’t doing it. Only time he and me’d speak was when he came through our neighborhood because when he was younger, he hung around the neighborhood that
we moved to, so. He would speak when we saw him. Other than that, he wouldn’t speak to me. Some birthdays, you might have heard from him. Christmas, he might have bought a bag of toys for me and my little brother. But, from going through that, that made me tell myself that I’m not going to be like this with my child.

Starting from a young age, the men and women put in intense “emotional work” (Hochschild 1979), trying to manage and process their feelings to grapple with these overwhelming situations and experiences. Borrowing the words of one interviewee, these young people needed to “think on the adult level” from an early age in response to their precocious development. In doing emotional work, the men and women often used a technique called “cognitive-emotional work,” which is the regulating and changing of thoughts to control one’s feelings (Hochschild 1979).

Jason’s story continues with details of doing cognitive-emotional work to manage his emotions and to think on an “adult level.” Jason, badly scarred, struggled with his contempt toward his father for a long time. But Jason strived to control his thoughts and emotions, as he felt strongly obligated to protect his younger brother from the same disappointment and rage that consumed him. Despite his own confusion and anger, Jason rationalized that he needed to help his little brother understand why their father acted in such a way. With Jason’s support, his brother “got to the point, too, that he understood.”

Marcus’ story is another example of doing premature cognitive-emotional work for the sake of a beloved family member. Recall that Marcus grew up in a poor neighborhood in South Baltimore rampant with drugs. But his home was one full of love and warmth because of his tight relationship with his mother. As an only child, Marcus was extremely close to his
mother. He and his mother were like “buddies,” a “comedy team,” and “siblings.” Marcus often treated his mother out to dinner and the movies. They shared in all the joys and pains together. Expectantly, Marcus was fiercely protective of his mother.

Marcus’ father, however, was barely around. When Marcus’ mother was pregnant with him, Marcus’ father told her to “flush it down the toilet” because he “didn’t care” what she did with their unborn child. Marcus met his father for the first time when he was five years old. This first meeting was the only memory Marcus shared with his father. During this encounter, Marcus’ father taught him how to fight at the request of Marcus’ mother. “I don’t remember him teaching me anything, all he did was say, put your dukes up. But that’s it, that’s the only fatherly thing he ever did, he never took care of me,” Marcus told the interviewer. Marcus didn’t see his father for ten years following their first meeting.

One day, Marcus’ father started coming back intermittently to visit his mother after reuniting with her. Throughout his interview, Marcus’ animosity toward his father was palpable. He took umbrage at his father’s actions. If one day, his father decided to permanently move back in with his mother, “Me and him is going to have a man-to-man. Not a father-to-son, but a man-to-man conversation,” Marcus declared. Still, he was determined to control his emotions for the sake of his mother. Despite his pain and depression, Marcus believed his priority was protecting her happiness: “My mother is so happy, I don’t want to … ruin her thing.” For his mother’s sake, Marcus has and continued to battle with his emotions.
Cognitive-emotional work was also in the interest of self, namely, to shelter oneself from further emotional damage. Larry’s story stands out here. Larry is one of the black men in this study who grew up fatherless. He was “gentle and thoughtful” in disposition. His physical attributes and body language as noted by the interviewer matched these observed personality traits. He had a “smooth face and long lashes that make him look younger than his twenty-three years.” Larry voiced his opinions with “quiet confidence” throughout the conversation.

Larry came from an affectionate family. He shared a warm relationship with his maternal grandmother and his two brothers who were his role models. In fact, Larry still lived at his grandmother’s house at the time of his Pathways interview. Most of all, Larry’s mother was his greatest motivation in life. His gentleness and thoughtfulness shined each time he recounted the heartfelt gratitude he felt toward his mother. Though Larry came from substantial poverty, he proudly graduated from high school.

Despite having a caring family and impressive achievements in the face of disadvantage, Larry still identified the saddest moment in life as not having a father. As a teenager, he struggled with the absence of his father and missed him greatly: “I just wished that I could have knew my father more often …. He lives somewhere. Honestly, where, I don’t even know myself.” The presence of his mother, siblings, and grandmother did not mollify his sorrow. His father’s absence also “put a down” on his academic performance.

From a young age, however, Larry began thinking on an adult level to manage his feelings. Frustrations about his father that long simmered within Larry boiled; it was time for a
resolution. Hence, at some point in his youth, Larry resolved to change his thoughts for his own sake. He convinced himself that the dysfunction of his family didn’t define his identity and his future goals.

Larry explained how he let go of his resentment and sadness after reasoning with himself:

> It was just, around my teen years, I just … wanted to get to know him. And just … see him and talk to him …. I wanted to just get to know my father …. it [growing up in a single parent home] takes its toll on the children, but it’s a point where you have to just say, well, I have to put that off now, I have to look out for me for right now, I have to set a role for myself that I have to go to, that’s something that I have to do, that I have to accomplish in my life, and everything else has to pick up later on.

*Parents’ Drug & Alcohol Use*

Exposure to drugs and alcohol is another source of too much trauma for the men and women in this research. Refer again to Table 5.1, which shows that about 38 percent of the young people in this study had a parent with either a drug or alcohol issue (e.g., addiction, selling, etc.). In addition, their parents’ involvement in drugs and alcohol often preceded their parents’ absence or violence. Of 45 interviewees with an absent mother or father, 15 men and women indicated in their Pathways interviews that their parents’ drug and alcohol use played a role in their mother or father’s absence.

The young men and women repeated that it was “really hard” dealing with their parents’ drug and alcohol use. Watching their mother or father spiral out of control because of drug and alcohol addiction was especially daunting. Furthermore, it was difficult facing the repercussions of their parents’ drugs and alcohol habits, especially their absence.
This sentiment that life was really hard because of the parents’ substance and alcohol use came up frequently in Jada’s story. Jada grew up in a segregated, “drug-infested,” and desolate housing project in West Baltimore. She is also one of the six black women whose parents were both absent. Jada’s father, a Navy veteran, was “not in a right, stable mind.” Jada assumed his time in the Navy “made him lose his mind.” Jada’s mother was also not around because of her drug addiction. As a result, Jada’s grandmother stepped in as her primary caretaker.

Jada weathered countless hardships in life but her parents’ absence was particularly damaging. She forgave her father’s absence because of his severe mental illness. But in Jada’s mind, her mother’s absence was inexcusable. Again and again, Jada denounced her mother’s “choice” to abandon her for drugs. She couldn’t fathom how her mother would be “out there buying drugs, and just tearing her body apart” and stealing from her grandmother to fund her drug supply. Jada recalled how it was tough to watch her mother drugged up. A mother is someone who “you[re] supposed to turn to,” Jada explained. But her mother was “never a mother,” Jada claimed. Jada also concluded that she couldn’t have the “good things” in life and the teenage life that she desired because of her mother’s addiction.

The sentiment that life was really hard because of the parent’s involvement in drugs and drinking was prominent in Jim’s account, too. Jim, like Jada, grew up in a deteriorating neighborhood of West Baltimore. His mother was a single parent. As the family’s sole earner, his mother wasn’t around as much as Jim would have liked. She “never” disciplined (“spanked” or “beat”) him and his siblings, instead, allowing them to do “whatever.” In
Jim’s opinion, his mother was more concerned with paying the bills than raising her children. But he said he understood; after all, she was their lone provider with little money to spare, struggling to make ends meet. Still, it wasn’t the ideal family setting that Jim desired.

Jim’s mother also had a brief stint with cocaine, but she quickly stopped. Jim commended her courage to quit on her own and not “fall victim” to the drugs: “I seen how it would affect this person that way, and then have to sit up and watch my mother, but it wasn’t as hard, because it wasn’t as bad as my father. Because it was brief.”

Jim’s father was a different story. His father was a heavy heroin addict, which led to his absence. Jim recalled the pain of watching his father “basically kill himself.” Eventually, his father passed away when Jim was 18 years old. When the interviewer inquired about the one thing that Jim wished he could change about his life, Jim pointed to his father’s drug abuse and absence. “I wish my father was there sometimes …. I would take out the fact that most of our life, my mother had to do it by herself. And I would put in my father where he should have been,” Jim explained.

The interviewer also asked Jim how he would improve society. Jim’s response was keen and thoughtful. Jim placed his father’s addiction into a larger social context. It was difficult to avoid drugs “living in the neighborhoods we did,” Jim explained. Hence, Jim recommended changing the drug policy to cut the drug problem at its root. Instead of inculcating the virtue of “just saying no” to drugs in children through programs such as D.A.R.E. and criminalizing drug users like his father, Jim proposed that policies target drug traffickers to
dismantle drug markets and choke off the supply of drugs before it reached the streets.

Perhaps then, Jim believed, his father would not have become an addict on the streets, but at home present for Jim.

Jim, however, didn’t entirely absolve his father of blame. Another poignant statement stands out from Jim’s interview: that ultimately, his father wanted “his drugs more than he wanted to be with his children.” This belief that drugs mattered more wasn’t a view unique to Jim, but others implied or said the same in their interviews. They accused their parents of being more concerned with drugs than the welfare or basic needs of their offspring.

Consider Michael’s story, where drug involvement was at the crux of his life as he transitioned into adulthood. Michael is a white man with short brown hair in “regulation prison style” and arms apparently scarred by needle marks. He was an engaging conversationalist, talkative, and willing to open up about his life. Indeed, Michael had much to open up about his life, particularly about growing up under parents who were drug users and his own descent into drug addiction.

Michael had a lengthy history of cycling through the criminal justice system, starting from a young age. As a child, he regularly got into trouble for minor offenses such as trespassing and spray-painting. Michael also began using drugs from an early age. After bouncing around schools because of his problem behaviors, he was assigned to a residential school in the sixth grade through the ninth grade. Michael’s time at the residential school was a welcome reprieve from the temptations and disarray of the streets and his home. He appreciated the
“structure” that the school provided for him – something that Michael said was lacking back at home. Michael excelled as an art major at the residential school. His proudest moment was winning first place at an art exposition.

After Michael left the residential school, however, he lost the “controlled” and structured environment that held him together. Michael dreaded the awful reality outside the school that he blamed for luring him back to a life of using and dealing. At the time of the Pathways interview, he was in prison for drug-related crimes.

Michael’s lifelong battle with drugs is not surprising as he grew up in a “drug atmosphere” under parents who were addicted to drugs. This wasn’t always the case. When Michael was a baby, his parents were together and drug-free. Michael’s mom was involved and “even strict” when she was still married to his father. But life took a turn downhill after his parents separated when Michael was three years old. “Things just really got out of hand,” Michael recalled. Both his parents became deeply involved in drugs.

Michael’s father was constantly in and out of jail. His father’s prison stints and ensuing absence were especially harmful to Michael. One stretch of his father’s time in prison was particularly devastating to Michael. It was when his father was locked up when Michael was 13 years old until 15 years old, effectively missing all of Michael’s adolescent years when Michael needed him most. In the end, Michael’s father tragically passed away from a drug overdose.
Michael’s mother also ventured in and out of prison, though not as often as his father. Michael, however, faulted her for his own drug addiction and the ensuing troubles in life. His mother, Michael claimed, turned their home into a drug den. His mother’s friends, who were also users and dealers, roamed freely in and out of their home. In fact, his mother and father supplied drugs for Michael and allowed him to use at a young age. By 13 years old, Michael was selling marijuana on the streets at the urging of his mother and her boyfriend at the time. Michael implicated his parents for caring more about drugs than raising him.

In Jackie’s opinion, too, drugs mattered more to her mother than Jackie’s well-being. Jackie is a white woman from an impoverished family. Jackie’s father was present in her life but suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. He had moved out of the home when she was eight years old, but she saw him regularly. Though he remained heavily medicated, Jackie called him an otherwise “regular human being.”

Jackie’s mother, however, was mostly absent. Jackie’s interview made clear the disdain she felt for her mother’s absence. From Jackie’s recollection, her mother spent more time drinking and “going to bars” than taking care of Jackie and her siblings. Jackie’s mom often left home weeks at a time, leaving Jackie and her siblings without adult supervision. Many times, they ran out of food and “never had clean clothes” to wear to school.

Once when Jackie was nine years old, her mother had been gone for three weeks on a boozy boat trip. Worried that their mother wasn’t ever coming back, Jackie called the Coast Guard for assistance. Less than two hours after the phone call, Jackie’s mother stumbled into the
home, tipsy and oblivious to her children’s plight and worry. Enraged, Jackie’s older sister rebuked her mother for neglecting them. Jackie will never forget her mother’s callous reply to their pleas: “Mind your own business.”

As an adult, Jackie looked back at her mother’s neglect with sadness and regret. The hardest part of her teenage life Jackie said was “never seeing my mom.” Jackie wished her mother had been there, instead of “always being at the bars.” In her interview, Jackie also reported that the rare times that her mother showed any sort of affection (e.g., saying I love you) were when she was inebriated. “Once in a great blue moon,” Jackie’s mother came home “really, really drunk” and yelled in a loud slurring voice that she loved her kids and forced them to kiss and hug her. Jackie remembered running upstairs in terror and locking her bedroom door. Aside from those scarce moments of drunken affection, Jackie’s mother only came home just “long enough to change her clothes and leave.”

The parents’ involvement in alcohol and substance abuse also played a part in family violence. As shown in Table 5.1, more white interviewees came from two-parent households than their black peers who were mostly from single-parent households. But looking only at those with domestic violence issues in their home, more whites (11) than blacks (4) witnessed intimate partner violence between their parents. It seems surprising that the whites in this study confronted more domestic violence, given that a disproportionate share of black women face domestic violence issues in the United States. But my findings agree with Benson et al. (2004) in that the differences in domestic violence by race are significantly
reduced after taking into account ecological contexts. In this case, whites came from similarly impoverished backgrounds as their black peers.

In particular, this issue of violence between their parents was frequently mentioned in conjunction with their parents’ involvement in drugs and alcohol. Research too finds that drugs and alcohol are linked to domestic violence. For instance, men are 11 times more likely to be physically aggressive to their female counterparts on the days of drinking than no drinking (Fals-Stewart 2003). The severity of alcohol issues is significantly linked to physical abuse and psychological aggression (Stuart et al. 2006). There is a strong relationship between psychological, physical, and sexual aggression with substances such as cocaine, marijuana, and amphetamines (Moore et al. 2008).

Alcohol, in particular, commonly preceded violent episodes between parents in the homes of white men and women. Martin, for instance, is a white man with an alcoholic father. His father routinely abused his mother in a drunken rage. Martin’s disgust with his father’s actions was obvious when he described his father as “not a man” for beating his mother. Sometimes his father drank “to the point where he don’t remember all the shit he did,” Martin recounted. In one severe episode, Martin’s drunken father smashed his mother’s jaw and sent her to the hospital.

Joseph is another white man who grew up in a violent and distressed neighborhood of South Baltimore. Joseph often got into trouble at school for fighting. Sometimes, Joseph fought in response to getting bullied. Growing up poor, Joseph didn’t have much food or clothes so
other kids taunted him about his poverty. Other times, it wasn’t his intention to fight but somehow, he found himself in a brawl.

Unlike many of his peers, Joseph lived in a two-parent household. His mother was a housewife after leaving her former job decorating ceramic pots. His father was in a union and worked as a “sprinkler fitter” (someone who installs sprinklers in buildings such as malls). Joseph’s parents were strict with high expectations for him. They gave him curfews and sternly disciplined him when he caused trouble. His parents also encouraged Joseph to get a high school diploma.

Outwardly, Joseph’s family appeared stable; but internally, they had “lots of conflict.” Living in a terrible neighborhood, Joseph felt that “all the families in the neighborhood were screwed up in one way or another, all dysfunctional,” including his own. Specifically, Joseph’s father struggled with unemployment and alcohol addiction. Joseph’s father was a “mean drunk” who physically and verbally abused his family. After imbibing alcohol, his father regularly instigated “knock-down, drag-out fights” with Joseph’s mother. The abuse was so severe that his father went to prison a couple of times on domestic violence convictions. One night in a drunken furor, his father almost smacked his mother when Joseph’s older brother intervened by “laying his father out.” Joseph regularly escaped to his grandmother’s house to get away from his drunk and abusive father.

Dennis like Joseph was brought up in a “dysfunctional” home. At the time of the interview, he was serving a 10-month sentence in prison. Dennis was in and out of the courts and
prison since he was 18 years old. He traced the origins of his troubles back to his father’s alcoholism starting at the age of 13. His mother suffered abuse under his alcoholic father for many years until she finally had enough and left him. As a kid, Dennis never wanted to come home because he didn’t want to be around his intoxicated father. He especially didn’t want to witness the violent episodes between his parents. Dennis stayed out nearly every day and consequently got “hung up with the wrong kids and started stealing cars.” On some nights, Dennis slept at his paternal grandmother’s home to evade his father’s explosions.

School

In addition to community and family trauma, the people in this study also dealt with too much stress in schools. For both the men and women, their ties to childhood institutions such as the school or their family of childhood were often tenuous or broken. As I have thus far reviewed, their bonds to family were fragile owing to absent or neglectful parents and family violence. In this section, I explore how their schooling environment weakened attachment to and belief in the school. Specifically, the students in this study attended public schools deprived of resources and riddled with violence and disorder. Many of the study students also felt that their schools taught nothing of value or interest – or in their words: “Schools teach nothing.”

These problems of school violence, disorder, and disengagement were crushing, and contributed to the “pushing out”, “pulling out” and “falling out” of the study dropouts (Doll, Eslami, and Walters 2013). “Pushing out” refers to students being pushed out of the
school as a result of a negative school environment (e.g., violence and disorder in classrooms). “Pulling out” occurs when the student is distracted by external factors such as family problems, work, or teenage pregnancy that pull them away from school (Jordan 1994). “Falling out” of school is when the student becomes disengaged or apathetic about school, mostly because of the lack of support from the schooling system, officials, and others (Watt and Roessingh 1994). The high school graduates in this research also faced overwhelming school stress, but certain protective factors shielded them from getting pushed or pulled out, or falling out. These protective factors will be addressed later in Chapter 7.

School Violence & Disorder

School violence and disorder refers to fighting, bullying, and other physical and verbal confrontations that occur on school grounds. General misbehavior and verbal or physical threats against teachers, school officials, and other students are also aspects of school violence and disorder. The literature underscores the issue of violence and disorder in inner-city public schools. In a study of 132 black fifth graders from a low-income urban school, nearly 83 percent were direct victims of violence while 93 percent were indirect victims at least once during a three-month period (Cedeno et al. 2010). In 2005, city students were twice more likely than their suburban peers to fear being attacked on the way to and from school (Dinkes et al. 2007). City school students reported more gang activity in their schools than their suburban peers. School violence and disorder is also linked to low teacher quality and retention in urban schools. City teachers experience more strain than their suburban
colleagues due to limited school resources, overwhelming workloads, student misbehaviors, and threats to personal safety (Matus 1999; Smith and Smith 2006).

According to the men and women in this study, school disorder and violence were widespread in their public schools. In addition, school violence and disorder were push out factors for some of the dropouts in this study. That is, violence and disorder decrease the attendance, performance, and commitment to schools among inner-city students. Bowen and Bowen (1999) find that school attendance decreases with increases in school danger. This was true for the men and women in this research, too.

Witnessing and participating in violent and disorderly conducts in school kept some men and women from attending school. Of the 31 dropouts, 17 cited fighting, bullying, and other violence and disorder within the school as one of their main reasons for leaving (or getting expelled from) school. Of the 17 dropouts, seven were white, eight were black; seven were women and eight were men.5

Tony is one of the dropouts who was pushed out by the violence at school. The high school Tony went to was full of “fighting, shooting, and drugs.” Tony’s high school was, in his words, “a park inside the building,” “ghetto,” and “pathetic,” among other unflattering characteristics. According to Tony, the students loitered freely in the halls all day and pulled off all kinds of disruptive stunts such as jumping off the balcony. Tony witnessed his first shooting while waiting for the bus after school. After a while, Tony reached a breaking

5 Based on reasons given in the Pathways interview and the Young Adult Survey for why the student left school. See “Using the BSS, YAS, and MAS Data” in Appendix A for further details.
point. He could no longer withstand the violence and mayhem at school and decided to drop out.

The young people in this study didn’t merely observe the violence and disorder. Many of them actively engaged in misbehavior at school. Overall, fighting was the most common problem behavior among the men and women. Regardless of gender, race, or education status, the majority of students in this study got into fights at school – ranging from minor tussles to severe beatings.

According to the individuals from this research, fighting at school was necessary for self-defense. That is, I noticed a recurring pattern in their motives for fighting – that no one wanted to “back down from a fight.” To clarify, the interviewees insisted that they never initiated altercations but they fought back in response to provocations and bullying. To “not back down from a fight” meant to “stick up” for the self when confronted. One individual explained here: “I’m not a fighter. I try to avoid violence at all costs …. But if it’s brought to me, I deal with it.” Backing down from a fight guaranteed a target on their backs for the remaining school year; thus, they refused to concede to the bullies. If “somebody said something” then they fought that “somebody,” and fought hard.

Monica, for instance, is a black woman who graduated from high school. The path to graduation, however, took her through many violent situations at schools. Bullies “tormented” Monica throughout elementary school. In fact, she got into her first fight when she was in sixth grade. Her tormentors also had older cousins and sisters who attacked
Monica and stole her lunch on multiple occasions. At first, she was too scared to fight back against these “cruel” kids. All Monica could do was cry every day.

Something, however, “came over” Monica when she went to seventh grade. Possessed with an urgency to stop the torture, she started to retaliate. From that point on, Monica was constantly belligerent and irritable; she was “ready to fight at any little thing” that anyone said to her. She got into countless skirmishes and “just rebelled so bad,” as she described it. “And I just carried it on and on and on,” Monica confessed about her fighting.

“School Teaches Nothing”

A recurring statement from the interviewees was that “school teaches nothing.” For some dropouts, this belief that the school teaches nothing was a push out or fall out factor. Of the 31 dropouts, 13 dropped out because they felt the schools didn’t teach them anything. This notion that school teaches nothing refers specifically to the following beliefs: (1) the school failed to teach anything of use or worth to them. Classes were irrelevant to survival in “real life,” and (2) the school was unchallenging, “boring,” and unsupportive. In essence, the young people claimed that their schooling environments were unproductive.

Erica is one of the dropouts who quit school after concluding that she learned nothing. After middle school, she attended a trade school for food service. But the commute from her home to the school was brutal. Everyday, Erica woke up before daybreak and rode three buses to get to the school. No longer able to sustain the commute, she transferred to her
public high school that was “dirty,” “trashy,” and overcrowded. Erica’s classmates were out of control – “everybody ran around” the halls and classrooms. Regardless, Erica accepted the chaos as long as she was learning. But sadly, the school “didn’t really teach” anything from Erica’s viewpoint. Fed up with not learning anything, she dropped out in the ninth grade.

For others, the classes were irrelevant or inapplicable to the “real world.” Thomas is a black man who dropped out after finishing tenth grade because of poor attendance and a lack of credits. The reasons for his poor attendance were two-fold; first, he was barely coping with the violent murder of his older brother. His brother’s death impaired Thomas to the point that the mere sight of siblings at his school incensed him. Second, Thomas started skipping classes because he wasn’t learning anything “beneficial.” Thomas explained,

> When I was there, it was a lot of things that they were teaching me that I didn’t see beneficial to me … in social studies, that was, that’s the time when I quit it, a lot of these people today, they’re teaching you about Alexander the Great and stuff, and I’m like, uh-uh, I live in the ghetto …. We’re not, and what job am I going to need that, where I have to know about these people? You know, and, when you at that stage, if something’s not keeping you interested, you tend to wander off …. Like, as far as my biology, I used to love biology and science and stuff like that, but it was the other things that, that turned me.

Instead, Thomas spent time voraciously perusing “pro-black” books and ruminating on “inventions and things” that weren’t taught at school. These books on African-American history infused Thomas with a newfound black political consciousness. He started “seeing all these different things” that weren’t part of the school curriculum.

As a “color conscious” person, Thomas especially abhorred his history courses. He didn’t care to hear about white historical figures whose lives frankly, “didn’t matter” to a
disenfranchised black man from the inner city. He lamented that schools only taught about black heroes and intellectuals (e.g., “Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, Madam C.J. Walker, with her hair kit”) during Black History month. Thomas felt that schools should teach about these courageous and influential black leaders year round. He also griped about being forced to study French. Thomas put it bluntly, “What the hell I need to learn French for?”

The disconnect between school and the real world also stems from the men and women’s judgment that their schools did not prepare them for “real life.” For instance, one man indicated that he “came out of school not knowing what to do for a job.” According to him, if all jobs are businesses then schools should offer more business classes. Others claimed that they gained more in the real world than from school. One candid remark echoed this thought: “I learned more not even being in there [school].”

In addition, the school was not a place of learning and growth, many claimed, but a venue for a “fashion show.” Both high school graduates and dropouts recalled that students came to school not for an education, but to attend a fashion show. That is, schools were runaways to flaunt expensive cars, designer clothes and shoes, and other fancy items.

Nathan for instance, graduated from high school, but he looked back on his time at school with indignation. In Nathan’s opinion, his school was a fashion show and nothing more. Otherwise, Nathan learned nothing of value at school, perhaps besides Math and English.
Because Math was “universal” and “everything” while English was “the power of the word,” Nathan elaborated.

The men and women also suggested that schools teach nothing because their school officials and teachers failed to challenge and support them. In addition to calling school a fashion show, Nathan also accused the school administrators and teachers of being unsupportive and inattentive. Back in high school, he fell behind on his coursework after getting into an accident. The school officials placed him into a “special class” after Nathan struggled to catch up.

Nathan loathed his time in this special class where he didn’t “really learn anything.” Nathan strongly believed that he was smarter than his classmates and that he deserved to return to a regular class. But from Nathan’s recollection, no one at his school stepped up to assess his progress or communicated trust in his ability. Maddened by this treatment, Nathan skipped school in defiance and hung out with his friends instead. In Nathan’s perspective, there was no purpose for him to sit in a classroom with academically inferior peers in a school that cared little for him.

Others indicated that their seemingly uncaring and unqualified teachers placed a distance between them and the school. One woman recalled how her teacher “wasn’t teaching” the class. This individual’s teacher supposedly only handed out work assignments but taught “nothing.” Olivia too, dropped out of school because of her conflict with teachers. Growing up in the city, it was difficult for Olivia as she was surrounded by a lot of fighting and drugs.
In elementary school, she was held back in second grade and placed into special education classes after having difficulties with comprehension. By the time she got to eighth grade, she was the oldest student in her class. Olivia remembered how her middle school peers teased her relentlessly about her age.

According to Olivia, her teachers, especially her math teacher, exacerbated the situation. On many occasions, Olivia “just didn’t get” certain math topics or problems, no matter how much she studied. Olivia recalled feeling ashamed when her math teacher sent her to the back of the room after she failed to solve a problem. In another incident, he allegedly ridiculed Olivia by intentionally mispronouncing her last name. “There’s no reason to make fun of my name,” Olivia said bitterly. Olivia also recalled how the math teacher called her “stupid” in front of everyone. She was suspended seven times for bickering with teachers whose “disrespect” of Olivia rankled her constantly. Olivia sizzled past boiling point after repeated instances of teachers supposedly shaming her, and she eventually left school.

Cameron too, faulted his school officials and teachers for turning him off to school. He freely admitted that he was a “little rebellious” when he was in the first grade, so teachers generally didn’t like him. Though Cameron failed first grade, he straightened up and passed second grade. Cameron was “happy” and doing well at school. He was at the pinnacle of his short-lived academic career.

For “no apparent reason at all,” however, the school suddenly sent Cameron back down a grade. Then began the steady slide; this setback crushed and embarrassed him, especially
since he had been doing well. Cameron wept in anger and hurt after getting the news of this downgrade. A technical issue with the school computers may have caused the regression, but Cameron wasn’t sure. Actually, the school never gave him a clear explanation, according to Cameron. After this incident, Cameron “stopped caring” about school and eventually dropped out in the ninth grade. In his interview, Cameron blamed his shortened schooling experience on the school’s mistake and their lack of concern to remediate the situation.

In brief, the prevailing theme of their lives was an overabundance of trauma, in all three major domains of their lives – the neighborhood, the family, and the school. Drugs and crime distressed their communities, changing their once tight-knit neighborhoods for the worse. Their homes were filled with violence, drugs and alcohol, and the absence of a parent. Their schools too were places of violence, disorder, and scarcity of support. As I discussed in Chapter 2, context and location matter affect life events and paths. Hence, in the next chapter, I examine how these men and women grew up “too fast” because of their challenging contexts. That is, I explore how the men and women in this study hurriedly transitioned into adult roles in response to “too much.”
CHAPTER 6: “TOO FAST”

The men and women in this study repeatedly stated that they grew up “too fast” as they recounted their life stories. Both men and women grew up at an accelerated pace in the face of overwhelming hardship, but there are gender differences in their paths to accelerated adulthood. To express growing up too fast, the women frequently mentioned stepping in to protect family members and stepping up to take on home responsibilities from an early age. On the other hand, the men in this study were about fending for themselves and less frequently, for the family.

Furthermore, both men and women got involved in risky and problem behaviors from an early age that expedited their adulthood. These differed by gender, too. The women in this study identified their risky and problem acts as “running wild.” According to the women, running wild refers to engaging in conduct that is problematic but not necessarily illegal (e.g., risky sex, cutting school, fighting, etc.). Risky and problem behaviors among women, especially risky sexual involvement, sparked a premature start to adulthood primarily via early parenting. The majority of the women in this study became mothers at an early age.

For the men in this study, risky and problem behaviors refer mostly to getting into trouble with the law and running on “the streets.” Though their problem behaviors aren’t always criminal in nature, more men than women in this study are involved in the criminal justice system. Dropout men, in particular, cycled through the system from a young age.
Women and Accelerated Adulthood

Stepping In & Stepping Up

Exposure to excessive trauma in their families, communities, and schools often removed them from what most of us think of as childhood at an early age. Specifically, seeing too much family violence and abuse hastened their transition into adulthood. Foster, Hagan, and Brooks-Gunn (2008) reported that the children who are exposed to intimate partner violence undergo a premature end to adolescence. Moreover, early and prolonged exposure to domestic violence and child abuse affects the overall “chain of development” (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan 2008). Experiencing physical abuse also instigates faster puberty for girls (Mendle et al. 2011).

For some women, stepping in to protect their loved ones from violence and abuse, signaled a premature end to youthful innocence. Specifically, the women stepped in to protect their battered mothers. The literature also finds that children in domestic violence situations cope by using both emotional and practical strategies (Peled 1998). Children often control emotional responses to the violence and take practical action, such as distancing from the situation or interceding to protect the abused parent (Peled 1998).

Kayla’s story exemplifies stepping in. Kayla is a black woman who was raised by her mother and her stepfather. Her biological father was mostly absent. Kayla’s mother worked long hours to provide for the family. When Kayla was a teenager, her mother suffered from
several strokes, induced by “overworking” according to Kayla. Meanwhile, her stepfather was a gambling addict and abusive. He would get “really crazy” and hit Kayla’s sickly mother. One time, Kayla watched in horror and shock as her stepfather assaulted her frail mother, who was still recovering from a recent stroke. This incident was Kayla’s snapping point. She described how she stepped in to defend her mother:

He wanted to act like a asshole, so, when I – when he started putting his hands on my mother, I didn’t appreciate that too much, and I would jump in the middle of it .... And I’d take up for my mother .... And I told him, you put your hands on my mother – I had like a hammer in my hand, and I was sleeping, I woke up, and I said, you put your hands on my mother again and I will take this hammer and I will bash your fucking skull in. He said, you’d better get out the room and mind your business, little girl. [saying mom’s name] you’d better tell your daughter mind her business. I said, let me tell something, that is my mother. She just had a stroke, you’re going to come in here, you going to put your hands on her. I don’t think so. I’m going to call the police on you. I called the police, so – he going to get in my face, I’m six months pregnant, going to get in my face. Slap me in my face. Then I take him in my brother’s room and I fought him. I was – I punched him, and I was just fighting on – and my brother and my mother was just standing, like, no, she is not fighting him while she is pregnant. I was fighting him and kicking him, and I pushed him into the dresser, I pushed him into the television, I was like, this is it. This is the end. Cause he messes, then, well, I’m going to fight him. I fought him.

The men and women also stepped in to shepherd and shelter their younger and “weaker” family members from emotional and physical threats. We saw this with Jason, who protected his brother from emotional injury caused by their absent father. We also see this in Allison’s story. Allison was “extremely close” to her two older brothers, one older sister, and one younger sister. They were “all each other” had and they “never” fought, according to Allison. The four older siblings including Allison bore the brunt of their stepfather’s abuse because Allison explained, “He resented the fact that the four oldest ones remembered our [biological] father.”
The youngest sister, however, was spared the abuse. Allison’s youngest sister was disabled after suffering a massive brain hemorrhage as an infant. Allison was closest to her youngest sister of all her siblings. In fact, Allison’s youngest sister inspired her dreams to write children’s books and become a special education teacher one day. Thus, Allison was “extremely protective” of her youngest sister, “babying her,” and shielding her from their stepfather.

The premature end to childhood among women, however, more commonly occurred from “stepping up,” which refers to taking physical, emotional, and financial responsibility for the self and the family, especially in the absence of parents. Burton (2007) found that low-income girls handle far more family responsibilities than their middle-class peers. This was true among the women in this study, too.

As discussed, many claimed that their parents or adult guardians were too busy to care or otherwise absent from their lives. Thus, the women stepped up in their place and took on family responsibilities from a young age. Their manifold duties varied and ranged from cleaning, cooking, maintaining bills, to caring for elderly or younger kin. Leslie explained how she felt like an adult from an early age because of these family responsibilities: “We had chores, and sometimes I felt like I had too much adult responsibility. In a way … I knew that they were trying to teach me, but in another way, I, it was too much for me. And it made me feel like I didn’t have any time to be a kid.”
Jasmine is one of those women, who instead of reveling in her youth, dealt with family responsibilities that far exceeded the usual chores given to children. Jasmine is a black woman who grew up in a “terrible area” of Baltimore. She once witnessed a murder on her street. Both her parents were absent, so she lived with her grandparents, three sisters, and aunt. Jasmine was especially close to her aunt and her grandmother. She proudly obtained a high school diploma despite her rough upbringing.

But it was a trek to graduation for Jasmine. She cared for her aging grandparents while attending school and working a night job at the same time. Her grandfather suffered from emphysema, which was “ten times worse than asthma.” As a result, Jasmine’s grandfather always wanted her “in the house taking care of them.” Her grandfather would “keep her” at home instead of allowing Jasmine to go to school. Therefore, Jasmine stayed at home on many days, “washing clothes, making market, mopping floors” and more. “I should have had a child’s life,” Jasmine mourned the early loss of her childhood, instead, “I had to stay home and take care of these people.”

Leslie grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood of Northeast Baltimore. Her mother left home when Leslie was a baby. Thus, Leslie stepped up as the “leader” of her family, and scrambled to care for her brother, sister, and father. Every morning, Leslie woke up on her own and rushed to get her little brother and sister ready for school. She cooked breakfast for everyone then walked her siblings to their bus stop. When Leslie returned from school, she completed her homework, and then served dinner to her family. After dinner, Leslie washed the dishes, cleaned the kitchen, and tidied up everyone’s mess.
Every night, Leslie collapsed on her bed, completely drained. “I didn’t have any time … to hang out with my friends, or visit here with this friend, or so, I just felt that … it was too much responsibility on me,” Leslie explained. Because of her responsibilities, Leslie stated that her only skill was cleaning the house. Leslie continued, “But other than that … I don’t know too much about what’s going on in the world and things like that.”

Consider Allison’s situation again. With an abusive stepfather and a disabled mother, Allison stepped up to help her family. She spent her days “cleaning the house, doing the laundry, cooking the food.” Throughout high school, Allison also tended to her infirm mother. Hence, she often missed school. “My scholastics were not what they should have been in high school, due to the fact that three out of five days, I was home with my mother,” Allison explained.

By senior year, Allison was only going to school two days a week. Surprisingly, she still graduated from high school. In fact, her teachers were supposedly “amazed” by Allison’s excellent performance. After high school, she relinquished her dreams of attending a four-year college – something she would “have loved to” do. Instead, Allison attended a nearby two-year community college because “it was right on the bus, right there, close to home.” Her mother, however, suffered a stroke again during Allison’s first year at college. Allison eventually quit college to assist her sick mother.

Another woman who stepped up as her family’s caretaker is Diana, who grew up in a single-parent home with her mother and younger brother. Their mother, however, worked long
hours and mostly hung around at her boyfriend’s house, according to Diana. Consequently, Diana and her brother were home alone on most days. Diana treated her brother as if he was her child. She watched “behind him twenty-four seven” especially since he suffered from chronic asthma. She also disciplined him and assigned him with household chores such as making the bed. Diana described how she acted like his mother:

And if I tell him, you come home and do that, and he don’t do it, then when he came home, I would do him the same way I do my son. My little brother drinks. I’m talking about – he – those gallon jugs of juice, it’d be gone in a day. So I would take it and hide it. And he’d be flipping out, because he don’t have no money, and he want something to drink. Well, you do them beds, and then you get your juice back.

Diana went to all of her brother’s football games with his pump and pills in hand, just in case he had an asthma attack. Diana knew her brother so well that she predicted his impending asthma attack with one look: “And I say, well, how can I look at him and tell that he going to get short of breath, but he – his expression change[s], and his face get[s] kind of pale, and that’s when I know it’s about to happen.” Diana’s mother, however, supposedly “couldn’t look at him and tell that” he was about to have an attack – the way she could. In fact, Diana’s brother apparently suffered more asthma attacks under their mother’s care than when with Diana. In this excerpt, Diana recollected how she took care of herself and her little brother:

Me and my brother always went to the same schools. So we went to school together, we woke up together, I ironed his clothes – but at night time I would iron our clothes or when I washed on Sundays, my whole day would just be devoted to our clothes, because I would wash clothes, dry them, iron them, put them on hangers – half the time we shared clothes, so, when we’d go to school we had to be so careful because I couldn’t get something on the pants, because he probably going to wear those pants tomorrow, cause we don’t have much. And, I mean, I was doing everything. Taking care of him – I paid the rent, I mean, my mother would leave her bank card home and say, well, go across the street to the bank machine, withdraw four hundred and twenty-five dollars, go to the store and get a money order, and write your name, write their name and stuff on there, and go pay rent. I did all of
that, I paid phone bills, I rode the bus downtown to gas and electric, I paid the gas and electric bill, I went to the market, I did everything. It wasn’t nothing that I had help with. I did everything on my own.

Naomi also had too much on her plate that led to growing up too fast. She and her alcoholic mother had a “rocky” relationship. Because of her mother’s drinking problems, Naomi’s grandparents took her away from her mother, who “didn’t put up a fight about it.” When Naomi was 13, her mother also moved in with them. Naomi claimed, however, that her mother was usually drunk and hardly talked to Naomi. Throughout the years, Naomi continued living at her grandparent’s “full house” with her grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other family members. Unfortunately, many of her relatives also had problems with drugs and alcohol.

Naomi initially survived those tumultuous years with the help of her grandfather. He was her closest friend and the backbone of Naomi’s family. Her grandfather, however, passed away from cancer. After his death, Naomi’s situation got “really, really hard.” Naomi’s mother had a stroke and Naomi’s grandmother also got sick. “It was just a lot,” Naomi told the interviewer. After her grandfather’s death, she took care of the home, cleaning, washing clothes, cooking and more. Because of her responsibilities, Naomi expressed that she has been “grown for awhile.”

Familial responsibilities weren’t limited to household chores and caretaking. Many of these women also took jobs outside the home, as they needed to provide financially for their families. The bills were endless: cars, rent, mortgage, medical bills, baby diapers, loans, school supplies, food and more. For example, Allison started working at 11 years old. Her
stepfather was unemployed and idle so he forced Allison and her siblings to pay rent. Allison contributed $60 a week by working odd jobs such as ironing people’s clothes for $5 a basket. During the weekends, she worked at a daycare. Not surprisingly, Allison started feeling like an adult then.

Lois also began working when she was 13 years old. Lois’ story started out differently from those commonly told by the black women in this research. She originally grew up in a two-parent home, with her father who was a mechanic and her mother who ran a daycare in their home. Their neighborhood was “good” despite some residents with “financial problems.” Lois grew up “spoiled.” Her father bought her anything she wanted, including a fur coat when she was 11 years old. All of Lois’ friends envied her, Lois said.

Lois’ family, however, plunged into poverty after the disintegration of her parents’ marriage when she was around 13 years old. Her parents split after her father cheated on her mother multiple times. After her father left, Lois began working to help her mother during the “hard times.” When Lois was 13, she got her first job at a pizza place. “I was working, and giving her [mom] all my money at first …. I would give … [money] my mother because I felt kind of bad. Like I would work, bring home like sixty to ninety dollars a week, and I would give her the whole thing,” Lois recounted. She worked every day for about five hours a day, without a work permit because she was underage. Lois lied about her age so she could continue working:

I was doing like thirty hours a week. And I think you aren’t even supposed to work until you was fifteen, but I looked older, so I lied to them. I was like, yeah, I am sixteen. And they were, give me a work permit. I said, my school didn’t have any more. So he kept saying, well, bring me in a work permit, I was like, I’ll get one in
tomorrow. So tomorrow went on and on and on, cause I knew I wasn’t supposed to
be working, but I wanted to help my mother.

Lois’ mother also suffered from heart disease and required a triple bypass surgery.
Throughout the years, Lois continued to provide for herself and for her mother.

Changing life circumstances also affected Leila’s life; she too, stepped up to provide
financially for her family. Leila once lived with her parents and her three siblings in a
spacious single-family house located in South Baltimore. Her family enjoyed going outdoors,
riding bikes, and playing in the fields together. When Leila was about 10 years old, however,
her parents fell into the drug world.

Consequently, Leila’s parents lost their house to foreclosure, and their family squeezed into a
tiny row home in a poorer part of the city. It was a heart-wrenching transition for Leila.
“People didn’t have any money” or cut grass in her new neighborhood. Children also didn’t
have bicycles like they did in her former neighborhood; instead, “they basically just ran
around and got into whatever they could, they threw rocks … that was their thing,” Leila
recalled. She also attended an overcrowded and violent school where she was one of the few
white students. At the school, Leila was bullied and shunned for being “the white girl.”

Life at home was harsher for Leila. Her parents, after becoming drug addicts, barely
provided for Leila and her siblings. Leila’s mother went out all night and “could care less”
about her children. Leila described being “deprived” of necessities. Hence, Leila didn’t rely
on her parents for any support.
At 12 years old, Leila took on various jobs such as babysitting to make her own money. All throughout high school, she set the alarm every day and got ready for school on her own. Leila worked during the summers and saved her money to buy school supplies and clothes. She also paid for her younger sister’s essentials. Leila watched glumly as other kids took for granted all the support and resources given to them by their parents. Because of all her responsibilities, she felt like “thirty-year-old woman trapped in … a sixteen-year-old’s body.”

Despite her countless hardships, Leila was the first granddaughter from her father’s family to graduate from high school. Thus, her high school graduation was very “special.” Leila styled her own hair for graduation pictures because she couldn’t afford to get her hair done at the salon like her friends. Nothing too “glamorous,” Leila clarified. She also borrowed her dress and shoes for prom. Unable to afford convocation fees, she walked off the stage without her high school diploma in hand. But she toiled during the summer and went back for her diploma. In another triumph-over-adversity move, she bought herself a school ring two years after graduation, something she had always wanted but couldn’t afford.

“Running Wild”

Many women in this study became mothers at a young age, thereby augmenting their family responsibilities. Before delving into their premature motherhood, I first explore how their risky and problem behaviors contributed to early childbearing. “Running wild” is how the women labeled their risky and problem behaviors. According to the women, running wild includes partying, fighting, and cutting school, but most commonly, engaging in risky sex with the “wrong” boys.
That is, many women were relationally precocious, connecting sexually and emotionally with mature, older boys from an early age. For example, one woman started having unprotected sex at 12 years old with an older boy who was 18 years old. She “never” had sex with a same-age partner but “always” with men at least five or six older. More women than men in this study went into detail about their relationships with their family members, significant others, and children. Namely, relationship talk was at the core of most women’s conversations. Thus, I focus on the women’s risky sexual involvement, and how it contributed to growing up too fast via early motherhood.

First, I explore the myriad reasons that the women gave for their precocious and risky sexual relationships with older men. One prevailing reason for running wild is that it was an emotional response to the pain of having an absent parent in their lives. As discussed in the previous chapter, many of these women experienced unstable or broken homes with an absent parent. Hence, they expressed feeling “unloved” at home and needing “something to cling onto” to fill the void of an absent parent, especially their absentee fathers. In essence, the older men were symbolic stand-ins for their absent fathers.

Over and over again, these women counted on older men to “save” them from their despair. Gabrielle is a black woman from a single-parent home. Growing up, she seldom saw her father because he was in and out of prison since Gabrielle was a toddler. Her saddest childhood memories were the times she “wanted” her father but “couldn’t have him.”
When Gabrielle became a teenager, she started running wild as her coping mechanism. She “usually had a boyfriend to fill the void up” and “grabbed onto” boys to meet her emotional needs. Gabrielle eagerly listened to older men like how a girl would “want to listen to your father.” By the time Gabrielle turned 17 years old, she was pregnant with her daughter. Her daughter’s father was also absent in their lives. Though Gabrielle didn’t regret having her daughter, she believed that she wouldn’t have gotten pregnant if her father had been around.

Leila also didn’t have her father around as he was out on the streets doing drugs. At 15 years old, Leila started dating her boyfriend who was 21 years old. She looked to him as her “savior”; a hero who could “take her away” from all her misery.

Like Leila and Gabrielle, Janice too, agonized over her father’s absence. At first, Janice grew up as her family’s beloved “baby” in a two-parent home. Her father, however, died from emphysema when Janice was 14 years old. Janice discussed her metamorphosis after his passing – how she was no longer the “very innocent” girl she used to be prior to his death. Hollow and “alone” was how she felt after losing her father. When she was 16 years old, she got into a sexual relationship with a 21-year-old man. “I guess I was like really vulnerable because I was lonely … and with my dad and everything like that, and he was a sweet talker, and so. I guess you can figure that one out,” Janice said in explanation.

According to the women, risky sexual involvement with older men is also a form of emotionally and physically “acting out” against neglectful or absent parents. Recall Jackie’s story, whose mother purportedly favored partying and drowning herself in liquor over
raising Jackie and her siblings. Jackie began to experiment with risky sex in retribution against her mother’s neglect. In Jackie’s words, her mother “wasn’t home to care.”

When Jackie was 11 years old, she lost her virginity to a 21-year-old man. Jackie’s mother found out and tried to press charges against the older man for statutory rape. But Jackie, in rebellion against her mother, gladly testified that she was “willing” to have sex with him. Jackie knew, all too keenly, that this embarrassed her mother deeply but Jackie savored this revenge. By age 15, she was dating a 32-year-old man. Jackie claimed that she “didn’t know any better” because her mother wasn’t around.

Nina’s father left their family when she was just three years old. Nina’s mother worked two shifts, barely scratching out a living, so she was rarely home to care for Nina. In addition to work, her mother was also going through her own issues so she neither had the time nor energy to spend on Nina. According to Nina, her mother was only attentive when she scolded Nina about an older boy that Nina liked. Nina’s anger and frustration with her mother erupted. Defying her mother’s wishes, she dropped out of school and moved in with that boyfriend when she was in the eleventh grade. That same year, she got pregnant with her first child at 17 years old.

Furthermore, some women blamed their neglectful or absent parents for their inability to distinguish a healthy relationship from an unhealthy one and to fully grasp the repercussions of unprotected sex. When asked why their peers start having sex so early, their responses were the same: that the youths were “too uneducated about choices” because their parents
weren’t around to teach them or “prepare” them. One interviewee explained that the parents often “don’t teach them” and thus, they “don’t know any better.”

Kayla, for instance, said her mother “never explained” or talked to her about sex. She either learned on her own through television or from her girlfriends who were “hanging around with the wrong people.” Kayla got pregnant the first time she had sex because she “didn’t even know what [she] was doing.”

Naomi too, felt that no one “prepared” her. Naomi’s life was fraught with heartache. Recall that her father was never around and her mother had drinking problems. Unable to handle her family mess, Naomi became “bad” when she turned 12 years old. She stayed out late partying every night. At only 12 years old, she also started having unprotected sex with an 18-year-old boy. Shortly thereafter, she got pregnant at 14 years old. In retrospect, Naomi wished her mother had been around to stop her from running wild. “Maybe I wouldn’t have had to have her [daughter] then, and everything would have been a little different,” Naomi reflected ruefully.

Practical provision is another reason for running wild with older men. That is, the women often dated older men who provided for their material needs, whether clothes, school supplies, car rides, and more. According to the women, these older men splashed money on goods that the women’s own impoverished families couldn’t afford. This desire for practical provision from their older boyfriends was especially tied to the issue of image and bullying at school.
Recall that the men and women in this research called school a “fashion show” – a place to showcase material wealth over academic achievement. The women, in particular, noted the related problem of image bullying. The students at school mercilessly teased anyone with outdated and shabby clothes. Labels such as “poor” and “ghetto” were thrown at those who couldn’t afford “name brands.” Some bullies went after girls who came to school without their “hair and nails done.” They ridiculed one woman about not having enough food because her family was poor. Her classmates also picked on her about having holes in her shoes.

This sort of image bullying was so stressful that many of the women skipped school. For instance, one woman was constantly “teased about having the plaits and stuff” in her hair. She cut school because she couldn’t deal with the harassment. Jada also hated going to school and cried every day because people mocked her “Jheri curls” that smelled “like an egg.” Jada remembered how the other students insulted her with cruel nicknames such as “Freddy Kruger.” Jada’s grandmother couldn’t buy her new shoes so they teased Jada about her tattered shoes.

The older men were rich but their money often came from drug dealing. This “hustler lifestyle” of the older men was enticing to the women. Dating a hustler meant getting what they couldn’t from their families and “looking good” at school. Sherry, for example, fell head over heels for an older man who was a drug dealer. He smoked weed, drank, and partied all the time. But Sherry wanted to hang around him because he had his own place, money, and
“respect in the neighborhood.” Despite knowing his “player” tendencies, she still longed to be “beside him, be his girlfriend.”

Like Sherry, Sonia felt drawn to the “lifestyle.” Not having a boyfriend who hustled, Sonia calculated, was equal to “having nothing.” The fastest way for Sonia to get her “new shoes and new clothes and new hairdos” was through these rich older boyfriends. When Sonia was 15 years old, she started having sex with her boyfriend who was 19 years old. Though he was a drug dealer and despite her grandmother’s futile attempts to keep Sonia away from him, she was transfixed. Sonia was “so into him” and “so in love with him.” When Sonia was with him, she “always had money.” Sonia used his money to ride cabs, buy new tennis shoes, and run up the phone bill.

Jada also relished the “pampering” that she received from older men. Her older boyfriend appealed to her by giving her everything that her grandmother couldn’t. With him by her side, Jada transformed from “Freddy Kruger” with the hideous hair to the girl with the “up-to-date stuff.” She was too in love to care that he was a drug dealer “on the corner.” He was also abusive and controlling but she prioritized the “dollar” over her personal safety. It was “nothing new” for girls with her kind of background to do so, Jada claimed. At the time, Jada sincerely believed that someone like him was the best that she could do. All teenage girls, Jada insisted, crave the “fast money” especially if they grew up penniless.

Furthermore, the older men were supposedly dependable and “different,” unlike the women’s same-age male peers. Jada leaned on her older boyfriend to take care of her every
need. Janice, who had risky sex with older men largely due to her loneliness and vulnerability after her father’s death, talked about one of her older boyfriends. This particular boyfriend had a car, which was a big deal as he was the first guy she ever dated with one. Janice fell for him because “he actually had something going for him.” He was, in her mind, “so different from all the little boys in the neighborhood.”

Finally, the women say they ran wild because of peer pressure. The topic of sex dominated the chatter among women and their girlfriends. In fact, many of them learned about sex from their friends. “Everyone else [was] doing it,” one woman explained. Tasha described the pressure she felt from her best friend, though she herself believed it was wrong to have sex at an early age:

Well, one time I had this best friend, and I thought she was really, really cool, but she was … we were like thirteen … twelve to about fourteen, and she was having sex, and she used to tell me about how it felt, and … her little boyfriend or whatever. And I used to look at her like, how can you do that? And she had nasty pictures and stuff. And one time, we was in our room, and she was telling me about the night before, she had with her boyfriend… he wasn’t even a boyfriend, he was just… getting some. And she was telling me about it, and I was feeling really, really uncomfortable. And she told me that … you just, you’re still a little girl. And I was like, really, I am? You know, I was like, I’m only fourteen. And it was like, she was trying to pressure me into getting a boyfriend and having sex and doing what she was doing.

Surprisingly, many women claimed that this pressure came more from female peers, not so much from their older boyfriends. Janice explained that the boys were “more discreet” about sex. Janice’s older boyfriend, for instance, never overtly forced her into it. There was a subtle pressure to have sex with him simply because he was an experienced older man. Janice’s friends, however, were far more direct in compelling her.
Tanya for example, was 14 years old when she began dating a “more experienced” boy. She too received pressure from her girlfriends to engage sexually with this older man. Initially, Tanya resisted having sex with him. She eventually, however, caved to the pressure around her: “Everybody was having sex, and so I had to have sex. I had to see what it was all about …. I really didn’t want to, but I did, because everybody else was.”

The women also suffered taunts and teasing from other girls about their virginity. Janice’s girlfriends teased her about “still” being a virgin in high school. Kayla’s girlfriends hung with the “wrong people” and proudly shared stories about precarious one-night stands with older men. “You don’t even know him,” Kayla would caution her friends. But they scoffed at her warnings; instead, belittling her for “still being a virgin.” Monica’s friends also coerced her into having risky sex. Though she was only 14 years old at the time, she was the “second to the last to have sex” among her friends. Monica elected to have sex, after no longer wanting to be ostracized by her girlfriends for being the only virgin.

*Early Parenting for Women*

As these women engaged in risky sex with older men, many of them got pregnant at an early age, often unexpectedly. Most women “put their trust in a lot of these guys” believing that they wouldn’t get pregnant, only to end up with unplanned pregnancies. In fact, many women got pregnant after their first time having sex, or while on birth control pills. On the other hand, some women willfully got pregnant. A baby, they reasoned, would validate and strengthen the love between them and the men. A baby also fulfilled their emotional need
for love and affection. Whether intentional or unintentional, early parenting was a common accelerated transition among the women.

The poor move into parenthood at earlier ages than their middle and upper-class peers (Furstenberg 2003; Settersten 2003). This is apparent here, too. Approximately 78 percent of the interviewees had children by age 30. Among those with children by mature adulthood, 16 are black women, 11 are black men, 9 are white men, and 14 are white women (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: Parenting Status (%) by Age 30, by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Has Child</th>
<th>No Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Men (14)</strong></td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Women (18)</strong></td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Men (14)</strong></td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Women (18)</strong></td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (64)</strong></td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(50)</td>
<td>(14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Based on parenting data from the Mature Adult Survey and the Pathways interviews for all 64 interviewees.  
† (Count of interviewees).

In Table 6.2, I report parenting status by age 24, their approximate age at the time of the Pathways interview. A similar number of white women (14) and black women (13) had children by age 24. This similarity between white and black women is interesting given the popular narrative that early pregnancy is exclusively a black woman problem. Low-income
women, however, are more likely to enter into motherhood at an earlier age than higher income women who generally prioritize schooling and careers over parenthood (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014). Based on the numbers above, this fact holds true for the women in this study, too.

Table 6.2: Parenting Status (%) by Age 24, by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Has Child</th>
<th>No Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Men (14)</strong></td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Women (18)</strong></td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Men (14)</strong></td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Women (18)</strong></td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (64)</strong></td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(43)</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Based on parenting data from the Young Adult Survey, Mature Adult Survey, and the Pathways interviews for all 64 interviewees.  
* (Count of interviewees).

More women (75 percent) than men (57 percent) in this study have children before age 24. Given that 75 percent of the women are mothers by age 24, it is not surprising that their Pathways interviews discussed motherhood in length. These young mothers believed that they grew up too soon as a result of their sudden and unexpected pregnancies.

Consider Hannah’s thoughts on growing up too fast. Hannah is a white woman dropout, who at the time of the interview, was barely hanging on. The interview took place in a small, cramped house. Hannah arrived twenty minutes late for the interview, disheveled and
hurried, dressed in a “well-worn t-shirt” and an “untidy ponytail.” At that time, Hannah lived in her mother’s “tiny house” with her mother, husband, two children, sister, brother-in-law, and two nephews. Hannah was visibly frustrated with the living situation, which she explained was “just for the time being.” Hannah’s mother too, was at her wit’s end and ready to “kick them all out” of her house. Hannah’s relationship with her husband was tenuous. Her job as a waitress was unsatisfactory, but job opportunities were limited without a high school degree. She admitted that she hadn’t accomplished many of the traditional milestones of adulthood, whether completing school or leaving her parent’s home.

Despite the instability of her situation, Hannah has felt like an adult “for a while.” She “grew up pretty fast” after having her first child at 16 years old. Throughout her interview, Hannah repeated five times that she grew up “real fast” or “pretty fast.” As a teenager, she “couldn’t do nothing” but stay at home to care for her baby. While “most teenagers were out doing their thing,” Hannah said she “was in the house, being a mother.”

Like Hannah, Suzy became an adult “pretty fast” after getting pregnant in the tenth grade. She didn’t know what adulthood looked like for “normal people.” But in Suzy’s view, she transitioned into adulthood “the same time that … [she] became a parent.” On the surface, she looked and acted like a teenager, continuing to attend high school after giving birth. After school, however, she picked her daughter up from day care and resumed her adult role as a mother.
Some women did not explicitly state that they grew up too fast, but implied in other ways that becoming a mother accelerated adulthood. First, they pointed to their teenage pregnancy as the end of childhood because pregnancy marked the end of being a student, or “just a kid,” as one person put it. Second, they expressed feeling grown, which refers to the women feeling older than their actual age due to the hardships of motherhood. Here, subjective age refers to how old an individual feels (Settersten and Mayer 1997). In particular, subjective feelings of adulthood are often associated with role transitions, such as becoming a parent (Settersten 2003; Shanahan et al. 2005).

A woman’s first pregnancy often signaled the end of childhood and youth. Naomi’s childhood “basically ended at fourteen” when she had her first child. One white woman pointed to becoming a mother for the first time as the moment she was “no longer a child.” Sonia also no longer had a “childhood life” once her daughter was born when she was 17 years old. When her daughter came into her life, she stopped “thinking like a teenager” and instead, began to “think as an adult … act like an adult.” Another young mother stopped being a child and “truly became an adult” when she gave birth to her daughter at age 18.

Early childbearing transitioned the women out of youth roles, specifically the role of a student. Consider the women who dropped out of a school as soon as they became mothers. The prevailing pernicious stereotype of a teenage mother is that she is an indolent, morally bankrupt woman with no educational or career ambitions. Contrarily, many of the dropout mothers in this study were studious and ambitious. They harbored dreams of dressing up for prom, walking across the stage to receive their high school diplomas, and attending college.
The unending demands and struggles of pregnancy and motherhood, however, kept them from finishing school. If Sonia could change anything in her life, she would have finished high school instead of dropping out after she got pregnant. Sonia lamented, “I would have went to my prom, I missed out on all that. Graduation, I missed out on all that. The only thing I really went to was the homecoming dance, and that’s about it. I missed out on all that.”

Consider Naomi’s story again. She had her first child at age 14 and her second child at age 16. Initially, she was going to school, caring for her babies, and “trying to make it work.” Her mother was the only person that could watch Naomi’s children while she was at school. But Naomi’s mother struggled with drinking problems. While at school, Naomi feared for her children’s safety and well-being under the care of her alcoholic mother. When Naomi returned home from school, she found her kids hungry and miserable in their sordid diapers. Every night, she cared for, fed, and cleaned her babies. After finally putting them to sleep, she attempted to do homework but she was utterly exhausted. Like building a plane while learning to fly it, Naomi was learning how to be a mother at the tender age of 14. Naomi’s grades suffered as she was “missing a lot of work.” Eventually, Naomi dropped out of school for the sake of her babies.

Pregnancy came with embarrassment and loneliness for some of the dropout mothers. One woman didn’t want to go to school pregnant because she was “embarrassed” about her baby bump. Another dropout mother, Maya, attended a vocational-technical school. Every morning, she looked forward to going to school. It was her escape from the turmoil back at
home. When Maya was in the ninth grade, her family moved to a more distressed neighborhood after her parents’ separation. Maya’s trauma deepened after her brother molested her. At only 15 years old, Maya already had a lifetime’s share of trouble and sorrow. But school was her solace. At school, Maya excelled in her trade (auto mechanics) under the guidance of an encouraging and caring teacher.

After getting pregnant at 16 years old, however, Maya was no longer able to continue the trade due to the physical limitations of her pregnancy (e.g., “couldn’t mess with the trucks”). Maya also felt lonely and ashamed because she was the only one pregnant in her auto mechanics trade class. She was depressed throughout her entire pregnancy. The school was no longer her sanctuary. Every day, Maya desperately wanted to “hurry up and get home.” She also started to miss class during her pregnancy. In the end, Maya dropped out but was deeply “hurt from leaving school.”

Feeling grown is another recurring expression of accelerated adulthood among the mothers. When mothers expressed feeling grown, they meant the dissonance between their objective and subjective age. That is, they were objectively young in age when they first became mothers. The average age at first child for white women was approximately 19 years old (the youngest at age 16, the oldest at 24.1 years old) (see Table 6.3). The average age when black women had their first baby was 17.4 years old (the youngest at 14.6 years old, and the oldest at 22.7 years old). Despite their young objective ages at first birth, these women felt old or grown because of motherhood.
Table 6.3: Average, Minimum, and Maximum Age at First Birth among Interviewees with Children by Age 24, by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Age at First Birth</th>
<th>Youngest Age at First Birth</th>
<th>Oldest Age at First Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Men (14)</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women (18)</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Men (14)</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women (18)</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note*: Based on parenting data from the Young Adult Survey, Mature Adult Survey and Pathways Interviews for all 64 interviewees.

*a* All age-related figures are in years.

*b* (Count of interviewees).

Naomi for example, began feeling grown after having her first child. The overwhelming responsibilities brought on by motherhood contributed to feeling grown. At the time of the interview, Naomi stated that she was “only” 23 years old. Yet, her days consisted of endless chores including washing clothes, cleaning up the room, cooking, and caring for her children. Throughout the night, Naomi stayed awake to care for her younger child. As another woman put it, motherhood was a responsibility “twenty-four hours a day … seven days a week.”

After her first pregnancy in high school, Maya went on to have two more daughters by age 21. Maya described how she felt during her first pregnancy: “I just felt so grown … I got to do this with my baby, and I got to do that. This is my baby, you know. She going to call me mom, and, it was a whole bunch of that kind of stuff going on in my head.”

Zoe too, had her first child at age 16. She ranted about being a stay-at-home mother in her interview. Though she was still “young” at 23 years old, Zoe was at home all day taking care
of her kids. Other jobs end at five o’clock, but Zoe was up all night tending to her children.

Zoe relayed her frustrations here:

I wake up at six-thirty in the morning, and by the time I get the laundry done, and clean up, and wipe [child]’s fingerprints for the fiftieth time off my table, or chase him up the steps a hundred times, the day is over. I mean, it really, I don’t, like, I tell [spouse] all the time, I’m like, I don’t sit down and eat bon-bons and watch soap operas all day. I mean, I do watch one soap opera, and it’s an hour, but I deserve that. It’s like, just people that work get breaks … [child] wears on my patience.

For some, having to do motherhood alone magnified the burdens of parenting. Support from family, peers and significant others increase well-being among teenage parents (Stevenson, Maton, and Teti 1999; Turner, Grindstaff, and Phillips 1990). By and large, the mothers in this study benefitted from their family members’ support. But a few of the women lacked help from family when they got pregnant.

Sonia, for example, was “real scared” and “upset” about her teenage pregnancy. She hid her pregnancy for three months but she was sick all the time and rapidly losing weight. Sonia knew it was only a matter of time before her grandmother discovered her secret. In desperation, Sonia went to a clinic to abort the pregnancy. After a lot of mulling and crying, she opted to keep her baby.

Sonia’s daughter was born with autism and an illness that caused near blindness. Sonia didn’t know what to do or where to even begin; she was barely a teenager with a sickly disabled baby. Her own mother had abandoned her. Her grandmother, who had raised her, already had her hands full caring for Sonia’s mentally disabled older brother. The father of the baby was in prison. Ultimately, Sonia went into motherhood alone.
Diana’s family members also didn’t help with the responsibilities of motherhood. Recall that Diana grew up under a single mom and took care of her sickly brother. In addition, Diana got pregnant when she was 17 years old. Diana was still a “child” when she was pregnant with her son. Though she was merely a “child,” Diana explained that her mother still didn’t lend much help.

The complete or intermittent absence of the baby’s father most commonly contributed to doing motherhood alone. The reasons for the absence of the baby’s father ranged from the father’s incarceration, drug use, to outright denial of the baby’s existence. The absence of the child’s father was especially common in the stories of the black mothers. Of the 13 black women who bore a child by age 24, only three received full support from the child’s father while two received intermittent support. In contrast, only two of the 14 white women with children dealt with the absence of their baby’s father, while two others received on and off support from the child’s father.6 Indeed, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) reported that though low-income white women from the BSS also become early mothers like their black peers, they reaped benefits through marriages or partnerships.

In the Pathways interviews, too, more black women than white women spoke about the absence of men in their lives, especially how the baby’s father “just left” or “didn’t care” after hearing about the pregnancy. The father of Naomi’s first baby was 18 years old and attending high school when Naomi got pregnant with their child at age 14. She had met him at a party in December and gotten pregnant with their daughter in January – the “very first

---

6 Based on responses to questions about the child’s father from Pathways interviews. During the interview, the women were either directly asked about the status of the child’s father, or the topic came up unprompted.
time” they had sex. Her second child’s father was generally around through her pregnancy, but he was busy selling drugs so he was “there, but not really.” Like Naomi, Monica also got pregnant at 16 years old with a man who was 21 years old. The man, however, “didn’t even care at all” about her pregnancy.

Vanessa was 15 years old when she started dating an older man. She “worshiped the ground he walked on.” But when Vanessa got pregnant with his baby, he denied his paternity, brazenly in Vanessa’s opinion. His mother worsened the situation by allegedly instructing Vanessa to “get rid” of the child. The foul reaction of her child’s father to her pregnancy put him on the “back burner,” as she put it. The baby’s father was nearby; but as far as Vanessa was concerned, he was “not in the picture.” Vanessa put it succinctly, “We don’t even speak.”

Zoe is one of the two white women who also had issues with the baby’s father. Her child’s father never met their son. When Zoe was pregnant, the baby’s father humiliated her by sleeping with Zoe’s friend. After that incident, Zoe never saw him again.

Diana too, lacked support from the baby’s father. For the first few months following their baby’s birth, “he was the best father” to their son. He bought diapers and spent time with their son. His fatherly passion, however, fizzled after he started getting into “stupid things, like selling drugs.” Diana didn’t mince her words when talking about her son’s father: “He is not a good father at all.” Frankly, Diana didn’t want her son around his bad influence, although she held her tongue and tried not to “down” the father in front of their son. In the
meantime, Diana assured herself that her son will “realize it himself when he gets older” that his father is an “asshole.”

Feeling grown also includes a sense of missing out on childhood and youth. “Missing out” refers to losing out on the adventures, pleasures, and accomplishments that the women might have had; for example, going out with friends, enjoying college, traveling, and taking on new hobbies and interests. Motherhood, however, propelled them into adulthood and the women skipped the “time in between” adolescence and mature adulthood. Lily, who had her first child when she was 18, explained, “Soon as I was allowed out past eleven o’clock, I was pregnant, and I had, and I was almost married …. There wasn’t much time in-between. A month.”

Zoe, too, missed out on her youth as motherhood depleted her time, energy, and resources. She felt “weird” that her life was all about her kids because she was “so young.” An example Zoe gave of missing out goes back to the night of her most recent birthday. To celebrate, Zoe went out with her friends that night. But she found herself constantly pulling away from the crowd to check on her son, e.g., making sure he had finished his homework or that he was in bed. At the party, she refrained from drinking beer knowing that she had to get up in the middle of the night to tend to her baby. Zoe spent the whole night worrying about her young children instead of carousing with her friends.

This sentiment about missing out was also expressed by Jasmine, who had her baby when she was in the eleventh grade. It was burdensome to simultaneously go to school, work, and
care for her children. Hence, Jasmine too, mentioned missing out on fun times with her friends because of her parenting responsibilities.

The mothers also said they felt old and “weathered.” Geronimus (1992, 2001) hypothesized that disadvantaged black women, in particular, experience more “weathering” or accelerated aging because of higher exposure to stress due to racial and socioeconomic disadvantages. Weathering can be both physical (e.g., early menstruation) and emotional (e.g., depression) (Foster, Hagan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008).

To illustrate, Jada had her first child at age 17. Jada’s weathering was apparent as she repeatedly complained that her “body feels so old” and “just so wore out” despite her young age. Jada also imagined what her life “could have been” if she didn’t have a child at an early age. She lamented that her “whole life [was] gone,” as she saw other young girls “still running out,” not working, and having fun. “You don’t have no time just to do nothing,” Jada said about young motherhood.

As I previously noted, dropout mothers aspired to go back to or continue school, despite contradictory popular belief about their educational ambitions. Nearly half of the dropout mothers in this study went back and got their GEDs. Two-thirds of the graduate mothers attended or completed some college or postsecondary training. Motherhood, however, was a competing priority. Young mothers oftentimes surrendered their dreams of obtaining a college degree for the sake of childrearing.
Work also competed with education. The mothers worked to provide financially for their children instead of going to school. In fact, one of the biggest regrets among mothers was not finishing or attending college. They felt that they missed out on their dreams to go to college and become “something.” Many women imagined that their lives would be drastically different had they gone to college and moved on to careers that they wanted before becoming a parent.

The anecdotes of women missing out on schooling are many. At only 21 years old, Lily was taking care of her disabled father, while raising her daughter and working full time to support her family. As she juggled her many obligations, she watched dolefully as her peers went off to college.

Vanessa also intended to attend college after finishing high school, but she needed to work instead to support her child. Diana too, was in the tenth grade when she started getting excited about going to college. In fact, there was a particular four-year college that she had wanted to go “real bad.” But she “dropped everything” because of early pregnancy.

Like so many others in this study, Jasmine had an arduous road to high school graduation. Jasmine raised her baby, went to school, and held down a job while living alone. With determination, she graduated high school. It was extremely tough but she “had to do it.” Jasmine also knew that she couldn’t go “too far without that [diploma].” Jasmine explained, “People that graduate from high school, you still really can’t get a good job, you have to further your education.” And so, Jasmine enrolled at a cosmetology school after high school.
But she couldn’t stay very long. Jasmine was going to school from 8:30 in the morning until 4:30 in the afternoon, caring for her baby afterward, then working from 11 at night to seven in the morning. “Something had to give,” so she chose to take a break from cosmetology school.

Suzy, like so many other women, was full of regrets and “frustrated” about missing out on her childhood dreams of going to college. Suzy certainly didn’t hate her child, but she believed her daughter was an obstacle because she always “has to come first.” In fact, Suzy would have gone to law school if not for her daughter. Suzy explained how her life would have been different without early childbearing: “I would have moved away and went, and lived on campus and went to college full-time, and I would be rich. I don’t know, like, if I would be married to anybody else now, but it just would have went in a completely different direction.”

**Men and Accelerated Adulthood**

*Early Parenting for Men*

Fewer men than women are parents by the time of the Pathways interviews: 57 percent of the men versus 75 percent of the women were parents by age 24. Of the 16 men who became fathers by age 24, nine are black and seven are white (see Table 6.2).
The conversations with men about parenting also diverged from those with women. While
the mothers spoke extensively about the harsh realities of early mothering, the men typically
reflected fondly and positively on fatherhood. The sentiments toward their kids were almost
entirely uplifting and touching. For example, the men described their children as their “heart
and soul,” their reasons to “live for,” and as their “peace.” One man described weeping with
joy after hearing about his girlfriend’s pregnancy.

Still, there are some commonalities with the women’s interviews; specifically, how
fatherhood also accelerated adulthood. Like the women, these young men unexpectedly
became parents at an early age. They often weren’t “ready” or yet “established.” Most
regretted having children too soon. One man for instance, suddenly became a father at 14
years old. He blamed it on his own impulsive behavior; confessing that he was “running
around” having sex without thinking and being one of those “little nasty bastards…
humping on girls.”

Consider Jason, who had his first child at age 16. He adored his daughter, but he regretted
the hasty timing of her birth. When Jason was in high school, he dreamt of playing
basketball at a four-year college. His daughter’s birth, however, derailed all of his youthful
ambitions. Having a child so early “kind of rained on” his parade, Jason told the interviewer.

Ronnie too, didn’t consider himself “established” and wasn’t ready for a baby yet. He felt
“pressured” when he found out his girlfriend’s pregnancy. To provide for his newborn,
Ronnie joined a union for operating engineers and got a three-year apprenticeship after high
school. Ronnie’s work was seasonal, so he went through stressful periods of unemployment.
This was especially difficult for Ronnie as a parent who wanted to do “more” for his daughter.

“The Streets”

In addition to fatherhood, “getting into trouble” and being in “the streets” also pushed the men into early adulthood. More men than women in this study engaged in criminal and risky behaviors, specifically drugs. Participation in crime and drugs drew men away from school and brought them into contact with the criminal justice system. After leaving school early, many of the men grew up too fast as they headed into both illicit and legitimate work at young ages.

Gender differences persist at all levels of contact with the criminal justice system: arrests, convictions, and incarcerations. As shown in Table 6.4, about 64 percent of the men versus 28 percent of the women have been arrested at some point in their lives by age 30. About 67 percent of men with prior arrests were “ever convicted” versus only 10 percent of women arrestees. Nine out of the 12 convicted men served time in prison, versus only one woman from the current study who was “ever incarcerated” (see Table 6.4). All of the men involved in the criminal justice system, were under 25 years old when they were first arrested (see Table 6.5).
Table 6.4: Criminal Involvement (%) by Age 30, by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ever Arrested?</th>
<th>If Ever Arrested, Ever Convicted?</th>
<th>If Ever Convicted, Ever Incarcerated?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Men (14)</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women (18)</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Men (14)</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women (18)</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (64)</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(36)</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on criminal and problem behavior data from the Mature Adult Survey and Pathways Interviews for all 64 interviewees.

a (Count of interviewees).

Table 6.5: Age at First Arrest, by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>18 years old or under</th>
<th>19 to 24 years old</th>
<th>25 years old or over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Men (10)</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women (7)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Men (8)</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women (3)</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (28)</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on criminal and problem behavior data from the Mature Adult Survey and Pathways Interviews for those “ever arrested” (28 total men and women).

a Age group figures are in percentage.

b (Count of arrestees).
Other studies confirm that women are significantly less likely to commit crime than men. While both men and women are more likely to commit property crimes and drug violations than serious offenses such as murder, men still perpetrate criminal acts at higher rates than do women for all categories of offenses (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). Past arrest rates from 1980 through 2002 illustrate the gender difference: 91 percent of robbery arrests were male arrests (West 2010). Recently, females only accounted for 12 percent of robbery arrests in 2010 (Snyder 2012). Furthermore, approximately 89 percent arrests for murder and 77 percent arrests for aggravated assault were male arrests in 2010 (Snyder 2012). In 2009, the imprisonment rate for men was 14 percent higher than women (West 2010).

Race differences are notable here, too. Nationally, black men are six times more likely than are white men to be imprisoned during their lifetime. The incarceration rate for black males is significantly higher than that of any other racial group. The proportion of black men in prison increased almost threefold from 1970 to 2000 – three percent to eight percent. As of 2009, the incarceration rate of black males was 4,749 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents; the estimate for white males is much lower, at 708 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents (Department of Justice 2010). Hence, most research into youth criminality appropriately has focused on black men.

In particular study, however, white and black men are similarly involved in the criminal justice system. According to Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014), 68 percent of poor black men from the BSS were arrested while 49 percent had a criminal conviction by 30 years old. This is comparable to low-income white men: 63 percent was arrested and 41
percent had a criminal conviction by 30 years old. Looking only at the Pathways interviewees (see Table 6.5), a similar number of black (10) and white men (8) were arrested at least once by age 24. The number of white and black females who were arrested by age 24 is also comparable (four black women versus three white women).

This similarity between white and black men is interesting, given the national statistics that indicate a large disparity between white and black men’s criminal involvement. The comparable criminal offending speaks to the role of the context. That is, both low-income, urban white men, and their black peers, were highly exposed to poverty, violence, drugs, and other social ills living in disadvantaged areas of Baltimore City. For instance, one white man described getting shot in front of his home as one his many “close calls.” In this incident, he ended up with 14 staples on his head after a bullet had grazed it. White men too, faced the pressures of the streets and risks of urban poverty. For example, Ethan is a white man who claimed that he was “drawn to” the trouble around him.

Nevertheless, the repercussions of contact with the system were far more detrimental to the white men. That is, white men from the BSS were still able to find work after serving time in prison, in contrast to their black peers who struggled to obtain employment post-incarceration (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014). Michael, for instance, is a white man who was incarcerated at the time of his Pathways interview. He mentioned that he had a “job lined up” for him once he left prison. As it turned out, Michael’s cousin was able to connect Michael to a position at his company installing cubicles in corporate offices. Michael’s cousin was also willing to give Michael all the necessary tools to do the work.
Drugs were also a problem among the men in this study. More white men than black men from the entire BSS sample used drugs at some point in their lives (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014). Looking only at Pathways interviewees, however, the reported drug use was the same for black and white men at 64 percent (see Table 6.6). The numbers were lower for women: 44 percent of black women and 28 percent of white women used drugs at least once in their journey to adulthood.

Table 6.6: Ever Used Drugs (%) by Age 30, by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Men (14)</strong></td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Women (18)</strong></td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Men (14)</strong></td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Women (18)</strong></td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (64)</strong></td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(31)</td>
<td>(33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on drug use data from the Mature Adult Survey and Pathways Interviews for all 64 interviewees.

a Drugs include marijuana, crack cocaine, heroin, prescription drugs, and more.

b Excludes alcohol.

c (Count of interviewees).

Drug-related offenses, in particular, contributed to criminal justice involvement among the men in this research. Based on 62 total instances of arrests (among the 28 men and women with arrest histories), drug and alcohol offenses (e.g., possession of and selling drugs, alcohol-related offenses, etc.) are the second most cited reason for arrest after assault, at 29 percent and 31 percent, respectively (see Table 6.7). This is true nationally, too. From 1982
to 2007, the estimated arrests for illicit drug use rose dramatically for both juveniles and adults. According to data from the Bureau of Justice, the adult arrest rate for drug possession or use increased 138 percent between 1980 and 2009, while the juvenile arrest rate rose by 33 percent (Snyder 2012). In 2010, drug-related arrests were 80 percent higher than in 1990. Out of the approximately 1.6 million arrests for drug abuse violations, males accounted for about 1.3 million of those arrests (Snyder 2012).

Table 6.7: Reasons for Arrests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Arrest</th>
<th>Number of Related Arrests</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs &amp; Alcohol Offenses</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery / Theft / Larceny</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Violation of Probation, Motor Vehicle Violations, Non Violent Family Offenses)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapon Law Violations</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trespass/Destruction of Property</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorderly Conduct or Resisting Arrest</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Homicide</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on criminal involvement data from the Mature Adult Survey and Pathways Interviews for the 28 arrestees (10 black men, 7 black women, 8 white men, 3 white women).*

a Percentages based on total incidences of arrest (62) among the 28 arrestees.
b An arrestee may have been arrested more than one time.
c Based on arrest data by age 30.

While more men than women are involved in crime and drugs as they grow up, the men too, had fragile bonds to school and their family of childhood. Women pointed to their relational problems as justification for running wild. Meanwhile, the men linked their criminal involvement and problem behaviors such as drug use to a weak attachment and commitment to school. As shown in Table 6.8, approximately 68 percent of the men and women who had
contact with the criminal justice system are high school dropouts. Looking only at the 18 men with prior arrest history, over 72 percent are dropouts.

Table 6.8: Educational Status of Arrestees, by Race and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>High School Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Men (10)</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women (7)</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Men (8)</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women (3)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (28)</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on criminal involvement and education data from the Mature Adult Survey and Pathways Interviews for the 28 men and women, arrested at least once by age 30.*

To elucidate how the men linked their problem behaviors to their tenuous ties to school, I refer again to the “pushing out” and “pulling out” factors. That is, the school environment encouraged violence and disorder, which “pushed out” the students from school. Specifically, the men pointed to their problem behaviors such as fighting, as largely a product of their unfruitful and treacherous schooling environment. “Pulling out” occurred when the men received persistent peer pressure to skip or permanently leave school from the “wrong crowds” out on the streets. Furthermore, getting into trouble with the law disrupted “normal” transitions, and attached men to non-normal adult institutions, specifically prison. These boys grew up too fast when they prematurely began illicit or legal work at a young age to fend for the self or for the family.
The school environment, according to the men, wasn’t conducive to their learning. Jalen’s high school, for example, was too “wild,” characterized by rampant disorder and violence, and, accordingly, Jalen remarked that he “didn’t learn nothing in the classroom.” Instead, Jalen spent his class hours shooting dice with other students in the school bathroom. In Jalen’s view, his teachers were incompetent; and that his principal refused to give him a “chance.” The first time Jalen ever saw a gun was at his school. By his senior year, Jalen had seen “hundreds of guns.” He couldn’t count the number of his high school friends killed “on one hand” – the fallen were too many. Jalen also got into multiple scuffles at school. Eventually, he dropped out of high school in the twelfth grade after getting into trouble too many times.

Recall that the students felt they had to fight and aggressively stand up for themselves. Thomas, for instance, fought back after “getting cracked on all the time.” Fighting back was the appropriate retribution when a “guy wronged you, friend or not,” Thomas explained. Actually, Thomas “respected” fighting because it was a “character-builder.” As Thomas saw it, fighting taught discipline, respect, and how to be a “better man.”

Tyler is a white man who often traded blows with his schoolmates. Sometimes he walked away from altercations, especially if he knew his opponent carried knives and guns. On most days though, he fought to “stick up for himself.” Frankly, Tyler felt that he didn’t have much of a choice: it was either fight or get “seriously hurt.” Gang members also ravaged his
school. Lots of “dudes used to come by and cut the lights off, and throw chairs in, throw chairs in the class, and hit anybody,” Tyler recalled. The daily mayhem at school took a toll on Tyler. So he ditched school to smoke cigarettes and play video games with his friends. Tyler eventually failed tenth grade and dropped out of high school.

Tyler was far from alone in his constant fighting at school. Michael too, remembered the many brawls at school. Michael claimed that he never initiated the fights, but he was easily provoked. The bullying and goading from his peers were “emotionally” tough for Michael. So he countered in uncontrollable fury. One time, Michael trapped another student on the ground, ready “to kill him” until the school security guard intervened. After this particular fight, Michael received counseling for anger management.

Fighting at school doesn’t necessarily escalate or translate to criminal involvement. Violence and disorder certainly pushed some to drop out of school, but more commonly, peer pressure from the “wrong kids” pulled them out from school and into the streets. Namely, these men faced pressure from their “bad” friends to leave school and participate in illicit acts on the streets.

A social learning account of crime causation holds that individuals learn both conforming and delinquent behaviors through interactions, situations, and structures (Akers 2011). There are four dimensions to this theory: (1) differential association, the associations (e.g., with peers and family members) that an individual has in which social learning operates; (2) definitions, the person’s own orientations or rationalizations that define whether an act is
right or wrong; (3) differential reinforcement, the anticipated rewards or punishment as a result of the act; and (4) imitation, imitating the negative or positive behavior of their associates. Evidence of precisely these dynamics is apparent in the experience of these young men.

First, the men pointed to their negative associations as the trigger to their criminal and problem involvement. Their associations with the “wrong crowd” prodded them toward a career of crime by first pulling them out of school. That is, a consequence of associating with the “wrong kids” was cutting school.

Thomas, for instance, got into fights at school and learned “nothing” at school. The genesis of his misbehavior goes back to seventh grade. In middle school, Thomas wanted to be like the “cool kids” who were cutting class and hanging out on the streets, or fooling around in the back of the classrooms on the rare occasions they were in school. Thomas too, skipped school to hang with the “cool kids” on the streets.

Ethan, a white man who dropped out of school after getting locked up in the tenth grade, was incarcerated at the time of the Pathways interview. His malfeasances began when he was 10 years old. Ethan retraced the inception of his offending to getting bullied at school as a child. “People [at school were] trying to try you all the time,” Ethan recalled. At first, he ignored the harassment. It wasn’t long, however, before he fought back. From that point on, Ethan was suspended and expelled multiple times for fighting, and other misbehaviors including drinking and trying to instigate a riot, etc.
What really launched Ethan’s criminal career weren’t the bullying and ensuing fights; it was “getting in with the wrong crowd.” Before all the fighting, Ethan was in fact, doing “good in school.” His teachers complimented him for being “real good,” but he caved to peer pressure and started hooking class regularly. Ethan wasn’t “smart enough to walk away” from the pressure. Instead, he felt “drawn to it [the streets].” He preferred running the streets with his friends to being at school.

We saw that many of the women in this study ran wild with older men. The men too associated with older guys, often with long rap sheets and money. Recall how Nathan called his school a fashion show. Hence, high school was “depressing” for Nathan because he felt uncool in comparison to the “dudes [who] had a lot of material stuff.” Nathan explained, “The more material stuff you had, the more people you knew, the more you were … accepted.”

Russell also started tagging along with the older guys when he was 12 years old. Russell’s older friends were about three or four years than him, and constantly going out and “looking for trouble.” Together, they stole cars, broke windows, robbed stores, drank, and smoked. Russell couldn’t concentrate at school because his mind was always “on the streets.” When he was at school, he longed to be outside with his friends. Here, Russell recapped the pressure from his older friends: “Don’t go to school tomorrow, we going to go with these females and go get some drinks, smoke some weed, and things like that.” Russell yielded to the pressure and skipped school the next day.
The social learning theory further contends that there is an imitation of the behaviors of one’s associates. Indeed, one of the black men, Simon, called his unlawful conduct, an “imitation.” Simon revered the older guys. “It was like a[n] imitation thing for me,” Simon repeated. Julius also imitated his older peers’ behavior. Peer pressure is “very very bad,” Julius told the interviewer. Nonetheless, he continued to imitate and transgress.

The anticipated rewards for associating with the older guys were threefold. First, money was a strong incentive, especially after growing up destitute. Young black males “get into the drug world” to escape poverty, according to Simon. Young guys who grew up in “the struggle,” idolized the “older guys on the block” with loads of charisma and cash. The struggle embodied racism, poverty, disenfranchisement, and limited prospects for legitimate employment among other systemic injustices that oppressed youths from the bottom rung of the economic ladder. The older friends “seem[ed] to have all the answers” to life’s struggles, Simon explained.

Jim’s story is an example. Jim sold drugs when he saw that “most of [my] friends was doing it.” As a 15-year-old, it was hard to resist “the material things, the money … five hundred dollars a day, at least, in your pocket.” Michael also peddled drugs and apparently dropped his money on eye-catching clothes and shoes that he flaunted around town. He recalled owning at least 20 pairs of shoes, funded by his hustle. Michael’s aunt once called him the “the best-dressed person in jail” when Michael got locked up.
Another reward for running the streets with older guys was an escape, however momentary, from their toxic family environments. Recall that Jim grew up in a broken home with a father who was a heroin addict and a mother who was constantly working. In addition to the money, Jim’s older friends gave him respite from his troubled home and a sense of belonging.

Likewise, Dennis also hung out with his “homeboys” to keep away from his alcoholic father. Dennis found the companionship he craved by socializing with the “wrong kids”:

> It was lonely, my father used to drink a lot. And I wouldn’t come home all night, cause I didn’t want to be around him. And I used to stay out, so I got hung up with the wrong kids, started stealing cars. It went from there, escalated from there … Me breaking laws, [be]cause I was staying out all night, and I got hooked up with the wrong kids.

The third reinforcement for associating with the wrong crowd was “fitting in.” That is, some men “just wanted to fit in and be cool with everybody” despite knowing “right from wrong.” Nathan, for instance, got into a lot of “wild stuff” such as stealing cars and getting into police chases with his friends. When asked what prompted him to commit those crimes, Nathan responded: “[Be]cause everybody else wanted to do it. It was a group thing.” Actually, Nathan didn’t want to do it but he had to do it; otherwise, his friends would have “turned on” him:

> They’d have been like … [saying] man, he ain’t even gonna steal a car with us, so he ain’t gonna do this with us, you punk … and then they’d have turned on me … I wasn’t, I wasn’t trying to have that happen. Plus, these are the only friends that I, friends, that I had, so. I was down for it.

Russell, who also hung out with mostly older guys, started smoking, skipping school, and getting into trouble when he was 12 years old. He faulted himself for being more of a
“follower than a leader.” The more he followed and imitated, the deeper he got into a life of crime to the point that Russell felt untouchable and unstoppable. In one incident, he got into a fistfight with a police officer. Russell always knew “right from wrong” but he still submitted to the pressure. In Russell’s words, he was “just trying to fit in.”

Contact with the criminal justice system also pulled these youth out of school, thereby disrupting and accelerating their pathways to adulthood. Jim for instance, was only in the seventh grade when he got kicked out of school after getting arrested for auto theft. Michael too, was expelled from school after getting into trouble with the law multiple times.

Furthermore, a few of the men transitioned into prison. Needless to say, incarceration was a significantly disruptive factor in their lives. Consider Cameron’s life account. After dropping out, he admitted to stealing cars and selling drugs. Cameron also served time in prison for selling drugs. After leaving prison, Cameron desperately tried to return to school to finish tenth grade, but he recalled that no school would accept him. Imprisonment hampered his attempts to get back on track.

In addition, while behind bars, the young men learned from the older inmates. Thomas was just 15 when he was first arrested for a handgun violation. Subsequently, he was arrested two more times and most recently was convicted and incarcerated for attempted murder. At the time of the interview, Thomas was in prison waiting for his appeals. Thomas described the penitentiary as a place that “breeds criminals” In prison, Thomas learned how to deal heroin, pick locks, and steal cars. Prison, Thomas explained, is not a place of “rehabilitation.”
Instead, prison is where people connect or network with other convicts for a continued life of crime. Thus, recidivism occurs and a vicious cycle persists.

Consider also Ethan, who was locked up when he was 15 years old and charged as an adult on auto theft, assault, and drug charges. Going to prison at a young age was scary at first. He was around adult prisoners who were “never going to go home” with “nothing to lose.” But Ethan soon grew accustomed to life in confinement. After getting out on probation, Ethan fell back into a life of crime. He was behind bars again when he was 18 years old and six years into his sentence at the time of the interview.

“Fending for”

The men in this study also expressed fending for or providing financially for themselves and for their families, which contributed to accelerated adulthood. Here, there is another gender nuance – that is, making money was the main motivation for the men, not so much caretaking or familial responsibilities, as was the case with the women. Actually, none of the men talked about stepping up as the primary home keeper. Two men briefly mentioned their chores growing up, but not anything beyond the ordinary for any child (e.g., making the bed). Instead, the few men who fended for their families did so by contributing cash. Mostly, however, the men fended for themselves from an early age, by taking on legal and illegal jobs outside the home.
In the absence of their fathers, a few men fended for their families by supporting financially. Young men, especially from single mother homes, experience “adultification” – becoming the “man of the house” in their youth to fill their father’s gap. As the “man of the house,” they manage their households and earn money (Roy et al. 2014).

Michael, for instance, provided for his mother as a teenager. When Michael was 18 years old, his mother lost her house because she couldn’t make the payments. After the foreclosure, his mother moved in with her sister. Michael, therefore, “made it a point” to “get a job, do the right thing, get her a place to live … and take care of her.” Michael worked as a forklift operator and used his earnings to rent an apartment for his mother.

Being the man of the house, however, more often meant, “hustling” on the streets over working legitimately to gather money. Recall that drug charges were the second most common offense among men with criminal records. Also, recall that money was an enticement for hustling on the streets. As Tony put it, “money was my life.” Many of the men especially doted on their single mothers and wanted to help them with the bills, at all cost. Thus, the source of the money was irrelevant as long as they fended for their beleaguered mothers.

Ethan for example, began selling drugs when he was 10 years old. Ethan lived in an area where drugs were openly “sold on every single corner.” He frequently mingled with junkies and drug traffickers, since his home was just around the corner. Ethan gave all the money to
his mother. She never questioned the money’s source. Ethan explained why he dealt drugs to support his mother:

Well, we didn’t have real, a lot of money, so I started going out, and I would get drugs. I wouldn’t do them, I would get them and sell them, try to make money to give to my mom, just to help us out a little bit, [be]cause it was real hard, when you don’t have money, it was real hard.

Fending for oneself was especially common among the men, both through lawful and unlawful means. Larry, for instance, started fending for himself as a teenager. When he was in the eleventh grade, he realized there was “going to be a day and time mommy not going to be there.” Hence, he took his first job at Taco Bell. Though it wasn’t the “best“ job, he was content to make money.

Going back to those who earned money illicitly, Tony for example, started selling drugs at a young age to make his own money. “I needed to step out and get a whiff of life on my own, at that time. I think I did it too early,” Tony explained. In the end, Tony got caught in a house raid.

Consider Michael again, who worked as a forklift operator to pay for his mother’s home. We know that he also dealt drugs on the side to pay his bills and bankroll his clothes and shoes. His daily routine included going to school during the day and dealing on the corner at night. Michael, however, quickly realized that he couldn’t get up for school the next morning after staying up all night selling drugs. He “had to pick one or the other.” Ultimately, Michael chose the one that “was paying the bills” over school.
Again, it was mostly men from the study who dealt drugs. Only one woman, Tasha, described selling drugs in a one-time stint. In fact, Tasha never intended to sell drugs. At first, Tasha didn’t realize that she had followed her friend to New York on a drug trading stint. Later, she discovered that it was a drug deal, but didn’t back out from the situation. Ultimately, the police raided the drug deal and arrested Tasha and her friends. Her reasons for drug dealing echoed the men’s: “I had no money, no job, so I was like, well, I could use that money to—buy my daughter stuff, and … that’s what I was thinking. So … I knew it was wrong, and I knew I didn’t want to do it, but I wanted the money.”

In short, the men and women grew up “too fast” in the midst of struggle. On one hand, the women stepped in and stepped up to family roles and responsibilities from a young age. In addition, some women ran wild as they coped with too much. Many became mothers at an early age and missed out on their childhood and adolescence. On the other hand, the men were pulled out and pushed out of school because of the school environment and the pressure of “the streets.” The men also quickly jumped into both legal and illegal work to fend for themselves and their families.

Thus far, stories of struggle, grief, and trauma dominated the conversations with the young people in this study. Despite hailing from similar backgrounds, however, the lives of the men and women are not all the same. That is, there were three divergent paths taken by the people in this study: (1) those who dropped out permanently from school; (2) those who dropped out of school but went back to school (e.g., getting their GED); and (3) those who graduated high school (with some who went beyond). High school graduates and dropouts
with continuing education, in particular, claimed to be “successful.” What then, helped some of these men and women obtain success in the face of various challenges? In the next chapter, I explore the factors that aided the “success” of these individuals.
CHAPTER 7: “LIFE ON THE STRAIGHT ROAD”

Portrayals of the inner city typically vilify the urban poor as the scourge of society. Even politicians pontificate about the moral decay and “carnage” in inner cities. Indeed, there are men and women from the current research who might be characterized this way as they came of age at the height of urban crime in the 1990s, but not all of Baltimore’s inner-city youth are troublemakers, welfare parasites, idlers, felons, or drug chasers and the like.

The Corner (1998), for instance, is a book that depicts the inner city as a cesspool of hopelessness, an “underclass ghetto,” with characters doomed to an irredeemable fate. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) countered by profiling Baltimore’s neighborhoods from The Corner and reported that they are diverse and vibrant and full of hard-working residents with varied educational backgrounds.

In this study, too, I discover that the urban poor are not all the same. As I previously mentioned, the men’s and women’s pathways diverged into three groups: high school graduates, permanent high school dropouts, and high school dropouts who returned to school. All three groups of individuals struggled to attain upward social mobility. But the high school graduates and the dropouts who continued their schooling later spoke of attaining “success,” or as one person put it, sustaining “life on the straight road” toward achievement and stability despite difficult childhoods.

According to the women and men in this study, they were fundamentally successful because they “stayed alive.” One man, for instance, responded to the interviewer’s question on what
made him successful: “I’m alive, that’s number one. I managed to stay alive.” Moreover, the high school graduates and dropouts with continuing education characterized themselves as successful people because they completed high school or a GED – a feat overlooked by the privileged, but an extraordinary accomplishment for the disadvantaged. Some ventured beyond high school and enrolled in college and earned other postsecondary certificates. They deemed themselves as successful because they had stable jobs, owned homes, and were responsible parents. Finally, they saw themselves as successful because they were optimistic about their future and diligent in pursuing their goals.

In this chapter, I discuss the protective factors that allowed high school graduates and dropouts with continuing education to live their lives on the straight road. That is, what kept these young people on the straight road despite their traumatic and accelerated journey into adulthood? While parsing through their interviews, I uncovered common protective factors that contributed to their successes. Those factors are the focus of this chapter.

The first protective factor is exile, which refers to the permanent or temporary removal of men and women from their negative environments or situations. Second, constructive diversions protected young people by giving them something to “cling onto” amid turmoil. Third, relational bonds provided the role models and supporters who prodded them toward the straight road. Finally, some high school graduates and dropouts experienced a realization point that encouraged positive self-change and turned them back toward the straight road.
Richardson, Brackley, and St. Vil (2014) reported parenting strategies that inner-city black parents apply to take their boys “out of the hood” in hopes of improving each son’s life chances. One particular parenting method is called “exile” or taking the children out of distressed and dangerous communities and relocating them to safer places inside and outside the city. Exile can be temporary; for instance, parents send their sons to a safe space for the weekend or summer (e.g., a relative’s home). Exile can also be permanent; for example, the entire family moves out to the suburbs. As a last-resort measure to push children out of “the hood,” Richardson, Brackley, and St. Vil (2014) further found that some parents force their sons to enter juvenile detention centers in order to avoid the streets.

In this study, I also find that exiling was a strategy used by high school graduates to attempt to stay on the straight road. Here, I expand on the concept of exile by proposing different categories of permanent and temporary exile. First, a type of permanent exile, schooling exile as I call it, is moving the whole family out of unsafe neighborhoods (e.g., out to the county) and thus, out of the city public schools. Schooling exile also occurs when the family stays in the city (or moves within the city’s boundaries), but the children transfer from their neighborhood public schools into “better” schools located elsewhere within the city (e.g., vocational-technical schools). Better schools typically offered safer settings, higher-quality classes, and the absence or reduction of disorder and violence that were common in local city schools.
Temporary exile includes *self-exile* or “keeping to self,” which is an attempt to physically or mentally avoid the “wrong kids” or situations for a period of time. Taking vacations or provisionally leaving the neighborhood during the summer, weekends, and the school year are also kinds of temporary exile. These categories of exile aren’t exclusive. For many men and women in this study, a combination of varying types of exile helped them stay on the straight road.

*Schooling Exile*

The interviewees’ neighborhoods changed for the worse as they grew up. Thus, for these young people, moving out of, or time away, from their disintegrating communities often meant greater opportunities and benefits. Only three high school graduates in this study, however, permanently moved out of the city and graduated from “better” schools in another county. The majority of high school graduates stayed within city limits but did not attend the public schools located in areas where they lived or within “zone” boundaries set by school districts. Instead, they attended vocational-technical\(^7\) or catholic schools within the city.

This movement out of local public schools and into non-city or other schools within the city (e.g., vocational-technical schools) is what I identify as schooling exile. The high school graduates in this research experienced more schooling exile than their dropout counterparts. Additionally, high school graduates more often mentioned deliberately avoiding their local

\(^7\) When the men and women were growing up, all vocational-technical schools were citywide magnets. Presently, Baltimore City students attend citywide high schools, regardless of where they live. During the winter, eighth-grade students select their top choices for the high school they wish to attend. Some schools have admission criteria (e.g., grades, tests, etc.) (Baltimore City Public Schools 2016).
public schools and choosing instead to transfer to a school with greater opportunities. That is, these men and women often identified this movement or transfer of schools as an upgrade in their schooling paths.

In the first column of Table 7.1, which highlights the educational path of dropouts, I list the type of elementary school that the interviewee attended out of the original 20 Baltimore City public schools from the BSS: “segregated white” school, “segregated black” school, or “integrated” school. The second column, “transfers,” indicates any transfers made by the interviewee from zoned middle or high schools into other types of schools (e.g., county middle school) before dropping out or graduating from the last school they attended.

Zoe, for instance, attended a public, segregated white elementary school but transferred to a county middle school. The final column marks the type of high school (or middle school) that the student attended when he or she decided to drop out. In Zoe’s case, she dropped out from a county high school.
### Table 7.1: Dropouts, School Transfers, and Last School Attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Racial Characteristic of Original BSS School</th>
<th>Transfer to other middle or high schools, if applicable</th>
<th>Last School Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shani</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasha</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurice</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Special / Alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td>Youth Detention</td>
<td>Special / Alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td>County</td>
<td>Special / Alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Special / Alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on BSS data from years 1982-1983 (Elementary School) and 1989-1984 (Middle & High Schools) and Pathways Interviews for all 64 interviewees.

Special/Alternative schools include residential school, special schools, and evening schools.
As shown in Table 7.1, all but one of the black women dropouts last attended their local public school before dropping out. Sherry is the one student who dropped out from a county high school. Two of the black men attended residential school for troubled kids before dropping out, while two others went to a vocational-technical high school in the city before quitting. The rest of the black men dropped out from zoned schools. The majority of the white dropouts were zoned school enrollees before leaving school, except for two students who dropped out of county schools. Two of the white dropout men with transfer histories did not experience an upgrade in their schooling because their transfers were to residential schools for troubled kids.

On the whole, though, movement was more typical among high school graduates than dropouts. Refer to Table 7.2, which shows that the majority of high school graduates (especially white men) received their diplomas from a non-zoned school. Most of the high school graduates remained in the city but transferred from their area public schools to vocational-technical, Catholic, or county schools from where they eventually obtained their high school diplomas. Three of the graduates (two white students and one black student) left the city permanently, which allowed them to attend schools outside of Baltimore. All three students who moved out of the city came from two-parent homes with resources or relational networks outside of the city that facilitated their move.
Table 7.2: High School Graduates, Transfers, and School of Graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Racial Characteristic of Original BSS School</th>
<th>Transfer to other middle or high schools, if applicable</th>
<th>Last School Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td>Special / Alternative</td>
<td>Zoned HS, part of a special program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lois</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned HS, part of ROTC program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned, part of Work Study Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darryl</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td>Special / Alternative</td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lelia</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzy</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Segregated Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lora</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie</td>
<td>Segregated White</td>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vo-tech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Based on BSS data from years 1982-1983 (Elementary School) and 1989-1984 (Middle & High Schools) and Pathways Interviews for all 64 interviewees.

* Special/Alternative schools include residential school, special schools, and evening schools.
Patricia, for instance, is one of the high school graduates who experienced schooling exile after leaving the city. She is a white woman who attended elementary school in a predominantly white neighborhood in Northeast Baltimore. Her old neighborhood in the city was, in her view, a “rundown dump.” Patricia’s mother was perpetually concerned about her children’s safety, and thus was “so protective” of Patricia and her brothers. To illustrate, Patricia’s mother wouldn’t allow them to “go more than two houses either way” on their bicycles. “We had to stay right there where she could see us at all times,” Patricia remembered about her life back in the city.

Patricia also despised her elementary school in the city. Patricia recalled getting yelled at by second-grade teacher and teased by her schoolmates her about being left-handed. After Patricia finished elementary school, her mother refused to enroll her into the middle school in their neighborhood. According to Patricia, there was “no way” her mother would send her to the local middle school. When Patricia was in the sixth grade, her mother remarried, which ultimately prompted their family’s move to Baltimore County where Patricia completed her schooling.

It wasn’t easy for Patricia to be “uprooted” at a young age from “everything you’ve known all your life.” Nonetheless, she admitted that the move was a “good thing.” Patricia explained, “I hate to admit it, but, and to this day, I mean, my mom did it for us. Like everything she’s ever done, it’s been for us kids. And I know she did what was best, she got us out of the city and into a real school, and now I have a future, and a life because of it.”
Patricia’s mother leveraged her remarriage to get her family out of the city; meanwhile, other students who left the city came from two-parent homes with the resources to move for the sake of their children’s safety and education.

Simon is the only black student who graduated from a county high school after his family left the city, and he is also one of the most educationally accomplished in this study. At the time of the Pathways interview, Simon was majoring in business administration at a four-year college, though he was attending only part-time due to financial hardships. He was also working for the Baltimore County Department of Recreation and Parks. Simon shared his goals to secure a position in the Baltimore County government and someday set up his own business as an entrepreneur.

Simon is also one of the few black interviewees from a two-parent household. When Simon was in high school, his family upgraded to a bigger house out in the county. Leaving the city was feasible because both his parents earned steady paychecks. Simon’s father worked two jobs to support his family. Simon’s mother was a nurse with lofty educational expectations for her son. His family was neither the “richest” nor the “poorest.” Simon was simply grateful to “have a home with two parents.”

Simon credited his academic success partly to his parent’s decision to decamp to elsewhere in the county. Simon flourished at the county school where he joined an entrepreneurial program. The county high school was, according to Simon, “more diversified.” His classmates had stronger “work ethic” than his peers at his former city schools. Simon also
stated that teacher involvement was higher at the county school. In contrast, Baltimore City schools were, in Simon’s mother’s words, “a real big hold-back.”

While there are a few students like Simon and Patricia who experienced schooling exile after leaving the city, the majority of high school graduates remained in the city through high school. Those who stayed in the city typically took two divergent routes of schooling exile. The first course most commonly taken by white graduates who remained in the city was using family connections to enroll in a private or parochial school in the city or a public school outside the city.

Ronnie, for instance, is a white graduate who used his aunt’s address to attend a school in a different county. Like many of his peers, Ronnie observed the decline of his neighborhood in the city. He recalled how a nearby housing project closed down, prompting an exodus of former housing project residents into his neighborhood. “Ever since then,” Ronnie vented, it was “all downhill.” Fights and crime escalated in his area. Furthermore, Ronnie’s neighborhood middle school was overcrowded, violent, and “out of control.” The situation at his local middle school “got so bad” that the administrators installed metal detectors. He also started getting into trouble (e.g., fighting, cutting class, etc.). Ronnie, being someone who doesn’t “back down from nobody,” lashed out at anyone who gave him the “wrong” look at school. Sometimes, groups of boys waited to jump him after school and the brawls extended into the streets.

---

8 At the time, charter schools were not yet established in Baltimore City. The state of Maryland passed a public charter school law in 2003 (Maryland State Department of Education 2009), which established charter schools around the state. The majority of Maryland’s charter schools are now in Baltimore City (34 total) (Baltimore City Public Schools 2017).
Ronnie’s parents had separated three years before he started first grade in 1982, so he lived with his single mother (though she did remarry later on). His mother only made a weekly income of $225 when Ronnie was in elementary school. Hence, moving out of the city was not a financially viable option for them. Instead, Ronnie’s mother removed him from the local public school and sent him to a county school using Ronnie’s aunt’s address. “I would have ended up quitting or dropping out of school,” Ronnie conjectured, had he not changed schools.

Ronnie still lived in his old city neighborhood at the time of the Pathways interview. In fact, his street was the only one in the neighborhood that was still occupied by old-timers. Housing values plummeted over the years. Most of his childhood friends fled the area as it transformed into a seedbed for drug deals and violence. Ronnie yearned to move out to the county. The block was “going down big-time,” Ronnie informed the interviewer. The field researchers noted navigating through “what looked like a thriving drug market” and maneuvering “through trash and dog poop” to reach Ronnie’s house for his Pathways interview.

Alan is another white man whose family stayed in the city. Alan went to his local elementary school until third grade. Like Ronnie, Alan enrolled in a county school starting fourth grade by using his grandmother’s address. His mother pulled him out of the city elementary school because the middle school near his home was too “tough.” Alan speculated, “I would have probably been beat up every day.” His mother also didn’t want Alan to “end up like some of the others around” the neighborhood. Curiously, Alan is the only high school graduate who
returned to the city school system for high school. Alan didn’t give a definite reason for this return, only that he was “shielded” by his mother growing up. As I will explore later, other factors likely aided Alan’s completion of high school.

Black graduates who were unable to leave the city frequently took the second course or route of schooling exile; that is, attending a vocational-technical school within the city over their zoned school. Nearly half of the black high school graduates attended a vocational-technical high school instead of public schools located in areas where they lived. Contrast this to white students who graduated from a more diverse array of county, zoned, vocational-technical or catholic schools. Furthermore, among black women who graduated from their local schools, most participated in a special program such as the ROTC or Work Study, which promoted their educational achievement. In contrast, none of the dropouts who attended their neighborhood public schools were part of a special program.

Black graduates, when possible, took advantage of any opportunities that exiled them from their neighborhood school. For instance, after completing the ninth grade at a local public school, Lois, who is a black woman, transferred to a vocational-technical school that traditionally took in expelled students from other schools. “I transferred myself, because, actually, I felt as though it was better, and it was a stepping-stone, because [the zoned high school] didn’t have any opportunities for me. They didn’t have any type of programs they could offer me.” Lois explained.
Lois’s vocational-technical school offered “all kinds of programs” that introduced her to a variety of “working environments.” Through programs at the school, she rotated between employment and schooling every month by working for two weeks and then attending classes for the other two weeks. For instance, Lois landed a job as a security employee at a nearby hospital through a security program at school. This security experience looked “really good” on her resume, according to Lois. She also received a certificate from forestry camp where she learned about caring for the forest. This certificate also made her resume impressive, she thought. Clearly, she was very proud of her resume.

At the time of the Pathways interview, Lois considered herself successful. She was content with her position as a state corrections officer, but was also finding new ways to prosper. One entailed obtaining a domiciliary care license to open up an assisted living facility in her home. Lois was already a certified nursing assistant and first-aid responder. Lois also bought her first house at 22 years of age and shared her plans to purchase another home in the future.

Julius also went to a vocational-technical high school where he majored in bricklaying and drafting. Julius opted for vocational-technical high school because he wasn’t “happy to go to the zone school.” Julius didn’t want the same fate as his friends and acquaintances from the neighborhood school who “failed their first year.” Instead, he resolved to attend the “other school.” Julius explained his decision to avoid the school near his home:

People around your area you hang with every day, and they all go to the same school, some of them are like, well, don’t go today. And then they stop going, they go elsewhere … cut school every day, things like that. So, they eventually start getting in the flow of doing that every day or whatever, stop going. And flunk out, or
whatever. And I knew that’s how I was going to be if I would have went there, too, because – when you go to school with basically all your friends, or instead of just going to a school, you make new friends, you go to a school with all your friends you already grew up with, they going to peer-pressure you, don’t go here today, or whatever, cut this class and let’s go here … things like that, so – that’s how it was with the zone school thing. That’s why I was determined I wasn’t going there, cause I wanted to get in school and graduate, you know, get out.

Four of the white high school graduates also received their degrees from vocational-technical schools, where they purposefully attended for better opportunities. Eddie, for instance, is a white man who graduated from a vocational-technical school like many of his black peers. Eddie is from a section of South Baltimore that he described as “real rough.” He lived there until he was 14 years old. His friends at his area public school were “constantly in fights” and getting into trouble. Eddie, therefore, “never wanted to go” to his zoned school. Going to his neighborhood city school meant entering into “the middle of basically a war.” There was “no way,” Eddie said.

Eddie’s vocational-technical school was nearly 45 minutes away from home while his local school was 10 minutes away; still, Eddie chose the former. At his vocational-technical school, Eddie took up masonry as his trade. He excelled in the trade, which was perfect for him as he liked working with his hands. Attending vocational-technical school was a “whole new world” and an “an eye-opening experience” for Eddie. He also befriended a diverse group of people from all around Baltimore City. Eddie was sure that he would have “had a hard time … and not had as many advancements” going to the school near his house instead of his vocational-technical school.
Temporary Exile

Again, moving out of the city was a luxury that many of the men and women, especially black men and women, could not afford. Therefore, those who remained in the city adopted temporary, but constructive, and creative measures to keep themselves on the straight road. Specifically, two types of temporary exile were evident in their lives. The first is *self-exile*. That is, the men and women exiled themselves or kept away from situations or people inimical to their welfare and productivity. Second, when possible, the young men and women temporarily departed the city and experienced “different atmospheres.”

High school graduates repeatedly mentioned “keeping to self,” or self-exile, which referred to actively distancing or removing themselves from the streets, the wrong crowd, or dangerous situations. Brushing off drug dealers on the corner, avoiding the streets at night, walking away from fights, and sidestepping “bad people” and big crowds are some examples of keeping to self. Self-exile is also, according to some, simply refusing to pay attention to others and “minding your own business.”

Vanessa graduated from high school, despite growing up in a single-parent household and getting pregnant in the tenth grade. Recall that she relinquished her plans for college because she needed to care for her baby. Vanessa, however, was extremely content with her position as a clerical worker. Her job was stable, with excellent benefits such as a 401k plan. Determined to give her son what he needs to succeed, Vanessa moved her family to the county three years before her Pathways interview. She considered herself successful because she could “get up every morning and go to work.” With a reliable income, she regularly
made all her payments. “I don’t depend on anybody,” Vanessa said with confidence. Not only was Vanessa self-sufficient but also able to financially support her mother, if necessary.

Vanessa described keeping to herself as aiding her success. Though she faced a lot of peer pressure, she resisted by exiling herself from situations or troublemakers. This is in contrast to her twin brother, Tony, who dropped out of high school. “I mostly stayed to myself,” Vanessa repeatedly told the interviewer. She “never liked to hang around a lot of people” as they would bring her down, she thought. Hanging with a lot of people will “get you in trouble,” Vanessa explained.

Janice, like Vanessa, overcame her childhood disadvantages to graduate from high school. Afterward, Janice dedicated herself to fulfilling her dream career as a police officer. Indeed, she became one after completing a six-month accelerated class. As a high school graduate and a police officer, she identified herself as one of the most successful persons among her friends. “I kept to myself,” Janice replied when asked how she was able to “resist those pressures.” In fact, she “always felt different and very alone and quiet” from a young age. Janice cherished her solitude and privacy. Though she didn’t have many friends, she was still well liked by her peers. Even if she did get taunted and bullied, it scarcely mattered. Keeping away from people, after all, seemed appropriate to a “loner” like herself.

The stories of self-exile continue. Larry explained how he kept out of trouble: “I stayed to myself.” He wasn’t trying to be reclusive or “anti-social,” as he put it. But he often got “bad feelings” about certain people or circumstances. Thus, he opted for self-exile by retreating
into his home and keeping to himself. Larry recounted a time he got a “bad feeling.” His friends and cousins pressured him to go clubbing with them one night, but Larry resisted until the end because of this ominous and uneasy feeling. As it turned out, multiple fights broke out at the club that night followed by police arrests. Larry knew he had made the right decision. “Nobody can make you do anything you don’t want to do,” Larry said.

Eddie deliberately constructed “escape routes” to circumvent trouble and “knuckleheads” at “all costs.” He kept “straight” by mostly staying to himself and holding everyone at arm’s length, except his brother and his cousin who were his only companions. The pull of the streets was seductive, and he nearly fell into a “route” that led to trouble, but, fortunately, Eddie was “strong enough to say no.”

As discussed in Chapter 6, many women grew up too fast and took on family responsibilities from a young age, burdens that, in a perhaps unexpected twist, often facilitated self-exile. That is, it was easier for women to isolate themselves from trouble when preoccupied with caretaking priorities.

Recall Jasmine who had her first child when she was in high school. She “really wasn’t out there” and mostly kept to herself. Jasmine not only “didn’t involve” herself in what was happening out on the streets but she also “couldn’t involve” herself. She spent an inordinate amount of time taking care of her elderly parents and child while working and going to school. Jasmine explained, “By the time I got home, did my chores, homework, what’s the use in going outside? You know, it’s almost dark. So…”
Diana characterized herself an “ornery person” who “judges everybody” and doesn’t “deal with people.” As a child, Diana was extremely careful and picky about her friendships. She only had one best friend; but otherwise, she stayed to herself. She dismissed “associates” who tried to pressure her. These pressures, Diana said, “didn’t faze me none.” Recall how the men and women called school a fashion show. To Diana, however, frittering away valuable money on “little stupid stuff” such as a “pair of hundred-dollar jeans” seemed preposterous. A pair of lavish shoes or jeans could have paid phone bills, Diana argued. Also, they should have “put that money in the bank,” Diana chastised her peers who she described as materialistic. Furthermore, Diana’s weighty home responsibilities reinforced her choice to self-exile. Caretaking and home-keeping were full-time endeavors; there was no time or money for Diana to spend on mingling with her peers.

Temporary exile is also taking physical “breaks” from the tough communities and experiencing “different atmospheres,” as one person described it. Often, the parents of high school graduates sent their children out of “the hood” during summer or winter vacations or on weekends. In many cases, parents tapped into their family networks to temporarily exile their children to relatives’ homes out in the county or out of state. This was true for both black and white families in the current study.

Recall Alan, a white high school graduate, who used his grandmother’s address to attend county school. During the school year, Alan went back and forth between the county and city, spending some nights at his grandmother’s house then coming home on other nights. After Alan’s parents divorced when he was five years old, his father moved to a quieter part
of town. On some days, Alan found refuge at his father’s house. Because of all the breaks from the city, Alan explained that he “wasn’t really raised around the other kids” in his community. In essence, these temporary breaks facilitated avoiding the trouble in his area.

Family support was common among black men and women, too. Kin support is considered a “social responsibility” in the black family (Jarrett and Burton 1999). For instance, uncles play a vital role in protecting black male youths from high-risk communities (Richardson, Van Brakle, and St Vil 2014). In this study, too, black high school graduates found temporary exile with their relatives. They regularly visited relatives outside of Baltimore City. Simon, for example, had family in New York, South Carolina, and D.C. And so, “there was a lot of traveling,” which Simon pointed to as nurturing his “appreciation for travel.” These trips during the school vacations or on weekends “played a big part” in helping to see the “differences in how everybody lives … the different atmospheres, different states and things,” Simon explained. For example, Simon noted that the pace in New York was “faster” than in South Carolina where “things is slower.”

Gabrielle also took temporary leaves from the city. She was extremely close to her maternal uncle and her cousin who lived in New Jersey. During the summer, she trekked up to New Jersey to spend time with them. Gabrielle loved going up there, as “it was more fun for a kid in New Jersey.” She “got to play more, got to stay outside” and “play with kids” more in New Jersey than in Baltimore. New Jersey kids seemingly “always had somebody home,” unlike her working mother who couldn’t always be present. Gabrielle experienced a childhood that she believed “every child should” in New Jersey. Back at home, she was
growing up too fast, which Gabrielle expressed was “harder because you start wanting to do what older people do” instead of being a kid.

Before Lois’s parents divorced, their family often went on “little go-away trips,” for instance, driving to Ocean City or camping out in the countryside on weekends. These excursions were Lois’s moments of reprieve from city life and her most treasured childhood memories.

Diana also cherished the brief breaks with her family. After her parents separated, Diana’s father moved to Boston. During the summer, Diana and her little brother visited and savored their time in Boston. Diana “did a lot of things” that she had “never done before, like riding a train”; Boston was “a whole different experience.” Her favorite memory was visiting the “wonderful” aquarium in Boston. “It [was] the most beautiful aquarium I’ve ever seen in my life,” Diana remembered. Everything in Boston was “so exciting” in contrast to the bleakness that surrounded her back home. Even the malls in Boston seemed superior to the ones in Baltimore.

Some high school graduates experienced different atmospheres through their schools. Leila was one of the few white students at her predominantly black public high school, but she enjoyed her time at the school because of “shadow days” and “tour days.” Leila seized opportunities to go out for “shadow days,” which involved shadowing a professional at a job, and “tour days,” which were visits to college campuses. During “shadow days,” Leila ventured out to different parts of the city to experience work life. One time, she shadowed a secretary at a neurology lab in Johns Hopkins Hospital. Leila relished playing the “secretary’s
secretary for the day” and working with doctors. “Tour days” were also exciting getaways for Leila. She visited various college campuses, where she talked with several speakers. Leila also sat in on interesting college classes and slept inside dorms. Any occasion to gain “more outgoing experience” was preferable to being “constricted” at her neighborhood school, Leila explained.

In addition to traveling with her family to Boston, Diana also got to “travel a lot” to places such as New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and Boston for college fairs. Diana was particularly close to her high school English teachers, who allowed her to tag along to conferences out of state. She often spent whole weekends at colleges, away from her neighborhood crippled by drugs and violence. Those expeditions cultivated her dream to go to college out of state; unfortunately, this aspiration fizzled because of early motherhood.

**Constructive Diversions**

Certain outlets, or *constructive diversions*, also encouraged high school graduates to continue on the straight road. I define constructive diversions as outlets or diversions that helped the youths use time constructively, release stress, stay out of trouble, and express their creativity. *Individual constructive diversions* included personal hobbies, interests, and talents that deterred the youths from trouble and gave them a sense of identity and accomplishment. DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin (2016) also find that many inner-city youths adopt “identity defining outlets,” which are similar to individual constructive diversions, for instance, activities such as writing poetry, making music, drawing cartoons, all of which gave the
youths meaning and a sense of purpose. Identity projects also oppose the pull of the streets, sometimes lead to life callings, and determine how youths invest their energy and time. To illustrate, playing the piano might be a constructive diversion for a poor urban youth. She devotes her time to perfecting her piano skills, which keeps her away from the streets. Perhaps this youth also dreams of becoming a famous pianist one day.

Constructive diversions are also institutional in that they are activities and hobbies linked to institutions, such as participating in extracurricular activities and clubs at school. These institutional constructive diversions strengthened attachment to school and sustained the men and women on the straight road toward graduation.

**Individual Constructive Diversions**

Reading, listening to and performing music, creating art, and playing sports were powerful constructive diversions at the individual level, for many of the high school graduates in this study. These individual diversions physically deterred them from the streets. Books, art, and music, in particular, also profoundly shaped their minds and perspectives.

A lot of things went awry in Nathan’s life; for instance, his father’s absence and his many adversities at school. But music, especially “conscious rap” music, proved to be an important protective diversion. He took rap music seriously, mastering knowledge about its history and social influence. In his interview, Nathan recapped the evolution of rap music in the 1980s: how hip-hop shifted from being festive or “all about party” to being about sharing a
“message” of black empowerment. Streetwise and socially conscious rap artists arose from a “politically aware hip-hop turf” during the late 1980s (Darling 1988). For example, the incendiary themes from Public Enemy’s hit album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), ranged from the rejection of white supremacy to police brutality against blacks. Nathan fantasized about becoming a “conscious rapper” like these rappers. Music “saved” him from being “the bad guy” amid intense peer pressure. At times, Nathan buckled, but music rescued him from falling deeper into the streets. His mind wasn’t on the streets anymore, but “elsewhere” – music.

Nathan was also a voracious reader. He immersed himself in countless books, especially ones with a message. Nathan kept his “mind in the books” and “on point” rather than heeding the outside noise. The streets tempted Nathan to “step out of my bounds to impress.” But his ability to resist the pull magnified with each book he read. One of the books that motivated him was *The Code of the Executive: Forty-Seven Ancient Samurai Principles Essential for Twenty-First Century Leadership Success*, a 700-year-old book written by ancient samurais. He called it a “real deep book” about “how to maintain a business, a proper business.” This book taught him how to be confident and “cool-headed.” Nathan also consumed African history books that instilled a sense of rootedness and pride as a black man seeking identity and contemplating his place in an unjust society.

Recall that Marcus grew up in a neighborhood notorious for “being a bad place to live.” He could have easily gotten pulled into the streets. But Marcus held onto his conviction that the
streets did “nothing but hold me back.” Marcus spoke about how he hungered to be “better”:

When I was younger, I was growing up, people around me, I was around people that did drugs, I was around people that sold drugs, I was around people that, actually, I mean, just did anything. They were a product of their environment. I had always been in the mix, but I had never been a part of the mix. So I … always wanted something, I always wanted to make something of my life. I wanted better.

To achieve that “better,” Marcus turned to the “desires of [his] heart”: music and basketball. As a “music fanatic,” Marcus created songs and worked as a deejay on the side. Puff Daddy, an acclaimed hip-hop producer, was his role model. “I was doing stuff that my heart wanted to do,” Marcus explained why he once worked for a record label without pay. When the interviewer asked how Marcus defied the streets, he looped back to music and basketball, which were his “sole priorities.” Music especially inspired him to stay on the straight road:

If I do drugs or if I sell drugs, eventually I’m going to get caught. Okay, it’s either you going to die or you going to go to jail. If I die, I can’t make music. I don’t have anything to look forward to. If I go to jail, I can’t, you can’t do music in jail …. Music was my thing. If I wanted, if I felt down, or if I, you know, was, even sometime when I was happy … I turned the radio on. Sometime when I was down, I turned it on. Sometime when I didn’t even feel like listening to the radio, I turned the radio on. I lived with the radio on. And different, I ain’t going to say artists, but different music, music in general, influenced me …. music was my motivation.

Joseph graduated from a four-year college as an art major. In fact, he was the only person from his neighborhood with a college degree. At the time of the interview, he was working toward a career in photography. Growing up, art and music were his escapist entertainments. Befriending classmates who were in bands spurred Joseph to take music seriously in high school. Joseph thought it was “really cool” that his peers made tapes with a four-track recorder, which they then sold for $5 apiece. When Joseph was 17 years old, he assiduously saved up his money to buy a guitar. Throughout high school, he played guitar, bass, and
drums. In college, Joseph formed a band with some classmates, who became his lifelong friends.

One story from Joseph’s interview highlights how music was his constructive diversion. As a white man, Joseph used to get beat up by a “bunch of black guys” (or the “project kids” as he labeled them) from a nearby housing project. He recounted how the project kids invaded his block and instigated melees and turf feuds with whites. According to Joseph, his parents were not racists and they did not raise him to be one. But he was “fed up with being beat up” by the “project kids.” And so, “I just blamed it all on all black people, instead of just the people that were beating me up,” Joseph confessed in his interview.

Joseph, however, “overcame” his racism toward blacks through music. As it turns out, Joseph’s favorite musicians were all black. Joseph explained, “I was listening to bands that were completely against racism.” The songs encouraged Joseph to think and reflect on his “dumb” behavior. Music was a physical “release” for Joseph, an outlet that he could “channel anger into.”

Alan looked to music as his diversion, too. Born in the late 1970s, Alan grew up listening to hit tracks such as “Hotel California” and “Victim of Love” by the Eagles. As a baby, Alan used to jump and dance in his crib whenever those songs came on the radio. For as long as he could remember, Alan always carried around a record player in his pocket, such as his “little carry-around forty-five battery-operated players with Snoopy on them.” In high
school, he amused himself by playing piano, violin, and guitar. Not only did Alan love to play and compose music but he also wrote poetry on the side.

Playing sports was also a popular constructive diversion for the young men in this study, bringing them together with others who shared their passion. This was especially true in Jacob’s case. He lived in the same Baltimore neighborhood his entire life. Jacob’s father was an assistant manager at a plant that manufactured plastic containers, while his mother stayed at home. As a youngster, he didn’t buy into the pressures from his friends to get involved in “some criminal stuff” such as theft and drugs. Jacob’s mother was proud that her son did not “hang with boys his age who look for trouble and [get] into sex and drugs.”

Instead, Jacob kept away from the streets by playing pickup sports with his friends. It was “soccer one day, football the next, baseball the next,” Jacob remembered about his childhood days. Besides playing pickup games nearly every day with the kids around the neighborhood, he otherwise wanted very little to do with his peers. As a child, he particularly loved baseball. His role model was a baseball player, Cal Ripken, who Jacob described as “appreciative,” “not arrogant,” and “successful.” Jacob frequently modeled his behavior after how he thought Cal Ripken would act in the same situation.

_Institutional Constructive Diversions_

Thus far, I have identified the personal diversions, such as music, sports, books, and arts that kept high school graduates on the straight road. Institutional constructive diversions,
specifically those tied to schools, also deterred the students from getting into trouble. These institutional diversions include school programs that provided opportunities and access, and extracurricular clubs and social activities that harnessed their interests and talents.

Constructive diversions linked to institutions are particularly impactful, as they reinforce a commitment to school. In criminology theory, Hirschi hypothesized that strong bonds to society control people from running afoul of the law. There are four elements in his social bonding theory: (1) attachment to others; (2) commitment to conformity (particularly to societal norms and values); (3) involvement in conventional social activities (e.g., a teenager who joins a soccer team); and (4) belief in a societal or a subgroup’s value system (Wiatrowski, Griswold, and Roberts 1981). These types of social bonds can work both directly and indirectly to encourage members of society to conform to social norms and laws or informal rules.

In this study, too, institutional constructive diversions, especially school and after-school programs, steered many youths away from trouble. Before Simon moved out to the county, he attended both zoned and vocational-technical schools. When he was still in the city, Simon participated in the Upward Bound program starting in ninth grade. Through the program, Simon received exposure to college life during the summer by traveling to different colleges throughout the East Coast. He also lived in various campus dorms and took college classes during the summer. In the fall, he attended Upward Bound on weekends for tutoring and extra coursework help. Upward Bound also helped to “bridge” the students through high school, guiding students toward graduation and aiding the college application process.
The program opened Simon’s eyes to the “real world,” showing him that “the world is more than just twelve years of high school.” Simon spoke of how much the program meant to him:

It’s just been good. Just all the things … that I’ve been involved with throughout life as far as like all of the different programs, you know, that just exposed me to different things. I think that really makes a difference in a child’s life, like programs like this, like the Upward Bound program … it’s just, all these kind of programs, I think that it’s very important that we reach back to the children … and … expose them to the real world, you know, just reality, just life … and kind of help them, let them know … what they have ahead of them …. it’s really done a lot for me …. I think highly of this program, though, I really do, man, I really like this program.

As previously mentioned, all but one black woman who graduated from zoned schools took part in special programs at their schools. Tanya, for instance, joined the ROTC program at her school. She was born and brought up in a segregated part of East Baltimore with “people who sold drugs” out in the open. Though she lived in East Baltimore, she attended high school in West Baltimore. Tanya liked learning, but she disliked the school and her teachers. Her geometry and English teachers, in particular, were too “boring.” Tanya’s “short attention span” and inability to sit still further inhibited her learning. During class, her mind always wandered “somewhere else.”

Tanya would have dropped out if not for the ROTC program at her school. She enrolled into the program because she “wanted to do something,” and to be “a part of something.” Furthermore, the ROTC program was Tanya’s escape. The program kept her active, “instead of just sitting there, listening to” her “boring” teachers. The “little drills” and exercises during her ROTC class were stimulating and fun for her. Before signing up for the ROTC program, she was passive about school and apathetic about her future. The values and
teachings of the ROTC, however, inspired her to dream of joining the army. Unfortunately, this dream shattered when she got pregnant at 17 years old.

Institutional constructive diversions also included involvement in conventional social activities such as extracurricular clubs and formal sports teams. Eddie, for instance, joined the National Junior Beta Club in middle school. To be a part of the National Junior Beta Club, Eddie needed to maintain “a ninety-five average.” This motivated him to keep his grades up in high school. Eddie “kept up the academics” in high school and “was always on the honor or merit roll.” He loved everything about his high school; it was great “from beginning to end,” Eddie told the interviewer.

Lily, too, found her constructive diversions at school. After graduating as a valedictorian in both elementary school and middle school, Lily attended an all-girls vocational-technical high school. The school was “challenging,” which Lily appreciated. At the school, Lily participated in drama club and competed on the swim team.

Julius grew up in the same home from two years old through adulthood. Over the years, drugs and violence took hold of his once tight-knit community. Julius mourned the state of his neighborhood:

You can’t even enjoy yourself going out anymore, you get shot in the club, going out to a club, or anywhere, going somewhere to eat. Kids go to barbershops, get shot, you hear about the kid that got shot in the barbershop, getting his hair cut on his birthday? On his birthday … he was at the barbershop, getting his hair cut for his birthday, a stray bullet come through the window, they be shooting at somebody, and shot the kid right in the chair, he died.
Previously, I mentioned how Julius resisted the pressure from the streets by not attending his nearby public school. In addition, he joined the football and lacrosse teams at his vocational-technical school. Instead of hanging out with his troubled peers, Julius willfully surrounded himself with his football and lacrosse teammates. Playing sports also encouraged him to attend and enjoy his time in high school.

Though Joseph graduated from a four-year college, he didn’t “start out” as the “best kid” in high school as he got poor grades and acted up during class. At one low point when he was a freshman in high school, he was placed on academic probation for “never doing homework.” What turned him around, however, was joining the lacrosse team at his school. Joseph wasn’t “a big sports person,” but the one sport he really liked was lacrosse. He tried out for the lacrosse team, but his low grades disqualified him from eligibility. He worked “extra hard” to raise his grades and triumphantly made the team. Staying on the lacrosse team was a strong incentive to maintain good grades. Being a part of the team also gave Julius “something to look forward to.” While on the team, Julius forged positive friendships with his teammates.

Joseph, however, needed more than the lacrosse team to keep him out of trouble. Joseph’s principal pulled him aside as he walked out of detention one afternoon. He advised Joseph to “get on something besides lacrosse” to fill his time. The principal then suggested that Joseph join the school newspaper. At first, Joseph resisted the idea since he wasn’t “big into writing.” The principal persisted and urged Joseph to be the newspaper team’s photographer. Joseph was hesitant at first, but took on the position and ended up really
liking the role. It was a “really great job,” Joseph said. He took the camera home on weekends to take “artsy pictures.”

Through his time in the newspaper club, Joseph also discovered his calling in life: to become a photojournalist. It was fitting since his childhood hero was Spiderman, whose alter ego happened to be a photographer. Joining the newspaper program “sparked that interest” to follow in his hero’s footsteps. Over the years, Joseph honed his creative skills, majoring in art and interning for a Baltimore newspaper on the side.

Relational Bonds

As thus far reviewed, the men and women applied measures of exile and immersed themselves in constructive diversions. They also identified relational bonds as critical sources of support and success. Recall that relational bonds, according to Sampson and Laub (1990), work as “social control” over life. That is, weakened or broken social bonds to social institutions such as education, neighborhood and family affect criminal and problem behaviors over the life course. Here, too, the bonds that the men and women shared with their supporters and mentors not only enabled and encouraged diversions and exile but also deterred them from trouble. We saw this in the relationship between Joseph and his principal.

We also see the importance of relational bonds Tanya’s life. Remember that Tanya joined the ROTC program at her zoned school? Tanya was especially close to her commanding officer
in the ROTC program. The officer was “really nice” and compassionate toward his students, regularly treating them to meals and taking them on different trips. “He just went out of his way to do a lot of things for students, including myself,” Tanya recounted. The officer mentored her and inspired her to graduate from high school.

A tight circle of supporters helped keep these youth on the straight road as they transitioned into adulthood. First, their relational bonds provided “structure,” “discipline,” and “encouragement” that guided them toward conventional social activities and prevented them from falling into the streets. Furthermore, the young men and women looked to their role models to help make the right decisions and find inspiration for success. Their attachment to role models often triggered a realization point – the moment when the interviewee realized he or she needed to change and head toward achievement.

*Structure, Discipline, and Encouragement*

Of the 64 men and women, 17 mentioned growing up in a home lacking “discipline” and “structure.” Of these 17, the majority (11) are high school dropouts. A home with structure, one individual explained, has “the rules in place, [and] makes sure you don’t break them [because] there’s a consequence if you break the rules.” She further clarified that while freedom is important, so are structure and discipline that keep a necessary “rope tied” around the children. Some felt their unlimited freedom to roam was detrimental to their progress and hankered for structure and discipline in their home. The lack of discipline made them “run wild” and get into trouble. As children, they were left alone to do as they pleased;
meanwhile, their parents were purportedly too busy scrimping and worrying over how to make enough for the next meal or simply not around. Additionally, they felt “unchallenged” and “bored” with life in general.

In the literature, there is much debate about parental involvement in their children’s educational attainment, especially by race and class. Lareau (2011) found that variations between poor and middle-class parental involvement originate not from the lack of values but practical issues, e.g., lack of transportation and childcare or conflicting work schedules. Furthermore, Lareau distinguished between what the parents do in school settings (e.g., attending PTA meetings) and at home. Entwisle and Alexander (1992), for instance, found “summer setbacks” where low-income students lose ground academically during the summer. Meanwhile, middle-class students have a summer advantage because of the opportunities provided to them within the home. That is, middle-class parents have the resources and the time to enhance their children’s education beyond school (e.g., private tutoring, violin lessons), and thus, apply a parenting style that Lareau deemed “concerted cultivation.” This parenting style of “concerted cultivation” is self-consciously intended to increase the skills, abilities, and activities of their children. For instance, pianos and computers were often present in middle-class homes. A contrasting parenting style is “natural growth,” which Lareau defined as a hands-off, minimalist approach to rearing children more often attributed to the poor.

In this study, parents often lacked the resources for concerted cultivation. In comparison to over a third of the dropouts who lacked structure and discipline at home, only six of the
high school graduates spoke of this problem within their homes, with the majority crediting their caretaker’s or parents’ positive expectations and hands-on rearing as reasons for going on the straight road. The parents of high school graduates fell mid-way along the spectrum between “concerted cultivation” and “natural growth” in their style of parenting. Both white and black high school graduates, whether from two-parent or single-parent households, commended their parents’ balanced discipline and affection in childrearing.

Eddie is one example of a white man who grew up with positive expectations and support from both his parents. Recall that Eddie was an exemplary student with excellent grades all throughout high school. He credited much of his success to the structure, discipline, and encouragement that he received at home. Eddie described his parents’ parenting style as the “blueprint” for his life. Life could never “go wrong” if he stuck to their blueprint. “My parents [did] a great job raising me,” Eddie raved about his mother and father.

Neither Eddie’s mother nor father graduated from high school. Both worked outside the home. Eddie’s mother worked at a daycare center, while his father was a superintendent of field operations at a big company in Baltimore. Eddie’s parents, however, made sure he and all four of his siblings graduated from high school. After school, Eddie and his siblings were expected to sit down “at the table with a book” and finish homework before their mother came home from work. She thoroughly checked each child’s work. Eddie’s mother revoked certain privileges from the children such as watching TV if they neglected their homework. Furthermore, his vigilant parents kept “good watch” on Eddie and his siblings so that they
wouldn’t “run wild on the streets.” Instead of going out on the streets, Eddie and his siblings played in their backyard. Eddie spoke about the structure and discipline in his home:

> Well, they were, they were very involved in my life … they were very involved in my schoolwork, my school, going to school, they were very big on that. That was the one thing they really pushed with us, was school is number one, you’ve got to get your education so you can do something in this world. And by being involved in that, they kept us in line a lot. They set, well, they set rules, we had curfew, we had to be in at bed time. Broke curfew, you aren’t going out the next night. So they were very, not, I wouldn’t say strict, but they were very loving, because they really, they cared about what we did.

More black men and women in this study come from single-parent households. To be black, female, poor and a single parent is often stigmatized, but many black mothers of marginal status perform “intense mothering” where they fiercely protect and sacrifice for the sake of their children (Elliott, Powell, and Brenton 2015). In this study, too, having only one parent around didn’t necessarily mean less structure, discipline, and encouragement at home. Black mothers (and sometimes, relatives) of high school graduates applied “intense mothering” through which they were highly involved in guiding their children away from the streets and toward success. While mothers of black graduates enforced structure and discipline, they also shared tender and affectionate bonds with their children.

Vanessa is very family-oriented since she grew up sharing a home with many family members (e.g., aunt, cousins, siblings, etc.). In fact, Vanessa still lived with family at the time of her Pathways interview and, during the interview, they frequently interrupted the conversation. Their exchanges reflected their warm and loving relationships.
Above all, Vanessa shared a special bond with her mother, who was her protector, enforcer, and defender. Her mother was especially strict about schoolwork and imposed a “rule” that graduating from high school was non-negotiable. “That’s my grandmother’s rule, too. In order to live in my house, you have to graduate, I don’t care if you’re a hundred years old. And that’s the truth,” Vanessa explained. When Vanessa’s mother was in high school, she got pregnant with Vanessa and her twin brother. Vanessa’s mother still received her diploma because it was the “rule” of the home.

Vanessa also got pregnant in the tenth grade. Vanessa’s mother was irate at first but eventually reassured Vanessa that she would be in her “corner” no matter what. Vanessa’s mom and aunt took care of the baby while Vanessa went to school. Meanwhile, her mother’s philosophy in a nutshell – “graduate, or hit the road” – still applied to Vanessa. Her mother badgered her about her schoolwork; when Vanessa resisted going to school, her mother didn’t hesitate to lay down the law. Sometimes, her judicious mother gave Vanessa a choice: either stay home and clean the whole house or go to school. Vanessa chose the latter.

Vanessa’s road to graduation was tumultuous after having her baby in high school. Her grades were terrible, and she was failing a math class that she needed to graduate. Her devoted mother sprang into action and intervened on Vanessa’s behalf by speaking to the principal. This apparently wasn’t the first conversation between Vanessa’s mother and the principal. According to Vanessa, her mother called the principal “a lot.” Fortunately, the principal was “real cool” and gave Vanessa the option of going to school on Saturday for extra math tutoring.
Michelle, like Vanessa, cited the positive influence of her mother. Michelle grew up in an apartment complex with all low-income black residents. Initially, her neighborhood was “pretty nice.” But once the drugs arrived, it became a “neighborhood that really wasn’t equipped for children to grow up in.” Michelle’s father wasn’t in her life. He was a “real jealous” person who was controlling over Michelle’s mother. He also shot Michelle’s mother in the back when she was nine months pregnant with Michelle. After that shocking incident, Michelle’s mother left her father and since then, her mother “never had nobody really to help her.” The tragedies piled on. Michelle’s two older brothers, who she was extremely close to, were both tragically murdered. One was fatally shot eight times by a police officer, while the other was inadvertently gunned down in a crossfire.

Clearly, Michelle’s life was marked by tumult and tragedy. At the time of the interview, however, Michelle was a medical assistant for a private-duty nursing employer and working toward a nursing degree and married to a home construction contractor. Her husband was a “hard-working honest black man” who was very supportive of her. Their goal was to set up a nursing agency. Throughout her interview, Michelle talked about how she always had her “mind set” on not being “another statistic.” She was set on finishing school and having children, but only when “accompanied by a husband.” Michelle survived and thrived, thanks in large part to her mother’s rearing.

Michelle expressed the strong relational bond she has with her mother:

I had a perfect relationship with my mother, I still have one today. My mother always thought that before you could be a mother, you had to be a friend. So my mother is my closest friend. She was strict when she had to be, but she was understanding in another way. She never … just thought about herself, she always thought about me
first … we have a perfect relationship …. It’s me and my mother just got this bond, and, you know, we done been through so much together, and we done lost so much together, we did gain so much together.

“No limits” was the credo of Michelle’s family, as set by her mother. “If you want to be President, then you can be President … it was never a limit with her,” Michelle described her mother’s tenacity and drive. Hence, Michelle never wanted to disappoint her mother.

Michelle’s mother was an encouraging friend, but “strict when she had to be,” especially when it came to school. For example, Michelle wasn’t permitted to leave the house until she finished her homework. There were “no ifs, ands, or buts about it,” Michelle remembered. Her mother readily withheld allowance and other privileges if Michelle didn’t perform well at school.

Michelle also adored and revered her two older brothers. The oldest brother was 18 years older and the second brother was 16 years older than Michelle. Before their senseless deaths, both brothers were exemplars of success for Michelle. The oldest brother graduated with a Bachelor’s degree and worked as a contractor in North Carolina. Michelle’s second brother became a lawyer who eventually set up his own practice in Atlanta. Her brothers were always “behind her,” always there to “hold and comfort” her through the highs and lows of life.

Michelle especially idolized her second brother; he was her role model. He was also her father figure, walking her down the aisle when she got married and remaining by her side when she gave birth at the hospital. He watched Michelle’s son every weekend. Their children hung out together all the time. Michelle’s first car was a gift from him. After moving away to Atlanta, he came back home every holiday to be with family. He was the first person
she called when she needed advice or help. After their oldest brother’s death, their bond grew stronger. Michelle considered him closer to her than her husband and best friends. Her encouraging brothers and mother kept Michelle on the straight road; because of them, she always longed to “make something” of herself.

Realization Points

Rarely did the high school graduates and especially high school dropouts with continuing education stay on the straight road throughout their entire journey from childhood to adulthood. Nearly all of them encountered ups and downs. Simon, for instance, “rebelled” and got involved with “knuckleheads” during high school. He was arrested and convicted for selling narcotics during his sophomore year in high school, being sentenced to a month in prison and a few months on home arrest followed by parole. Despite all this, Simon became one of the more educationally achieved in this study. Lois’s transformation was also striking. She originally started as a “troubled youth” according to her BSS file, but the researchers noted that she was a “completely different person” at the time of her Pathways interview.

So then, what got these youths back on the straight road? Here, the men and women spoke of a “realization point” that preceded a change in their lives. The realization point differs slightly from the “turning point,” which is the actual turn that occurs in an individual’s life course because of a favorable or adverse life event or situation (e.g., marriage, family death) (Laub and Sampson 1993). For example, life events such as marriage, stable employment, or serving in the military are positive turning points, whereas unstable employment, risky
behaviors (e.g., alcohol and drug use), and incarceration are negative turning points. The realization point is, however, the language that the interviewees used to attribute the moment when they “realized” that their paths were going off the straight road in contrast to the actual event that turned their lives around.

The main source of the realization point was relational bonds, which triggered the men’s and women’s realization that they needed a change in the direction of their lives. For the high school graduates, their social support not only provided structure, discipline, and a model of success but also helped them come to a realization point. Some dropouts also had people in their lives who inspired their realization points, which ultimately improved their trajectories. Specifically, 11 of the 31 dropouts went back to school to get their GED. Like their graduate peers, this group of individuals who returned to school considered themselves to be successful. Furthermore, like their high school graduate counterparts, realization points brought positive change into the lives of these dropouts.

Tina’s story exemplifies how she came to a realization point because of her relational bonds. Tina is one of few high school graduates who experienced “no structure” at home. Her parents were around, but not truly present as they were either too busy working or hanging out with friends. Tina’s father worked full time, and her mother worked two jobs. No one was around to check Tina’s homework or “care” if Tina cut school. Thus, she became a “buck-wild” teenager doing whatever she wanted. Meanwhile, Tina’s older brother chose to live with their grandmother to get away from their “crazy” house. While Tina, too, could have lived with her grandmother, she indulged in her freedom at home despite a contentious
relationship with her mother. Tina called her mother a ‘weak person’ who was easily influenced by “bad” friends. Tina recalled an episode when she was in high school: Her mother’s friends stayed overnight and slept on Tina’s bed. They also broke her bed after having sex on it. A terrible fight between Tina and her mother erupted the next morning.

Not long after the bed incident, Tina, then in the tenth grade, moved in with her grandmother and brother. Fortunately for Tina, she shared a strong bond with her grandmother, aunt, and older brother. Her grandmother provided Tina with the structure and stability that she desired. At her grandmother’s behest, Tina made her bed every morning and attended school. Her grandmother lovingly nurtured Tina. This was also when Tina “realized” it was time for a change. She and her grandmother had a “really, really strong bond” so it was worth it to lose the freedom she once had and change for her grandmother’s sake.

It was also worth it because of Tina’s strong bond with her older brother. He was the only person that she looked up to in her life. In the ninth grade, Tina joined the track team, wanting to be like her brother who was a track star at his high school. She also participated in a bowling league and a church youth group, after visiting her brother’s church. In her interview, Tina named him as the most successful person around her. He was the first of their family to graduate from college, where he majored in social work and pledged into a fraternity. She often visited him at college and enjoyed her time there. Tina realized that she too wanted to attend college like her brother.
After the realization point inspired by her grandmother and brother, Tina stopped cutting school and focused on raising her grades so she could make it to college. Tina eventually went to the same college as her brother and graduated on time. Following her brother’s footsteps, Tina also joined a sorority to make new friends. At the time of the interview, she was a teacher, living with her brother, his wife, and their daughter at his house. The relational bonds to her grandmother and brother helped her realize her life goals and transformed her from a troubled youth to a successful adult.

Relational bonds also include attachment to parents or role models and to the interviewee’s children. As earlier discussed, many of the young men and women became early parents. The young parents in this study, especially the mothers, grew up too fast as a result of early parenting. But some of them also spoke of fatherhood and motherhood as their realization point. For the women, becoming a parent was realizing maturity. For the fathers, having a child meant becoming “a man,” and getting back on the straight road.

Many mothers talked about the travails of motherhood, but they also expressed deep love and affection for the children. While they spoke of feeling grown, weathering, and missing out on youth because of early childbearing, motherhood was still a positive force in maturing their mindset. Furthermore, women often mentioned how their children motivated them to become a better person and achieve more in life. As one woman put it, “My son keeps me going.” Another young mother revealed her feelings toward her children:

When I had them. It … changed my life. Like, I felt like I had everything …. I mean, even though I knew I was missing out on things, it also in a sense made me feel like, you know, I had everything, you know. I didn’t need anything else. And, like, they love me more than anything, you know.
Monica, a high school graduate, felt that things changed when she had her baby at age 16. Monica’s father died in a robbery incident, so she grew up in a single-parent home. Fortunately, Monica’s grandfather was the backbone of her family, providing financially and emotionally for everyone. He gave Monica an “excellent childhood” by “putting interest” in Monica and her brother. As a father would, her grandfather took charge of everything from buying school supplies, filling out school applications, and dropping them off at school.

Monica’s grandfather, however, died tragically after a car struck him in a nearby alley when Monica was 10 years old. After his death, their family was in shambles. His sudden death also traumatized Monica. She remembered passing by the alley cordoned off with yellow tape, and the horror that overcame her when she saw the dreadful chalk outline of his body. The memory of his death was still excruciating for Monica as an adult. Soon after that, she started “hooking up with the wrong crowds,” getting into fights and having risky sex.

Eventually, she was expelled from her local high school and sent to an alternative school for “bad kids.” The alternative school felt like a “jail” with bars in the windows.

During her time at the alternative high school, she got pregnant with her daughter at 16 years old. Initially, Monica harbored many doubts about her parenting ability. She did a lot of “crying, stomping, just staring” at her daughter wondering, “What did I do?” Soon, however, she got “used to it” and felt “good” about having responsibility for the first time in her life. She needed her daughter to slow her down after she was running the streets.

Following her daughter’s birth, Monica also realized that she needed to “strive” more and be
a good role model. This realization point drove Monica to finish high school. Here, she explained her thought process:

Who am I to be raising a child, out here fighting and getting put out of schools? What kind of role model would I be for my daughter, getting put out, just sit and tell my daughter, you know, I got put out of high school, or I ain’t finished high school because I was fighting? She’d think that’s okay. That’s not okay. It’s not okay to get put out of schools for fighting.

At the time of the Pathways interview, Monica was starting nursing school to pursue her goal of becoming a nurse. She dreamed of buying a big house one day so that her children could run around in the backyard.

Some women dropped out of high school after getting pregnant and not being able to handle the heavy weight of responsibilities. There were dropout mothers, however, who realized the need to “seek better things” after having children and thus returned to school. Jada, for instance, dropped out in the tenth grade after engaging in various problem behaviors such as fighting.

Jada, however, “calmed down a lot” after having her daughter when she was 17 years old. Her daughter got her back “on track,” and Jada eventually obtained her GED. Her daughter, she believed, set her “toward that adult level” and helped her gain a “responsible mind.” If not for her daughter, Jada reflected, she would probably be “running the streets.” At the time of the interview, she worked as a file clerk at a hospital, a job with excellent opportunities for promotions. “Anybody can do anything, but I have that type of mind, where if I want it, I can get it, you know what I’m saying. It may take years from now, but I know I will eventually get there,” Jada said with confidence.
For some men as well, the realization point came with parenthood. Fatherhood compelled them to “become a man,” which meant leaving behind the mistakes of their youth, taking responsibility, and becoming “better.” The relational bond to their children was a “good influence” as some men described it. In this excerpt, one man explained how fatherhood turned him into a man:

Kids will make you change. It’s a thing where I feel as though I got to set a certain role model for them, in order for me to have them to grow up to be respectful to people and do the right things in life, I have to do them, in order for them to follow up. And that’s what I live on. Trying to do right … it woke me up, made me become a man, quick. Boy, you can’t do this no more, can’t do that.

Recall Jim, who grew up in a drug-filled household with an absent father addicted to heroin and a single mother struggling to “care” and be present. Like his parents, Jim also got involved in selling drugs and cycled through the criminal justice system. He dropped out of school after getting in trouble with the law. Jim’s realization point, however, came when he had his daughter. Frequently, men wanted to be better fathers than their own dads, who were abusive, problematic, or absent. This was also true for Jim, who determined to put the streets aside and be a present and loving father to his daughter. “I took one look at her, and right then and there,” Jim explained the moment when he realized being in the streets was “not the way” he wanted to be anymore. As a father, Jim vowed not to repeat the same mistakes of his parents. His daughter’s birth “changed [his] mind” about how he wanted to live.

After “being a scrub” for many years, Jim suddenly “became a man.” Jim talked about his actions after the realization point: “I was involved with nothing but trying to better myself and do what’s right.” He stopped hanging out with friends and took his responsibilities
seriously. He recognized that good jobs required a GED or a high school diploma. There
“ain’t no handouts, nothing ain’t free,” Jim explained. And so, he acquired a GED when he
was 21 years old. Jim planned to attend a four-year college someday to pursue business
administration. Having grown up with only women in his life, Jim never understood the
meaning of “manhood” until he became a parent. Becoming a man, Jim realized, was
becoming “somebody who take care of his family, and be there for his family first. God-
fearing man. Somebody that takes care, like I said, takes care of his family first.”

Some who graduated from high school also credited fatherhood for turning them into a
man. These men realized the burden of responsibility to care for their children and to
become “better” and dream bigger in life. Simon is a high school graduate whose son was
born during his senior year in high school. When Simon’s son came along, Simon was filled
with joy, but also terribly frightened; life suddenly “seem[ed] more real.” Simon realized that
he was stepping into the “real world.” Life wasn’t about him or buzzing around with friends
anymore. And so, Simon began working several jobs to sock some money away for his child.
Thus, his son’s birth triggered a realization point that pushed him into responsibility and the
real world with his son as his greatest inspiration. Simon loved his son more than life itself.
His son emboldened Simon to achieve his goals, “if not for me, at least for him,” Simon
explained. During the interview, Simon described how he wanted to be an exemplary father
to his son:

Right now, I'm just trying to learn how to be a good parent, and learning how to
instill ... wanting to try to learn how to instill those values in him the way they were
instilled in me. Just trying to interact with him, trying to build up that bond ... and
try to be there for him .... Because so often that ... fathers aren’t there ... so I just
want to kind of change this .... I see so often that young black fathers aren’t there,
like when they have children at young ages .... I want to show everybody, not really
show everybody, but I just want to be there … because I know that so often they’re not. I mean, I’m just, I’m really attached to my son. We spend a lot of time together. We have a good relationship, to whereas though … he talks to me … and I want to be able, I want him to be able to talk to me … come and sit down … when he’s having problems in his life … that he feels like, well, I can’t talk to my father about this … I can’t talk to my mother about this. I want him to able to just talk to me, so now I try to talk to him a lot now, you know, so that maybe in the future, he will come and talk to me a lot then.

Eddie also had his daughter when he was 17 years old. Becoming a father at a young age was Eddie’s realization point that life no longer revolved around his wants and needs. Having his daughter ended any feelings of complacency. Being fiscally responsible for his child, Eddie realized, was a prerequisite to “becoming a man.” After high school, he took on a full-time job at a warehouse to provide financially for his daughter. Eddie worked diligently and rose to a top position overseeing the warehouse. Eddie was also on good terms with the child’s mother, co-parenting responsibly for the sake of their daughter.

Becoming a father was also the moment when Jason realized that he “wanted more” and “to do better” than in the past. Jason worked summer jobs during high school to help provide for his daughter. He successfully graduated from high school, and he worked hard to “continue to take care of her.” He established a close relationship with his daughter, even though he and the baby’s mother broke up. It wasn’t easy, but he had a “responsibility back home” that never left his mind.

In short, the men and women in this study survived and succeeded, at least in their minds, despite the traumatic experiences of their youth. Much of the conversations on their successes revolved around the protective factors that improved their life chances, especially of high school graduates and dropouts with continuing education. The men and women
experienced temporary and permanent exile that kept them away from the wrong company and situation. They resisted the streets by clinging onto their individual and institutional constructive diversions. In addition, their supporters gave them structure, discipline, and encouragement. Lastly, some high school graduates and especially dropouts who continued education weren’t always on the straight road, but their relational bonds gave them a reason get back “on track.”

In the next and final chapter, I bring together the findings and themes of these past three chapters. Specifically, I delve into their meanings of success, and what contributed to the varying levels and definitions of success according to the paths they took. I conclude with thoughts on what can be done to support inner-city youths based on this study’s findings.
INTENDED TO BE BLANK
CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

At first glance, the stories of the inner-city youth in this study seem familiar. Reminiscent of classic coming-of-age tales, their earliest childhood memories were nostalgic and endearing – biking around, playing basketball, and skipping rope with neighborhood friends, to name a few. Their conflicts growing up also strike a relatable note – e.g., dealing with the insecurities of the teenage years and confronting the antagonists who are often school bullies or flawed parents.

Upon deeper examination of these inner-city youth life stories, however, one thing is clear: their transitions to adulthood experience diverge notably from the mainstream, middle-class experience of the childhood to adulthood journey. Middle-class and advantaged youths have a different kind of coming-of-age story. The time after adolescence is stretched out before they finally enter into mature adulthood, which is traditionally marked by transitions such as becoming a parent or settling into a career.

As I noted in Chapter 1, Arnett (2000) calls these young people who delay adulthood the “emerging adults.” This emerging adulthood model, however, does not appropriately capture the transition to the adulthood process of the men and women in this study. For the low-income youths in this research, there was no time “in between” adolescence and adulthood for exploration and thrilling adventures. Instead of being “self-focused” like their emerging adult peers, the youths in my study were outer-focused – forced into and committed to their roles and obligations as caretakers, parents, and providers their family. Unlike emerging adults, there was no “gap year” for the poor, when they took time off to travel leisurely and
contemplate their place in this world before committing to adult roles. Rather, these inner-city youths craved stability given the volatality of their lives growing up. Resources and time were too scarce for the urban poor. Self-exploration was a niche worry reserved for the privileged.

On the contrary, the adolescence of these inner-city men and women was cut short as they dealt with overwhelming commotion and turmoil around them. The young people in this study, borrowing the words of the women in this study who became early mothers, “missed out” on adolescence because of their trials. The literature, as I reviewed in Chapter 3, has primarily focused on the various components of accelerated adulthood such as the precocious timing and sequence of certain markers (e.g., having a baby as a teenager). But here, what the men and women experienced was not merely a speedy transition into adult roles, but rather a curtailed adolescence. Thus, in the first part of the current chapter, I revisit the contexts of the young men’s and women’s lives that forced them to hastily leave behind their adolescence. I also discuss how curtailed adolescence was detrimental to this often overlooked and underprivileged group of men and women.

The stories of the men and women, however, do not end here. While the young people mentioned their many hardships, they also spoke extensively about the triumphs in their lives. Certainly, the people in this study came from deeply injured contexts, and little from their accounts of their upbringing would have suggested a “successful” end to their pathways. But at the time of their interviews, many claimed to have achieved success. Thus,
the second part of this concluding chapter explores their meanings of success, and how their definitions differed by the paths that they took.

In the third part of this current chapter, I discuss the strengths and resources that they drew upon to achieve success. Their strengths and resources fall under three overarching categories that I identify as people, place, and potential. First, the people in their lives were influential in boosting their achievement. Second, the place, or a safer, better environment, improved their life chances. Finally, potential, or their strengths and skills, opened up opportunities to stay out of trouble and thrive.

In the final part of this present chapter, I consider what might help and protect inner-city youth who, like the ones in this study, experience a curtailed adolescence and face a steep climb toward success. For guidance, I look to those in this study who demonstrated success, despite their many ordeals in life.

Curtailed Adolescence

Adolescence was traditionally seen as a time of “storm and stress” (Hall 1904). In our society, too, adolescents are typecast as awkward, moody, rebellious, and overly theatrical, among other negative characterizations. But some scholars called for the “de-dramatizing” of adolescence because most adolescents develop into “normal” adults without much behavioral and social difficulty (Dornbusch, Petersen, and Hetherington 1991; Arnett 1999). Thus, researchers also depict adolescence as an “age of opportunity,” a time for capacity
building, and positive development (Steinberg 2015). The men and women in this study, however, did not dwell for long in this life stage of opportunity and capacity building. If anything, “life is too short,” as one person stated in his interview, and life was too hurried. To understand why the men and women felt that life was fleeting and rushed, consider the stressful backdrop of their lives.

First, the sense that life was too short came from the relentless grief and loss that bombarded the men and women in their youth. Growing up poor, they experienced traumatic life events and challenges, but upon close inspection, their stories are far from uniform: there were differences along the lines of race and gender and not all their neighborhoods were inhospitable places. Some painted favorable pictures of their neighborhoods, at least during their early childhood years. But then the drug epidemic across inner cities in the United States came into full swing. Soon, the drugs invaded their public spaces, too, and a relentless cycle of violence followed. Their neighborhoods became the places individuals fled, according to the people in this study.

As testified to in the accounts we have heard, many of these young men and women struggled greatly as drugs, alcohol, and violence tore their families apart. Poor white youths, in particular, watched helplessly as their parents turned against each other in discord and violence. Meanwhile, the low-income black men and women in this study lamented the widespread absence of their biological fathers in their interviews.
This belief that life was too short also stemmed from early and repeated exposure to traumatic deaths in the family. Namely, the men’s and women’s adolescent years was the time when many began to see their family members die around them. Approximately 48 percent of the 64 men and women experienced the death of their family members before age 23 or 24. The reasons for deaths were both violent (e.g., homicide, manslaughter) and non-violent (e.g., cancer, stroke). This number does not include those who also saw their friends and schoolmates get buried. Recall the trauma that Monica experienced after seeing the chalk outline of her grandfather’s body where it laid after his tragic death. She was barely 10 years old when she endured this tragedy. Not surprisingly, Monica was painfully aware while growing up of the fragility of life.

Their schools, as the interviewees described them, were not safe places of learning, but sites of disorder and violence. In particular, diminishing resources and hyper-segregation characterized the schools that the black men and women attended. Some claimed that schools taught “nothing” and so, their time there was unproductive.

Economically depressed neighborhoods, fractured families, and substandard schools – this was all too much. In turn, their adolescence was not a time of opportunity and identity seeking. Instead, the obstacles in the men’s and women’s lives urged them to leave behind their adolescence as quickly as possible and to become independent adults apart from their fragile families of origin.
Life was ephemeral and extremely busy and hurried for the men and women in this study. In particular, many women stepped up as the head of their households, in place of their often absent or neglectful parents. The women took on a significant number and range of responsibilities in their homes, including cooking, cleaning, getting themselves up for school, raising and protecting younger siblings, and caring for elderly or ill family members. The women also started work from an early age to provide for their impoverished families. Recall Allison who began working at 11 years old to help her family pay for rent or Lois who lied about her age to her employer and started working underage at 13 years old.

Though the men and women acted like adults instead of adolescents, they still confronted the common problems and insecurities associated with adolescence regardless of socioeconomic status—bullying at school, peer pressures, and self-esteem issues, to name a few. For instance, the issue of image played a significant role in “running wild” among the women. We know from the literature that outward appearance and body image is associated with self-esteem among girls (Polce-Lynch et al. 2001). Among the impoverished youths in this study, too, teasing and bullying were also common and impactful.

This image issue and the emptiness and pain that the women felt from the neglect of their parents were reasons they gave for risky sexual involvement with older men. The love and attention that the women craved from their absent fathers instead came from older boyfriends. Consequently, many who engaged in risky sexual relationships became pregnant in their early teens, rapidly shifting them from adolescence to early motherhood.
Recall also the peer pressures that both the men and women faced growing up. Both the white and black men, in particular, gave in to the pressures to run the streets. Like the women, the men began working early to fend for their families and to fund their independence (e.g., moving out on their own in their teens). But for many, their work was often illegal, and found on the streets (e.g., drug dealing on the corner). Instead of mingling with other adolescents, many of the men hung out with older men on the streets. In return, the young men gained money, respect, and especially for the black men—brotherhood in “the struggle.” But also, in return, they left behind their adolescent roles (e.g., being a student), and stepped into risky adult roles. Some young men served prison time after getting charged as adults.

Curtailed adolescence has lifelong, adverse repercussions in the lives of these men and women. While they experienced the usual challenges associated with adolescence, the consequences of their setbacks were extremely detrimental to these disadvantaged youths who were already no strangers to pain and struggle. Privileged children, who face difficulties once they hit adolescence, rely heavily on the ample resources and support of their families to aid healthy coping, e.g., high-quality counseling and treatment. Here, I do not discount the struggles of adolescents born of wealth and privilege; pain is pain, whether growing up in abundance or not. But the challenges are amplified for the young people in this study whose lives are already beset by hardships and fewer resources than their sheltered peers.

For instance, these inner-city youth experienced a compounding of their disadvantages, especially in social markers such as schooling, after their adolescence was cut short. Consider
how youths are typically expected to be full-time students during adolescence. Many of the students in this study, however, walked away from school, effectively cutting their adolescence short. The fighting, bullying, disorder, and the lack of learning at schools pushed them out, they said. The beckoning of the streets, the need to parent and provide for their children, weighty home responsibilities, and early involvement with the criminal justice system pulled them out, they said.

In turn, the men and women lost the most prominent identity of an adolescent – to be a student. We know about the widening educational gap between the haves and the have-nots – a chasm that exists before children enter kindergarten (Reardon 2011, Reardon 2013). Time away from school widens this gap, as shown in the research of “summer setbacks” (increasing gap during the summer) (Entwisle and Alexander 1992). Thus, this disruption in the educational trajectories of these low-income men and women exacerbated the early disadvantage that shapes long-term schooling outcomes.

The harmful repercussions of curtailed adolescence ran deeper than social markers. Young people might acquire certain skills, assets, and experiences during “healthy” adolescent development. Developing competence, acquiring confidence, or finding an identity with the guidance of adults are some examples (McNeely and Blanchard 2009). Instead, the men and women in this study spent their youth tackling the heavy challenges and stresses associated with adult life (e.g., witnessing deaths, toiling to feed their families, etc.).
The men and women were also full of regrets about growing up too fast and disappointment about “missing out” on their adolescence. Jada explained, “My childhood life was … parents being on drugs, you know, didn’t [have] anyone to turn to, and the person I did turn to … he passed away … so it was just basically a whole, in and out, you know, didn’t have, skipped over my teenage life, and end up in … adulthood.” Others, like Jada, longed for their missed childhood and adolescence. Many wished they had stayed in school or continued with further education. But the hardships of life had taken too much from them or as one person put it, “took all the wind out of me,” including their adolescence.

The “Latent Ladder”

All of the young people in this study faced a mountain of challenges and experienced a curtailed adolescence. Among the accounts of despondency and trauma, however, there were also recurrent stories of success and contentment. While analyzing their interviews, I was constantly struck by their positive words that reflected contentment with life, immense pride about their achievements, and sanguine expectations for the future.

Many of the young men and women in this study repeatedly identified themselves as “successful” people, despite remaining poor. For example, one person explained what made him successful: “I got goals, you know, and it’s like, I have become more and more successful every year.” Another interviewee, when asked if she was a successful person, answered, “I consider myself very successful, because I enjoy my job, I’m very happy. I’m happy to work with, I enjoy the people I work with.”
In this section, I write about these men and women who demonstrated extraordinary resilience and achieved success in the face of countless hardships. By and large, these young people would not be considered a story of success since they failed to move up the socioeconomic ladder. That is, given their structural constraints, these men and women were unable to attain upward mobility, which is typically defined as the standard of success.

I discovered, however, that though these men and women did not climb the standard socioeconomic ladder, they did not consider themselves to be failures. Rather, many of them defied the sort of paths typically relegated to inner-city youth — the ones destined for a dead-end life because of poverty, by creating their own definitions of success and navigating their pathways toward their own versions of success. This redefining of success by the men and women in this study is what I visualized as another type of ladder that they were climbing, which I called the 'Latent Ladder’ as illustrated in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1: The “Latent Ladder” – A Redefining of Success
According to the people in this study, their success is not defined as or the byproduct of a single trait or characteristic. Success, in the view of the men and women, has a multifaceted meaning, depending on whom you ask. One interviewee explained, “You could say, I want to go smoke some crack, and if you go get that crack and you smoke it, you’re successful … in a crackhead’s eyes, that’s successful for them.”

Specifically, there was heterogeneity in the pathways of these men and women. That is, not all of them ventured on the same paths toward success, nor did they all make it to the same end point. Three divergent paths were taken by the people in this study despite similar backgrounds: (1) permanent high school dropouts; (2) high school dropouts with continuing education, and (3) high school graduates.

Thus, the standard and interpretation of success differed by the paths taken by these men and women. Here, I introduce three variations of success as illustrated on the latent ladder (See Figure 8.2) and that I explore in detail in the next section. First, some of the permanent dropouts who deemed themselves successful, characterized success as what I call a hopeful success. On the other hand, high school graduates were able to climb higher on the latent ladder than their permanent dropout peers, and defined their success as what I label as a meaningful success. For dropouts who continued education, their interpretation of success was what I identify as a fragmented success.
Figure 8.2: Variations in the Standard of Success on the Latent Ladder

Despite the variations in the men and women’s end points, all of them demonstrated “human agency.” Thus far, I discussed the powerful social forces adversely shaping their trajectories. A core presumption of the life course framework, however, is that people have human agency (Elder 1994). That is, individuals or collective groups are not passive but are active agents who make choices, act upon, and exert influence into their life situations. The men and women, despite oppression and marginalization, displayed a strong sense of agency that commonly came in the form of resilience and self-efficacy.

First, self-efficacy refers to the ability of an individual to assess and deal with the environment, and apply social, behavioral, and cognitive skills to attain a certain goals or tasks. Self-efficacy is also how much effort people put in to reach their intended results in the face of aversive experiences (Bandura 1982). To illustrate, someone with low self-efficacy may believe that their lives are beyond their control.
The men and women in this study, however, were not resigned to their difficult circumstances and not reaching the mainstream standard of success (again, referring to moving up from the lower to the higher-income group). Rather, with self-efficacy, they created their own criteria for success and steered their pathways toward achieving their version of success by setting goals and making efforts to attain those goals and move up the latent ladder.

The people in this study also demonstrated resilience. In research, the definition and understanding of resilience remain ambiguous. Resilience, however, is generally identified as a process—not merely a personality trait in an individual (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000). For instance, Mullin and Arce (2008) define resilience as the ability of a low-income family to “function well and achieve life goals” despite the hardships of life. Resilient families apply personal beliefs and meaning to make sense of their adversities, maintain caring networks to the family and community, and collaborate with each other to facilitate life’s undertakings (Walsh 2003).

In this study, too, the poor urban youths demonstrated their capacity to overcome “serious threats to adaptation or development” (Masten 2001:228) and improve their pathways by not just showing grit—an internal characteristic. But these men and women also drew from varying levels of resources that I review later to help them overcome the constraints in their lives and actively achieve certain goals to climb the latent ladder.
Here, these men and women who navigated distinct pathways toward success cannot be labeled as emerging adults since they skipped their adolescence and rushed into adulthood. On the other hand, to simply call them “mature adults” dismisses the nuances in their life outcomes. That is, while many identified themselves as “mature,” some still had not completed some of the traditional markers of mature adulthood, e.g., graduating from college or settling into a lifelong career. Instead, I call these men and women, “agentic adults,” who activated human agency and found ways to strive and thrive, despite the structural constraints of their lives. I now turn my attention to the variable definitions of success according to these agentic adults.

**Hopeful Success**

Consider first the context of success for the permanent dropouts in this study. Though permanent dropouts struggled the most and continued to deal with countless hardships at the time of their Pathways interviews, some still stated that they were successful. Their standards of success were one, they “stayed alive,” and two, survival meant hope for success ahead. Thus, I label this type of success a hopeful success.

The foundation of hopeful success was “staying alive.” That is, these dropout interviewees, in spite of their struggles with the past and present, were exceedingly grateful and proud “to be able to live.” To be alive at 23 or 24 years old was a significant victory, given that they knew a stream of victims murdered on the streets. Staying alive, according to the permanent
dropouts, meant there was still a “chance” for something better ahead, unlike those without that chance because they were either dead or too far gone.

Consider Jalen, whose story I told in Chapter 6, specifically about his misbehaviors at his “wild” school. Jalen grew up in quiet and “boring” area of the city, but he hung out in a nearby block where many drug dealers operated. Jalen sold drugs and slipped into teenage criminality. He also learned how to smoke and gamble from his father. Jalen acknowledged that his gambling addiction was one of the biggest problems that interfered with his life, especially with his schooling.

At the time of his Pathways interview, Jalen worked in a “stressful” job as a medical attendant, giving medicine to disabled patients, assisting them in and out of bed, and wheeling them around. Despite his tumultuous past and his dissatisfaction with his current job, he still characterized himself as a successful person for simply staying alive. “Even though we [Jalen and his siblings] did, like, some things … nobody did anything real major, and we all, we all still alive, you know. All of us, still alive,” Jalen told the interviewer.

Hopeful success also refers to the strong sense of hope routinely expressed by the permanent dropouts. Their belief in a second chance to make a dramatic turn in their lives magnified their sense of hope. Shani is a black woman who dropped out of school after finishing ninth grade. Her life was full of tempestuous incidents. Born to a single mother, like many of her black peers, she languished over the absence of her father. In high school,
she began using drugs with her boyfriend “for fun” at first, but then she continued using on the streets.

At the time of her Pathways interview, Shani was a heroin addict, heavily medicated for withdrawal, and desperately seeking help beyond addiction meetings and medication. Her discontent with her life status was apparent: “I could do a lot better. I could. I don’t like, I mean, I don’t like how my life is leading now, [be]cause it’s leading down the wrong path, because the people I hang with … I’m just tired of being tired. I’m just tired.”

Despite battling with drug addiction and hanging by a thread, Shani still expressed a strong will “to live.” She hoped for better days ahead, with a determination to overcome the obstacles in front of her. “I can’t run forever,” Shani explained. Like Shani, other permanent dropouts conveyed a noticeable tone of hopefulness about their future. Many of them wanted to be “better.” Improving their lives, which were often bruised and battered by countless tragedies and “mistakes,” proved arduous. Nonetheless, the permanent dropouts retained hope and did not stop dreaming about a second chance in life.

For instance, consider Jalen’s story again. Despite the specter of his troubled past hanging over him, Jalen was undaunted. His goals were lofty: to get his GED, join the police department, become a CEO later in life, and retire early after making lots of money. Instead, Jalen deemed himself a case of success because as he explained, “I got another chance, but some of these kids out here, they don’t really have another chance.”
To these permanent dropouts like Jalen and Sonia, knowing that there was still a chance extricated them from being a story of failure. Their aspirations, in some sense, could appear to be pipe dreams. But to these dropouts, their goals motivated them to press on despite the hardships of their life. Perhaps they may never attain those goals, but at the least, these ambitions were something to live and work hard for. As Alex, a permanent dropout, explained, the goals “gave me the momentum to do what I wanted to do.”

*Meaningful Success*

On the other hand, the high school graduates obtained meaningful success. Specifically, success to the high school graduates was about achieving feats or goals that were meaningful to them. I define meaningful success according to three criteria that emerged from their depictions of success.

First, for high school graduates, staying alive was at the root of meaningful success. Being alive, however, meant more than mere survival to the high school graduates. As previously noted, more dropouts than high school graduates ran counter to the law. Hence, staying alive also meant keeping out of trouble and away from the streets. To put it another way, being on the streets often preceded early, traumatic death; thus, the high school graduates stayed alive by avoiding the ruinous fate of the streets.
Here, Jason explained how he was a story of success because he kept away from the streets and stayed alive:

Coming out of the neighborhood that I came out of, and doing what I’m doing, I think I’ve succeeded in what I wanted to do. To not become a statistic. To not be on a corner selling drugs, not be out there getting high. To not be an inmate in prison. To not be laying somewhere dead. To be able to live, say that I have things that are mine.

Success also meant achieving certain markers or role transitions that were meaningful to the high school graduates. Obtaining a high school diploma, working at a stable job, being good parents to their children, and owning homes were some of their indicators of success. As previously mentioned, we apply a social mobility standard of success – that is, the poor must rise on the socioeconomic ladder to be considered successful. Hence, from a scholarly perspective, these youths’ markers of success fall short as they do not result in upward social mobility.

For example, their high school diplomas did not carry them far. Studies show an earnings gap that has been widening since the 1970s between college graduates and those with only high school degrees. Those who completed college earned about 56 percent more than those who did not continue education beyond high school (Abel and Deitz 2014). Furthermore, the jobs of the men and women in this study, which they described as stable and sometimes lucrative, were mostly in low-wage industrial, construction, service, and labor sectors, such as truck loaders, welders, or cosmetologists (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014). Many still lived inside the city at the time of their Pathways interviews, where their children attended the same substandard city schools. The homes they bought or inherited from their families were located in still-isolated sections of the city.
The men and women’s version of the mobility ladder, or the latent ladder, consisted of steps that represented certain markers, life events or transitions, which though inadequate for upward mobility, were meaningful to the men and women. First, these markers were meaningful to the high school graduates, because accomplishing them resulted in being “better-off” than their peers from the same background.

That is, success is relative and competitive (Hochschild 1996). In the viewpoints of the high school graduates, they were successful in comparison to others around them. Reference points are key here. For example, obtaining a high school degree is not seen to be as successful as getting a college diploma, based on the earnings gap between the two degrees. Nonetheless, for the people here, finishing high school was comparatively a step up on their latent ladder toward success. In essence, the high school graduates passed their peers without high school diplomas on the ladder.

Jasmine, for instance, named her mother as a successful person because she was “the first person to graduate in our family in a long time.” Another interviewee defined her success as being a good parent, compared to her friends on welfare who “don’t take care of their children.” Earlier, I noted the distinction made by Jalen; he saw himself as a story of success in contrast to “some of these kids out” on the streets.

These accomplishments were also meaningful because they came with a profound and empowering sense of ownership, which signified success to the men and women. That is, many of the interviewees emphasized that what they had achieved was “mine.” One
interviewee explained, “I’m not making a lot of money, but I’m making enough to make myself happy … and it’s mine, you know, I work hard for it, so I’m going to be happy, I’m going to be proud of it.”

Recall Leila’s story again. Leila is one of the graduates who considered herself a successful person. She graduated from high school, despite her turbulent life and history of trauma. At the time of her interview, she had a steady job at a glass company where she had worked for four years. The job was not prestigious, but it was “fun” and “cool,” according to Leila. Her strong sense of ownership was evident when Leila proudly shared that she had bought her house when she was 21 years old without a cosigner. “Everything in here is mine,” Leila told the interviewer. Her house was “no two-hundred-fifty-thousand-dollar home,” Leila explained. Nonetheless, Leila was still proud of her home and her ability to pay for the mortgage: “I’m happy here, in my house. Get up and go to my job, it pays my bills.” Leila continued regarding her success:

If you want to be a successful lawyer and go to school all those years and buy you a condo, living down the Harbor somewhere, then fine, then you can be successful that way. But as long as I go to work and do what I have to do, that’s successful to me.

For the high school graduates, their sense of ownership was undeniable when they spoke of graduating from high school. Graduation was “my pride and joy day for myself,” Larry, a high school graduate, explained. He further stated how getting his high school diploma was, “something that I really took pride in, that I could finally say … that, you know, look, something that I did.” Indeed, graduating from high school was a tremendous feat that evoked vigorous self-satisfaction because of the hurdles they overcame to complete school. Enduring this uphill battle to high school graduation developed a sense of ownership. The
high school graduates emphasized their agency; they had worked excruciatingly hard to obtain their diploma.

*Fragmented Success*

In between those who graduated from high school and those who permanently dropped out of school, were those who took the third path: dropping out of school, but later continuing their education (e.g., getting their GED). Dropouts with continuing education also told of being successful people. Their success, however, is what I call, fragmented success. Like their permanent dropout peers, they left school and struggled after dropping out. They stayed alive, but also got into trouble at school and on the streets.

At the time of their interviews, dropouts with continuing education were not quite as secure and satisfied with their lives as their graduate peers. This is not surprising given that dropouts with continuing education dealt with serious blows in life; for instance, dropping out of school in itself, was a significant disruption. Thus, pieces of their lives were and remained fragmented.

Like their graduate peers, however, the dropouts with continuing education eventually completed certain markers, such as finishing their education or getting a job. In particular, dropouts with continued education fulfilled those transitions after reaching a *realization point*. This was the moment when they realized the need for a change and vowed not to repeat the mistakes of their past. After this point of realization, the young men and women displayed
personal agency: they chose to go back to school and obtain their GED or their high school diplomas belatedly, some continuing beyond and attending college.

Consider Leslie’s story as an example. In Chapter 6, I introduced Leslie, who grew up with overwhelming responsibility as the leader of her family. Leslie’s life story was full of insecurity and instability. Leslie’s mother left, moving out of state when Leslie was a one-year-old. Leslie met her mother again for the first time when she was seven years old. Her mother eventually came back to Baltimore again when Leslie was 14 years old. When Leslie turned 16, she moved in with her mother, but ran away to her friend’s house during a period of rebellion. Leslie’s father also used marijuana and cocaine when Leslie was young.

As the de facto head of the household, Leslie kept their home as best as she could, but Leslie remembered feeling embarrassed about their “messy house” with roaches. Her peers often teased Leslie about her home. Leslie compared her house to her aunt’s house out in the county, which Leslie described as “always so beautiful, so clean … so nice.” Growing up, Leslie also battled depression and bulimia. Leslie eventually dropped out in the eleventh grade after getting into trouble for cutting classes, fighting, and going “boy-crazy” instead of focusing on her schoolwork.

At 18 years old, however, Leslie was hospitalized for bulimia. This was also the moment when she had a “wake-up call,” as she put it. The doctors and other “smart people” who were treating her and close to her at the time inspired this moment. Leslie realized that she no longer wanted to be a “low-life,” or “like drinkers and people that don’t care about life.”
Instead, she aimed to emulate the doctors around her. This realization point cemented her eagerness “to do something” with her life. Consequently, Leslie decided to go back to school and get her GED.

As a patient, however, Leslie wasn’t allowed to leave the hospital to take courses. But determined to change the course of her life, Leslie persistently “begged” the hospital staff for permission, and they eventually obliged. Ultimately, she got her GED, a deed that made her “really proud.” After that point, Leslie deepened in her commitment to attaining success and began piecing together the fragmented pieces of her life.

Thus far, I discussed the variations in the meaning of success by life paths. “Planfulness,” however, was a weighty indicator of success, regardless of these agentic adults’ paths. In all three versions of success, these men and women had “planful competence,” which according to Clausen (1995) is recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses, assessing and thinking about how to take advantage of available options, and making rational decisions for long-term success.

For high school graduates, success was about thoughtfully establishing and pursuing plans with competence. For instance, Gabrielle, a high school graduate, defined success as “accomplishing any goals that you set for yourself.” Success for the permanent dropouts was taking hold of the second chance to hopefully turn their lives around and achieve goals. The high school dropouts with continuing education demonstrated planful competence by
recognizing their weaknesses after the realization point and making choices to pursue further education.

The planful competence of these men and women also pointed to their desire for conventional success. To explain, these young people, on the surface, appeared content with their success thus far. Starting from the lower reaches, they had climbed the steps of their latent ladder. But curiously, the top of the latent ladder was not their final measure of success. Next, they looked to climb the classic socioeconomic ladder. That is, their end goals usually indicated a desire to ascend beyond the latent ladder and achieve conventional success. The definition of conventional success, at least according to culturally prescribed measures in the larger society, includes attaining financial security, wealth, prestige, or status, life satisfaction, higher education, and more.

For the men and women in this study, their triumphs up to the point of their Pathways interviews were only the beginning. Their ultimate goals for success very much reflected the virtues and tenets of the American Dream. They aspired to own single-family homes with the “white picket fence” and a large backyard with plenty of space for “two kids, and the dog.” They dreamed of obtaining high-income jobs or becoming entrepreneurs and setting up their own business. The men and women talked about sending their children to the best schools outside of the city and living comfortably and blissfully in economic security.
People, Place, and Potential

Thus far, I discussed how their meanings of success diverged by their end points. In this section, I examine the factors that helped these low-income youth gain success. Thus, I explore the strengths, resources, and other protective factors that these men and women accessed to achieve success.

As established, the men and women in this study had agency – they were self-efficacious and resilient, which helped them realize their version of success. Here, some may contend that children who are intrinsically bright or full of “grit” (persistence and passion) are more likely to be high-achievers and more resilient than those without this trait (Duckworth 2016). Indeed, these men and women showed incredible grit as they grinded to stay alive and move up the ladder. In the interviews, many also directly pointed to their personality characteristics as strengths that aided their success. These are some of the positive qualities that they attributed to themselves in their interviews: caring, good-hearted, well-rounded, friendly, grounded, smart, consistent, and responsible. Indeed, individual traits such as the ones they listed may encourage positive adaptation in adversity. For instance, certain personality traits such as high self-esteem or hardiness boost resilience (Masten and Gamezy 1985, Bonanno 2004).

The men and women in this study, however, mainly pointed to external forces beyond their personality traits as encouraging their agency and helping their life chances. Specifically, varying levels of strengths, resources, and access to institutional, kinship, and friendship
networks were available to all three groups of interviewees, which got them more or less closer to the mainstream definition of success. These resources are conceptualized through this framework that I created; the components are people, place, and potential (illustrated in Figure 8.3). Some men and women like the high school graduates in this study had access to more of these resources, while others like permanent dropouts did not.

**Figure 8.3: The People, Place, and Potential Framework**

People
- Family Support
- Non-Family Support

Place
- Self Exile
- Temporary Exile
- Schooling Exile
- Permanent Exile

Potential
- Individual Constructive Diversion
- Institutional Constructive Diversion

To explain briefly, I centered “place” around this idea of exile or the permanent or temporary removal of the men and women from their negative environments or situations. There are different types of exile: self-exile, temporary exile, schooling exile, and permanent exile. For instance, permanent exile was often the most resource intensive as the youth was able to leave the city, whereas self-exile or keeping to self and away from trouble was often the most basic type of exile.
The second component “people” refers to relational bonds. There are two main types of relational bonds – the first are bonds to family members (e.g., parents, grandparents) and the other are bonds to non-family members (e.g., principal, sports coach). Some relational bonds were more seemingly more resourceful and stable, for instance a two-parent home with the resources to leave the city.

Potential was about the strengths, talents, and skills that the men and women possessed. These men and women activated potential through what I call “constructive diversions.” Some of the youths had individual constructive diversions, which were personal hobbies or activities (e.g., reading, playing music) that provided meaning to their lives and aided constructive use of time at home. Institutional constructive diversions, on the other hand, are diversions linked to institutions such as the school, e.g., college-readiness programs, extracurricular activities, or sports teams. Next, I detail how these men and women engaged these people, place, and potential resources to boost their success.

*High School Graduates and Achieving Success*

First, the roles of other people were vital in encouraging success among these disadvantaged youths. Mentorship, social support, and role models are trite and repetitive words in discussions of helping underprivileged children. In this study, however, relational bonds were typically the first and final catalysts for success among these poor men and women. Relationships matter profoundly, as they affect developmental trajectories, in line with the “linked lives” tenet of the life course theory, which frames this study’s approach (Elder
1994). Also in line with Coleman’s (1988) theory on social capital, the people in this study gained resources from their relationships with their supporters.

In particular, the pathways of the high school graduates illustrated this significance of people, and relatedly, of place. The graduates had greater access to, and knowledge of, family, friendships, and other instrumental relationships and resources, which offset the risks of growing up in poverty and drew them closer to mainstream success than their dropout peers. Unlike their peers who left school permanently, their lives primarily told a story of access to more influential people in their lives who also gave them greater institutional opportunities and a better place or environment to thrive.

The people in the lives of high school graduates were especially vital to the students’ success. Jasmine, for instance, wanted to drop out of school. She, however, had an aunt who persuaded her to stay in school. Jasmine explained, “That’s all she asked me to do, was stay in school, and graduate. And I promised her that I would do that, so nothing was going to stop me from walking across the stage, and I did it.” Recall Marcus from Chapter 7, who turned to music to keep him on the straight road. He also looked to his mother, who he named as his “excellent role model” and taught him how a man is “supposed to be.”

These relational bonds also shifted high school graduates to a better place and maximized their potential. That is, many high school graduates experienced various forms of exile or a changing of place. Exile, they said, removed them from harmful places and improved their odds of survival and success.
For instance, three of the high school graduates experienced a permanent exile, wherein they were able to escape the city permanently. We know about the detrimental consequences of coming from single-parent households and living in the poorest, most segregated parts of the city for inner-city black youths. The research shows that life chances and long-term life outcomes are vastly better for inner-city children who are taken out of impoverished, segregated parts of the city. For example, college attendance and income levels improved for housing project residents who moved to low-poverty areas (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016). Hence, permanent exile improved the life chances of these three high school graduates.

Due to the lack of resources or family connections outside of the city, however, the majority of these young men and women could not permanently leave the city. Still, many of the graduates adopted other types of exile. For instance, we saw improved life chances with schooling exile – that is, high school graduates who experienced an upgrade in their schools. Changing schools supposedly set them on a different path. The men and women credited their success to moving from their neighborhood public schools in the city, which they often described as disorderly and dangerous, to non-city schools, which they depicted as far more beneficial to their schooling career. For instance, the vocational-technical schools, from their vantage point, provided better opportunities than local public schools. People like Lois, Eddie, and Julius in this study seized the many opportunities offered at their trade schools.

Some high school graduates applied methods other than schooling exile to keep on the straight road. For instance, these young people also had access to temporary exile. Any time
spent away from their neighborhoods on these periodic expeditions, whether to briefly visit relatives out of state or to travel out-of-state for college tours and visits, distanced them from the streets. Furthermore, the high school graduates imposed a self-exile, purposefully keeping to themselves instead of hanging on the corner with drug dealers or mingling with the “wrong crowd” at school.

In addition to people and place, many high school graduates had resources and networks that harnessed potential, which kept them out of trouble and progressing toward success. Potential refers to the skills, strengths, and capabilities of these youth. Potential is activated through constructive diversions. To elaborate, many of the high school graduates had access to constructive diversions, which refer to the individual and institutional outlets that diverted them away from trouble and motivated the productive use of time. As shown in Figure 8.4, approximately 82 percent of high school graduates versus 32 percent of dropouts had some sort of constructive diversion growing up.
Individual constructive diversions included personal skills, talents, and activities, such as art, music, sport, reading, and writing. Tapping into their potential through these diversions kept these young people off the streets, added meaning to their lives, and maximized their chances for success. Certain career goals also sprang from these individual diversions, which augmented their potential. Joseph’s story is an illustration. He was a skilled photographer when he was young. This diversion kept him in school and eventually became his calling in life. At the time of his interview, he was trying to find a job as a photojournalist.

Institutional constructive diversions were especially influential in the lives of these men and women. After-school enrichment and college readiness programs, such as Upward Bound, and extracurricular activities, such as the newspaper club, are examples of institutional constructive diversions among the students. Recall the black women who joined special programs at their public schools, which raised their enthusiasm for school. Furthermore, the...
venues where these institutional constructive diversions took place provided the students with a safe environment for learning and growth. Kinship and friendship networks were also influential here. For example, Simon joined the Upward Bound program after his mother’s friend recommended it to him.

Participation in after-school clubs and sports teams at school also allowed these young people to join conventional social activities and stay on the straight road. Here, too, mentors and family members encouraged these diversions. For example, Joseph’s principal pulled him aside one day and persuaded him to join the newspaper team.

Here, I present an illustrative example to show the types of resources that a high school graduate might have engaged within the people, place, and potential framework. Figure 8.5 is a graphic that highlights the resources present in Joseph’s life. Joseph was one of three college graduates by the time of the Pathways interview, and so he reached the top of the latent ladder. He had family support from his two parents who pushed him toward educational achievement, and non-family support from people like his principal. Joseph also attended vocational-technical school instead of his neighborhood public school, and generally stayed away from trouble. He had many constructive diversions including music, art, and photography, and institutional diversions such as joining the lacrosse team and newspaper team.
Figure 8.5: Example of People, Place, and Potential Resources: Joseph

As discussed so far, high school graduates had relational bonds to family and mentors, access to a better place, and opportunities to maximize their potential – all of which kept them on the straight road and helped them to flourish. Then what about the high school dropouts and how they achieved success?

The pathways and end points of the dropouts differed from their graduate peers; in other words, dropouts fell behind on the latent ladder to success. The reasons that dropouts lagged behind their graduate peers were twofold. First, the interviews with dropouts centered more on the mishaps and hardships of the past in comparison to high school graduates who focused on the triumphs and the positives of their present and future. That is, the dropouts
more often mentioned experiencing risks and traumas in their lives than their graduate peers. Dropout interviewees spoke of heart-wrenching tragedies. They recounted lacking basic needs such as food, electricity, and clothes; living in a constant state of fear and anxiety; and depending on welfare and food stamps, among other harrowing experiences. Recall Ethan, a white high school dropout, who dealt drugs to fend for his mother. He spoke of how his mother was always on welfare, and how he lived in perpetual fear – “always coming out the house, looking over your shoulder” – out of concern for his personal safety. These weary dropouts seemingly required substantially more effort and resources to scale the latent ladder than their high school graduates.

Second, opportunities and resources to mitigate the strains in the dropouts’ lives were presumably absent or fewer than their graduate peers. Lisa’s story is an illustration of this. Lisa is a high school dropout who later obtained her GED at 20 years old. Her father was absent, and her mother would “come and go” because of her drinking problems. And so, Lisa grew up with her aunt, two brothers, and sister. She remembered that her school had “a lot of like violence in there, like fights and stuff.” Eventually, she “followed” her friends and dropped out of school.

People were the most important element in these young men’s and women’s success, Lisa, however, spoke of lacking supportive connections. She could not name a single role model in her life. Her teachers, Lisa said, weren’t there to help her. It appeared that the only person close to Lisa was her oldest brother who acted as her father figure. Encouragement from others “probably would have helped,” Lisa assumed. Unfortunately, however, such
encouragement was seemingly lacking in her life. When also asked if she was involved in any organizations growing up, Lisa responded, no. She had no constructive diversions. Her life at the time of the Pathways interview was fragmented; she was contending with depression and low self-esteem. She was also unemployed and relying on her brother for financial support.

Nonetheless, high school dropouts, like their graduate peers, considered themselves to be successful – or at the least, they had a hopeful success or a fragmented success. While there was less movement (or changing of place such as their environment or school) and fewer constructive diversions among dropouts than their graduate peers, they also most often credited the influence of other people for their success. Specifically, the dropouts with continuing education turned their lives around because of their relational bonds. The permanent dropouts also stayed alive because of the helping hand of another person.

Consider first the dropouts with continuing education and the impact of other people in their lives. The bonds to their loving family members and supporters were often their inspirations for change, the impetus to their realization points. Earlier, I wrote about the “smart” doctors who inspired Leslie; her grandfather also helped her get to her realization point. As she explained, “My grandfather, the whole time, has been my, my support, my legs.” Through it all, her grandfather was always beside her. He cared for Leslie and drove her to and from her GED classes twice a week. Eventually, Leslie “passed the test with flying colors” with the help of her grandfather.
We also saw the significance of relational bonds for Tina who went from a “buck-wild” teenager to a successful college graduate. When she was younger, she was always slipping, but a lifeline emerged in the form of her loving grandmother and her older brother. Another example of the importance of relational networks circles back to Lisa’s story. She may have grown up disconnected and lacked opportunities. At 20 years old, however, she was able to obtain her GED – an incredibly proud achievement for her. As it turns out, her “motivation” for getting her GED was the people around her. It was the one time, Lisa suggested, that she was pushed toward achievement.

These relational bonds also gave defining roles to some dropouts, which drew them closer to achieving mainstream success. For instance, attaining an education is a critical component of conventional success. These relational bonds emboldened the dropouts to become a student again – a role that was cut short due to curtailed adolescence.

Consider the dropout parents like Jada and Jim, who went back to school and received their GED to be a better example to their children. That is, many of the dropout mothers and fathers in the study claimed that their children were influential in getting them back on track. They dreamed of providing a “better life” for their children, and this “better life” often constituted indicators of conventional success, such as sending their children to excellent schools in safe areas.

The influence of relational bonds was also evident in the lives of the permanent dropouts. For this particular group, life was exceptionally difficult from start to end. Namely, many of
the permanent dropouts were still struggling significantly during their Pathways interviews. Their challenges as adults at the time of the Pathways interviews were stark and greater than their peers who graduated from high school or some who dropped out but continued their education. Thus, the joy and contentment with life expressed by many graduates and some dropouts with further education were not as evident in the conversations with permanent dropouts. Nevertheless, like their “better-off” peers, permanent dropouts also pointed to relational bonds as their reasons for staying alive and hopeful.

For example, Sonia is a permanent dropout. At the time of the interview, she was distraught and overtired from the ever-present stresses of her life. She explained, “I been going through so much stuff with my bills and everything, and it just stresses me out. It really stresses me out.” Her past obstacles were many. With both parents absent, Sonia and her brother and sister grew up under the care of her grandmother.

Sonia’s life was, in obvious ways, tragic. She reminisced sadly about how her family would often go hungry. Sometimes, her grandmother went to the corner store and picked up lunchmeat to feed Sonia and her siblings. “My grandmother would try to split a dollar’s worth of spiced ham between me, my brother, her, my sister …. And it really wasn’t nothing … but even still, she tried to make sure that we ate,” Sonia recounted. There had been plenty of times we been in the house without lights and had to walk around with candles, been teased by other kids on the outside that we don’t have lights,” Sonia continued about growing up poor.
Sonia’s circumstances were clearly challenging, but she also had a great relationship with her supportive and reliable boyfriend of six years. He took care of Sonia’s daughter and backed her financially. Her boyfriend also came from a “strong family.” Sonia especially respected and depended on her boyfriend’s parents. According to Sonia, they were “smart” and excellent grandparents to her daughter. They often commended Sonia for being a good mother, praises that raised Sonia’s spirits. It was this helping hand from her significant other and his family that sustained her and kept her alive. It was also this helping hand that drove her to hope for a better future. Sonia pictured herself returning to school, getting a well-paying job, and becoming independent.

Looking Ahead

The low-income black and white youths from Baltimore City whose lives I have chronicled in these pages grew up in a distinct era. Born in the late 1970s, the men and women were part of the Generation X cohort, who came of age during the heyday of drug markets and the rise of violence in cities across the United States, including Baltimore City. They witnessed firsthand the deterioration of their once flourishing industrial city and the drastic plummeting of the city’s population as mostly better-off whites hightailed it to the suburbs.

Hence, this study’s findings need to be replicated in studies of inner-city youth who grew up in a different time and in other cities. Would the transition to adulthood process look similar for poor, inner-city children who were part of other demographic cohorts? At least based on Deluca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin’s (2016) study of Baltimore city youth born roughly
10 years later than the men and women in this research, they still experienced accelerated adulthood due to neighborhood segregation and other inner-city hardships.

Thus, I suspect that the findings here will apply to later cohorts, though results may vary based on geographic areas. I also contend that what I uncovered in this study about the divergent pathways of inner-city youth who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrate *what more we can learn* about the current generation of young people who find themselves in the same difficult circumstances, and *how we can help them*.

First, I discovered that these agentic adults devised alternate constructions of success. That is, there was a latent ladder at play in their lives, which the men and women used to measure and mark their accomplishments. There are some, like the permanent dropouts, who remained at the base of this latent ladder, but at the least, alive and hopeful. Others, like the high school graduates, reached, or were close to, the ladder’s peak after achieving markers of success. The dropouts with continuing education were somewhere in the middle of the ladder at the time of their interviews. Hence, more attention is needed on understanding the steps to success on this latent ladder. What other markers of success constitute their version of the ladder, and why are they considered to be so according to disadvantaged youths?

Second, all three groups aimed to extend their reach beyond this latent ladder and toward upward mobility. At what point does this extension begin? It would be of particular interest and significance to explore the pathways of “high achievers” who not only attained success on their latent ladder but also experienced upward mobility and conventional success. For
example, what are the pathways for low-income high achievers, who escaped poverty and “moved up” from the lower group to a higher one (e.g., the middle class)? What are their meanings of success, and what enabled them to climb the social mobility ladder in the face of persistent and intergenerational poverty?

Third, according to the definitions of the men and women, staying alive was a powerful indicator of success for these youths from challenging and dangerous contexts. I noted that staying alive, especially for high school graduates, also meant keeping out of the destructive streets. I further discovered that certain factors such as relational bonds were crucial in helping them to stay alive. But this notion of “staying alive” has yet to be fully explored. What else helps poor urban youths stay alive, despite being surrounded by many with tragic fates?

The findings on the strengths, resources, and networks that the men and women applied to achieve success also teach us about how we can help the poor urban youths now. Consider the significance of people, place, and potential again. First, we know that people mattered deeply in the lives of these disadvantaged youth. Mentors and role models in this study spurred these youths to engage in productive activities (constructive diversions), realize the need for change (realization point), make healthier choices such as staying in or going back to school, worked as social control by deterring them from trouble, and provided structure, discipline and encouragement.
Thus, we must continue to invest in and expand programs that nurture deep engagement between caring and responsible adults and inner-city youth, e.g., mentorship programs such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs (a nonprofit that links adult role models to at-risk children). Studies cite the positive impact of mentorship. Thompson and Kelly-Vance (2001) find that at-risk boys who participated in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs had higher academic gains after receiving mentorship. Keating et al. (2002) report that mentorship decreased problem behaviors among at-risk youth.

Place, too, matters. Both permanent and temporary exile, as I found, were beneficial to keeping the men and women alive and preventing them from falling into the toxic spiral of the streets. Thus, solutions to disperse poverty and fight segregation remain effective and imperative. The research proves the benefits of moving families out of high-poverty areas.

For instance, HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) funded the demolition of housing projects and the dispersal of former residents via Section 8 housing vouchers (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2001). This program resulted in an improvement in the quality of life and safety (Popkin and Cove 2007; Popkin, Levy, and Buron 2009).

Another example is the Baltimore Housing Mobility Program (BHMP), which has relocated more than 3,000 low-income families to “high-opportunity areas” since 2003 (Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership Program 2017). The program also provided mobility counseling to the families. The results showed academic improvement among children of
families who participated in the BHMP (DeLuca, Rhodes, and Garboden 2016). Hence, moving low-income families to low-poverty areas through housing mobility programs is essential to improving their life chances.

Finally, recognizing potential means defining, acknowledging, and cultivating the strengths and skills of inner-city youth. Their strengths are glimmers of hope. Many of these young people who graduated from high school and some dropouts with continuing education participated in constructive diversions that kept them on the straight road and nurtured their strengths.

Thus, career and technical education programs, internship programs, and enrichment opportunities must be expanded to help disadvantaged youths translate these personal skills into employable positions, which will ultimately boost conventional success. Vocational-technical schools, for instance, are stigmatized as the “pathway to nowhere” (Dougherty 2016:2). The youths in this study, however, credited their move to vocational-technical schools as benefitting their life chances. These schools apparently considered and developed the potential of the students by engaging their interests and their talents. Nowadays, career and technical education (CTE) programs are “strategic and sequenced” in helping students to build their skills (Dougherty 2016:2). These CTE programs also inspire career goals as early as high school and show the greatest benefits to low-income students. Hence, the social and cultural norms that attach a stigma to vocational schools must change.
For those who are college-bound or seeking to attend college, we must encourage not only their enrollment but also their completion of college to help them realize and reach their full potential. Again, the men and women in this study stated traditional measures of success as their end goals, and postsecondary attainment is one of the markers. High school graduates, despite working remarkably hard, frequently surrendered their dreams of going to college for the sake of their children, families, or financial stability. Still, many mentioned going back to school to further their education and to build a better career, specifically noting that a college degree was key to upward mobility. A high school graduate explained, “I definitely think if I want to keep moving up, that I need to go back to college.”

Entering, and persisting in, college proved extremely difficult, according to the people in this study. Hoxby and Avery (2013) reported that though high-achieving, low-income students score in the top 10 percent on the SAT and ACT, only a third enter into selective colleges (despite generous financial aid offers). Instead, many attend and fail to graduate from two-year or four-year colleges closer to home. We saw this with Allison. Recall that Allison graduated at the top of her class in high school and displayed much potential to enter into a four-year college, which she desired attending. Instead, she went to, but did not graduate from, a two-year college near her home because she had to assist her ailing mother.

Hence, low-income students, like the high-achieving high school graduates in this study work exceptionally hard to get into college yet after enrollment face obstacles to finishing college. Nationally, college graduation rates for low-income students are 14 percent in comparison to 60 percent for high-income students (Kena et al. 2015). Low-income students
are more likely to enter into two-year colleges, which have lower completion rates than four-year colleges (Juszkiewicz 2015). In this study, only three people had completed college by the time of the Mature Adult Survey.

Thus, it is pressing to find solutions to reduce college attrition among inner-city youth. For example, 60 percent of first-generation students (who are also commonly low-income) leave community colleges in their first year (Pascarella et al. 2003). And so, special attention to and care for the students during the initial transition period is vital. Increasing student engagement, tracking progress, and providing supplemental support for these college enrollees are other strategies to increase college retention among low-income students (Engle and Tinto 2008).

In the end, it is clear that poor urban youths are not a homogenous group or destined for failure because they remained poor. This study was a story about not only the trials in the lives of the urban poor but their triumphs. Though they grew up with too much trauma and too fast, these men and women were hard to discourage, as they endeavored with passionate intensity to achieve their hopeful, meaningful, and fragmented successes.

Despite their travails of life, the people in this study persisted, never shedding their dreams and aspirations about someday achieving conventional success. They were like “roses that grew from concrete” (Shakur 2009) – blooming from seemingly the most improbable and toughest settings. Hence, we must, most of all, applaud their strengths and harness their powerful belief in a chance and hope for better days ahead. Ultimately, the goal is to defy the
unflattering caricatures of inner-city youth as “thugs,” lost causes, and dregs of our society, and rather to see them as hard-working and aspirational young people with a chance to succeed in life.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Additional Details on Methodology

Using the BSS, YAS, and MAS Data

Using the YAS, the MAS, and the Pathways interviews, I acquired percentages for educational attainment at three time periods: at ages 22 to 23, ages 23 to 24, and ages 28 to 30.

Information about the highest level of schooling obtained at the time of the YAS (ages 22-23) came from their responses to the following question: “First, did you graduate from high school, or get a GED, or neither?” The YAS also asked for the month and year when the men and women received either their high school diploma or GED.

The MAS also asked about high school, GED, dropout, and postsecondary experiences since the last time the BSS researchers surveyed the men and women (usually the YAS since all 64 interviewees participated in the YAS). Sample schooling questions included:

- Have you passed the GED exam or earned any other type of high school equivalency since then (the last time the BSS researchers spoke to the individual)?
- When we spoke to you in [interview year], you had not completed high school. Since then, have you passed the GED exam or earned any other type of high school equivalency?
  - [If Yes] In what month and year did you earn the GED or any other type of high school equivalency?
- What grade were you in when you last attended high school, or if you didn’t reach high school, when you last attended middle school?
- [If the panel member was enrolled in school at time of YAS] The last time we talked to you in (interview year), you told us you had most recently attended (school) working on (degree). Since then, have you attended any other schools of the types I just mentioned or worked on an additional degree/certificate program at (school)?

While analyzing the Pathways interviews, I also collected information about their educational attainment at that time (ages 23-24). Usually, the interviewee directly mentioned his/her highest schooling at that time; e.g., “I graduated high school” or “I got my GED.”

I also used the YAS and Pathways interviews to capture the dropout experiences. In the YAS, if the men and women had not acquired a high school diploma or a GED, then they were asked about dropping out. Questions about dropping out included: “How many grades of school did you finish?” “What was your main reason for leaving?” “Was there another reason?” The replies to these questions, in conjunction to their accounts from the Pathways (and at times, the Dropout) interview, gave me insight into the dropout experience.

For instance, the dropouts were asked about their main reasons for leaving school in the YAS. Some of the answer choices included: “Poor grades in high school,” “Expelled or suspended in high school,” “School was dangerous,” and “Got into trouble with the law.” In Chapter 5, I wrote about the reasons that some interviewees dropped out, and how that ties in with schooling trauma. This information from the YAS, in addition to their explanations given during the Dropout and Pathways interviews, gave me a better understanding about why they left school.
To understand their schooling paths, which I discussed in Chapter 7 (and displayed in Tables 7.1 and 7.2), I also dug into their BSS interviews (for school year 1982-1983) to note which type of elementary school (segregated white, segregated black, or integrated) that the men and women attended as first graders. Each year, the BSS researchers recorded the anonymous school number that the student attended at the time. Thus, I was able to confirm the type of middle and high school that the interviewee attended. For instance, I used the BSS data from school year 1993-1994, to figure out where and what type of high school (e.g., vocational-technical, Catholic, zoned, etc.) the student attended that year.

I also confirmed the last school that the dropout attended using the school ID, and also information about when the interviewees dropped out (e.g., after finishing the eleventh grade). I verified their elementary, middle, and high school information from the BSS using the Pathways interviews. During the Pathways interviews, the interviewees were asked about which schools they attended throughout the years – their responses gave the anonymous school ID.

Data about the men’s and women’s parenting status (Tables 6.1 to 6.3 showing percentage data) also came from the YAS, MAS, and Pathways interviews. During the Pathways interviews, not everyone (especially the men) indicated if they had a child, and if they did, at what age they had their first child. The women often mentioned their age at first pregnancy, but again, not all did so. Hence, while reading through their interview transcripts, I noted parenting information (if available), specifically if they had any children, and their age at first birth and first pregnancy (other pregnancies too, if applicable).

I also went back to the “Family and Relationships” section of the YAS to gather parenting status information before age 23. The questions were straightforward:

- Are you expecting now?
- Do you already have children OF YOUR OWN?
  - [If Yes] How many children do you have?

The MAS, too, asked direct questions about parenting status by age 30. The following are some questions:

- Are you expecting a baby now?
  - [If Yes] In what month and year is the baby due?
- Do you already have children of your own? This includes biological or adopted children.
  - What month and year was born? IF R CAN'T RECALL THE MONTH, PROBE: Do you remember the time of year?

To gather information about the men’s and women’s criminal involvement (Tables 6.4 to 6.8), I again referred to the YAS and MAS. There are three distinct stages of criminal involvement. The first level is arrest, being taken into custody or being summoned to appear as a criminal defendant. The next level of contact with the system is if the individual has been convicted of or pled guilty to a crime. The final level of involvement with the system is if the individual has ever or is serving jail / prison time or been under house arrest. The situation of each person varies; that is, some may have been arrested but never been convicted, while others were arrested, convicted and spent time in prison.
The YAS asked a series of questions related to involvement with the criminal justice system, specifically about arrests and incarcerations:

- Have you ever been arrested?
  - [If Yes] How many times before age 18?
  - How many times since age 18?
  - Why were you arrested?
- Have you ever been incarcerated?
  - [If Yes] How many times have you been incarcerated
  - What is the longest period of time you were incarcerated?

The responses to the following retrospective questions (asking about past criminal activity) from the MAS detailed age at first encounter with the justice system and past experiences with the criminal justice system:

- Have you ever been arrested, taken into custody by the police, or been summoned to appear as a criminal defendant?
  - How old were you the first time this happened?
- Have you ever been convicted of or pled guilty to a crime other than a minor traffic violation?
  - How old were you the first time this happened?
- Have you ever served jail or prison time before this most recent instance, including home monitoring?
  - How old were you the first time this happened?
- In what month and year was the most recent conviction or guilty plea?
- For your most recent conviction or plea, were you sentenced to probation, jail or prison, or some other sentence?
  - What was the length of sentence?
  - Currently incarcerated?
  - Are you currently on probation
- Have you ever served jail / prison time?
  - How many times did this happen?
  - How old were you first happened?

I also created Table 6.6 using MAS data on the respondent’s past and recent drug use. Specifically, the MAS asked if the respondent “ever used drugs,” which included past use of one or more of these drugs: marijuana, hashish, cocaine (in all forms), tranquilizers, stimulants, pain killers or other prescription drugs, heroin, opium, glue, ecstasy, LSD or peyote, and any other drugs not specifically mentioned. Some drug use questions included:

- Have you ever used (marijuana, hashish, cocaine (in all forms), tranquilizers, stimulants, pain killers or other prescription drugs, heroin, opium, glue, ecstasy, LSD or peyote, and any other drugs) for non-medical reasons even once?
- How old were you the first time you used (marijuana, crack cocaine, prescription drugs, etc.)?
- Did you use (marijuana, hashish, cocaine (in all forms), tranquilizers, stimulants, pain killers or other prescription drugs, heroin, opium, glue, ecstasy, LSD or peyote, and any other drugs) for non-medical reasons at any time in the past 12 months?
Criteria for the Dropout Subset

(1) Reasons for dropping out of high school included:
   - Didn’t like school
   - Expelled/suspended
   - Poor performance
   - School was too dangerous
   - Illness/disability
   - Pregnancy
   - To support family, financial problems or wanted to work
   - Moved far away
   - In trouble with the law
   - Gave no reason

(2) Timing of dropping out:
   - “Early” timing: If the student dropped out before the end of the 1992–1993 school year (ages 15-16, grade 11)
   - “Late” timing: If the student dropped out after the 1992–1993 school year

(3) Demographic characteristics:
   - The researchers chose individuals mostly from the low-income strata. They also balanced by race and sex as much as possible.
Pathways to Adulthood Interview Guide

Work
- Working?
- Tell me about work
- Will you do this for a long time?

Childhood, Neighborhood, Family
- What was your neighborhood like?
- Tell me about your family
- Wish anything had been different?
- How are siblings?
- Anything else?

Teenage Years
- What was it like?
- What pressures?
- Inner struggles?
- Special problems?

School
- What was it like?
- Who got good grades?
- Special groups?
- Why hard to finish?
- Prepared you for life?
- What would you change?

Family
- Any children?
- How did you feel?
- What is a good parent?
- What is a good family?
- How different from your parents?

Self
- How do you see yourself?
- What has made self?
- Who has most influenced?
- What might have made a difference?
- When happiest? When saddest?
- When felt good about yourself?
- Biggest challenges
- Anything you would change
- Have you changed direction?

Adulthood
- Life right now
- Like to change?
- Enjoying most
- Hardest things
- What you expected
- What makes an adult?
- Think of yourself as an adult?
Measuring Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Alexander and Entwisle (2010) were the principal investigators of the BSS, and the focus of their most recent work (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014) was on the socioeconomic origins and destinations of the same group of men and women as this study.

Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) determined socioeconomic status (SES) using a composite of the following measures based on data from the BSS: (1) family income level (based on meal subsidy status); (2) mother’s and father’s education; and (3) mother’s and father’s occupation. From this composite, they derived a three-category ranking of family SES: lower, middle, and higher. Below is a summary overview of the indicators:

- Meal subsidy status: The eligibility for free or reduced price meals based on family size and income was recorded starting the third year of the BSS (1984-1985).

- Parent education data: Parent education data (usually mother’s education) was recorded starting the first year of the study. Beginning in the third year of the BSS, the principal investigators obtained education information for both parents (mother and father living in the same house as the respondent). Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson pooled parent education data from the first eight years of the BSS.

- Parent occupation data: Starting year 1 of the BSS, the researchers asked about parent employment details (e.g., place of employment and work hours). Beginning in year 2, occupation data for both parents (living with the student) were recorded. Beginning in year 9, they also collected information about the occupation of parents who did not live with, but had regular contact with the respondents. The investigators pooled occupational data from the first nine years. Parent responses were coded using 1970 Census occupational codes, and corresponding occupational status scores were assigned.

Sample Comment

Jasmine is a high school graduate.

She really wanted to do cosmetology and was attending cosmetology school, but was unable to finish cosmetology school because she had a baby, and she was working. She has two children, one when she was in HS and another one a bit later. Both her parents weren’t really around when she was growing up. She lived with her grandparents and her aunt. She was especially close to her grandmother and her aunt. She did a lot of housework for her aging grandparents. Her aunt and grandmother were especially strict with her, and encouraged her to stay in school.

Growing up, she lived in a really "bad" neighborhood where there were a lot of drugs. But she dealt with it by not going out in the dark, and keeping to herself in the house (watching TV, etc.) She has a brother who became a drug addict and lives in West Baltimore still - but she looks to him as someone NOT to follow.

She started working at a very young age because she needed money to survive. Over the years, she has had 14 different jobs.

She had wanted to drop out and go to job corps instead because she had some issues with being held back at school and needing to spend summers at school. She did however enjoy her HS because she took a video production class she really liked. Though she had some problem behaviors at school (cutting, altercations with other students, talking back to teacher), her aunt and grandmother’s discipline and her promise with her aunt helped her to stay focused and graduate.

She claims to have had a bad temper, but her children helped to mellow her out.

She is currently aiming to join the police, after having some experience working in corrections. She wants to get married someday, own her own business, and go to school again.
Sample Memo

Jasmine's life story really showed me that options after graduating from HS are really limited for people like her. Realities outweigh dreams. How could people like her be expected to dream, aim for higher – when basic needs are not being fulfilled?

She struggled and failed to complete cosmetology school because she had a baby at a young age. Her parents weren't around. Her aunt, who she was close to, passed away. Her grandparents were old, and they were poor, so she experienced accelerated adulthood. Instead of focusing on school, she had to make money. So much so that instead of school, she felt initially that dropping out and joining Job Corps would be the better option...

Now with two young children, she needs to just focus on making money and taking care of her children. **Motherhood is an obstacle.** Instead of focusing and finishing her dreams of cosmetology, she kept switching jobs. She worked in security (e.g., corrections) so she was planning to take her agility test for police. Even though she wants to work in cosmetology, she is trying to do what makes money so she can save up and start her own business. *Fulfilling basic needs – money is more urgent than dreams and desires. How can they be expected to have dreams when those are luxuries?*

But her aunt and grandma asked her to stay, so she did and she graduated - She had a **realization point** after her aunt and grandma spoke to her:

“I promised her that so nothing was going to stop me from walking across the stage, and I did it.”

Her aunt and her grandma were very strict with her. She was punished after cutting school and messing up at home - she calls it as "lesson well learned." Even after her aunt passed away, she "made this promise so I had to cool it" – **emphasizes the importance of support in Jasmine’s life.**

Funny how her aunt and grandma asked her to stay in school so she could get a picture in prom dress! **Image is really important to women – I know this because I was this way too growing up.**

She was engaging in problem behavior at school (cutting, "running wild") – interesting how that’s how women describe it often “running wild” as their way of getting into trouble. Wild seems to be equivalent of “trouble.”

She actually enjoyed going to HS because they offered a trade that she liked - video production-multimedia - "it was video production-multimedia, so I liked my trade. Sometimes that was the only reason why I would get up and go to school in the morning, because I looked forward to going to that class."

But because of her circumstances and her lack of HS grades / SAT, she couldn't attend the college she wanted to for this trade. Also, because she wasn't aware of transportation methods - Even though there were colleges she knew had this trade, she didn't apply because it was too high standard "so I didn't bother trying to get there" Her other reasons was because of the commuting hardships - she didn't know about the MARC.

**Transportation issues as recurring need / problem / cause of concern – whether that's long commute, needing / wanting a car.**

**Goes back to – how can R expected to dream when life is accelerated toward survival / taking care of child at young age / needing to make money?**

**It's sad that on paper, she graduated from HS after working hard to catch up, and keeping the promise with someone she loves. But ultimately, she couldn't do what she really wanted.** She did the opposite of her brother, who got caught up in drugs. She resisted peer pressure by having
a "mind of her own", - "I'm that type person, I don't do what everybody do. I do what I do, you know."

But even after all of this, she couldn't go beyond...

It was interesting how aware she was that a HS diploma doesn't afford much - "Oh, it was very important for me to finish school. Because I know that you can't get too far without that, and even still, people that graduate from high school, you still really can't get a good job, you have to further your education, so."

It really seemed that the social support from her aunt, grandma, and her sheer desire to survive, make money, and provide for her children, got her this far.

It's interesting that she had a teacher who really "cared" and even called her up when she was absent, but that didn't amount to as much.

I saw a lot of **accelerated adulthood** in her case - where she has a lot of responsibilities. I saw "downshifting" happen – especially when her desires to go to college couldn't be fulfilled because of her circumstances, and her unawareness about different options.

She had no exile options. She only temporarily had an outlet (this video class), but the realities crushed those dreams...

Really, all she had at that time was her promise to her aunt, and their support.

What protected her then besides social support?

But yet she said, she had an "easy life" – curious as to how R can possibly call her life “easy” – matter of perspective I suppose.
Sample Code Definitions

Example #1: The code “closeness to relatives” and the definition I developed:

- **Description**: Close relationship to relatives (in most interviews, with aunt and grandma)
- **Includes**: How close [Participant] feels toward relatives; [Participant] mentions closeness to a relative
- **Excludes**: Getting physical/financial support from relatives (coded separately); Relative as positive forces to encourage [Participant] to make the right decision (This is coded as “relatives as positive influence.”)
- **Example**: “I’m close to my grandmother, and I love her so much. I can talk to her about anything.”

Example #2: The code “Absent or Neglectful Biological Father” and the definition I developed:

- **Description**: Biological father was absent in [Participant]’s life
- **Includes**: Biological father may be present, or around here and there, but relationship is strained or largely distant. Or entirely absent relationship where [Participant] grew up without a father.
- **Excludes**: Absence of a father like figure, stepfather, mother’s boyfriend
- **Example**: “my father left us, left my mom when I was two”
## List of Code Groups and Subcategories for All Cycles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Groups</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Cycles</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Coding</td>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Vivo Coding</td>
<td>EARLY: Family of Origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EARLY: Residential Status / History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EARLY: Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EARLY: School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td>ADULT: Self Reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Adulthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Problem Behavior Deterrent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Post HS Schooling &amp; GED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Drug/Drinking Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Fatherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Employment/Unemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Social Commentary/Views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADULT: Problem Behavior Causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Cycle</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused Coding</td>
<td>Negatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negatives-Age &amp; Life Stages Struggles &amp; Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negatives-Lacking / Problematic Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negatives-Problem / Risky Behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negatives-School-related Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negatives-Struggles with Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negatives-Traumatic / Difficult Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negatives-Family Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positives-Avoiding Risk / Deterrence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positives-Exile / Other Options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positives-Future Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positives-Outlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positives-Positive Self Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positives-Social Support / Positive Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Structural-Social Support &amp; Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Cycle</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused Coding</td>
<td>Too Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too Much-Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern Coding</td>
<td>Too Much-School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too Fast-Preocuous Actions &amp; Transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too Fast-Problem Behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straight Road-Goals &amp; Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straight Road-Outlets &amp; Exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straight Road-Positive self feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straight Road-Self-change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straight Road-Social Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second Cycle Coding: Categories and Codes

“Negatives” code groups & corresponding codes

Negatives-Accelerated Adulthood
1. Accelerated Adulthood
2. Teen / Early Pregnancy

Negatives-Adult Life Stages Struggles & Challenges
1. Defining Adulthood as Responsibility, Maturity
2. Desire to change current work / career
3. Difficulties / Stressors at Work
4. Dropout - GED Challenges
5. Fatherhood as a Struggle/Obstacle
6. Financial Hardships / Stresses / Responsibilities
7. Instability with Work
8. Motherhood as a Struggle / Obstacle
9. Owning a Car as a Goal
10. Post HS – General Obstacles to College / Higher Ed
11. Post HS – Money / Work as Obstacle to College/Further Ed
12. Post HS - Struggling to finish 2 or 4 year college
13. Post HS - Struggling to finish post HS program
14. Problems with the Baby Father/Mother
15. Problems with the Baby Father/Mother
16. Struggling to find work/unemployment
17. Undesirable Living Situation

Negatives-Lacking / Problematic Relationships
1. No person to turn / look up to
2. Relational Problems / Abuse
3. Significant Other with Problems

Negatives-Problem / Risky Behaviors
1. Drinking Problems
2. Getting into fights
3. Getting into trouble / running wild
4. Giving into Peer Pressure/Fitting In
5. Illegal / Criminal Justice Involvement
6. Not backing down from a fight
7. Problematic Involvement with Boys
8. Problematic Involvement with Girls
9. Selling Drugs
10. Using / Addicted to Drugs

Negatives-School-related Problems
1. Attending Residential School / Alternative School
2. Bullying / Teasing
3. Cutting / Messing up at School
4. Disliking / Losing Interest in School
5. Dropout Reason
6. Fashion / Materialism / Flaunting
7. Incapable / Disconnected Teachers / School Officials
8. Unproductive School – “teaches nothing”
9. Unsafe School

**Negatives-Struggles with Self**
1. Regrets & challenges of adulthood
2. Self blame / low self ambition
3. Temper & Attitude Issues

**Negatives-Traumatic / Difficult Experiences**
1. Death / Tragedy of Family Member
2. Depression / Mental Health Issues
3. Disability / Physical Health Problems
4. General trauma / difficult experiences

**Negatives-Family Problems**
1. Absent / Strained Relationship with Biological Father
2. Absent / Strained Relationship with Biological Mother
3. Abuse by Family Member
4. Family Members with Problems
5. Father with Problems
6. Mother with Problems
7. Parents with Health Issues
8. Problems / Abuse in Parents' Relationship
9. Fragile Relationship with Parent
10. Lacking Structure, Discipline, Stability

**“Positives code groups & corresponding codes”**

**Positives-Adult Life Stage: Achievements & Successes**
1. Content with Current Work
2. Dropout - Obtained GED / HS Diploma
3. Fatherhood as Influence / Joy
4. Motherhood as Influence / Joy
5. Living in own place / Being independent
6. Post HS – Achieving 2 or 4 Year College
7. Post HS – Achieving Trade / Occupational Program

**Positives-Avoiding Risk / Deterrence**
1. Keeping away or to self
2. Resisting Alcohol / Drugs / Smoking
3. Resisting Bad Peer Pressure/Influence

**Positives-Exile / Other Options**
1. Attending County / Private / Catholic
2. Attending / Taking up Trade / Vocational / Magnet School
3. Moved out of the city
4. Travels / Activities
Positives-Future Orientation
1. Current / Active Job Pursuits & Goals
2. Desires / Plans to leave their area
3. Desiring Traditional Achievements
4. Career goals / plans for future
5. Dropout - Desire to get a HS Diploma / GED
6. Plans / Desires to Further Education

Positives-Outlets
1. Faith, Values, and Beliefs
2. Hobbies & Interests as outlets

Positives-Positive Self Reflection
1. Good and "spoiled" childhood
2. Being a "good" student / kid
3. Good Work Ethic / Habits
4. Personal Success & Achievements
5. Positive Self Reflection
6. Realization Point
7. Self Change
8. Self- Determination / Efficacy / Resolve

Positives-Social Support / Positive Relationships
1. Close relationship with biological father
2. Close relationship with biological mother
3. Close relationship with relatives
4. Close relationship with Siblings
5. Close relationship with Stepparent
6. Close-knit Neighborhood / Telescoping
7. Getting Support from Family
8. Influential / Caring Teachers / School Officials
9. Positive parental rearing / expectations
10. Role Model / Good Influences
11. Seeking Professional Help
12. Significant Other as a Positive Presence

“Structural” code group & corresponding codes

Structural-Neighborhood & Society
1. Changing Neighborhoods
2. Drugs around R
3. Rough & Dangerous Neighborhood
4. Growing up poor
5. Problems with Transportation
6. Racial Tension & Discrimination
Third Cycle Coding: Categories and Codes

“Too Much” code groups & corresponding codes

Too Much-Community
1. Changing neighborhoods
2. Close-knit Neighborhood / Community
3. Drugs around R
4. Rough & Dangerous Neighborhood
5. Seeing Violence / Victimization

Too Much-Family
1. Absent or Neglectful Biological Father
2. Absent or Neglectful Biological Mother
3. Abuse in Family
4. Conflicts / IPV between parents
5. Death in family
6. Drug alcohol and problems in family
7. Fighting with parent
8. Growing up poor
9. Health issues in family
10. Parents with drug and alcohol problems
11. Lacking structure, discipline, challenge

Too Much-School
1. Attending Residential School / Alternative School
2. Bad teachers / school officials
3. Challenges to GED
4. Cutting / Messing up at School
5. Disliking school
6. Experiencing racism
7. School teaches nothing
8. Unsafe school
9. Nobody to turn to

“Stresses in Adulthood” Code group & corresponding codes
1. Challenges to GED
2. Current financial difficulties
3. General obstacles to college
4. Money/work as obstacle to postsec ed
5. Regrets of adulthood
6. Stressors at current job
7. Unstable work / Unemployment
8. Depression / mental health problems
9. Disability and health issues
10. Negative self traits
“Too Fast” code groups & corresponding codes

Too Fast-Precocious Actions & Transitions
1. Early pregnancy/parenting
2. Family responsibilities from early age
3. Fatherhood as an obstacle
4. Growing up too fast
5. Motherhood as an obstacle to schooling
6. Motherhood as an obstacle to work
7. Motherhood struggles & burdens
8. Moving out fast/Independence
9. Problems with the babys mom or dad
10. Working at an early age

Too Fast-Problem Behaviors
1. Bullying / Teasing
2. Criminal involvement
3. Drinking
4. Fashion / Materialism / Flaunting
5. Getting into fights/arguments at school
6. Getting into trouble
7. Giving into Peer Pressure/Fitting In
8. Not backing down from a fight
9. Risky involvement with girls
10. Running wild
11. Selling Drugs
12. Using drugs

“Straight Road” code groups & corresponding codes

Straight Road-Goals & Planning
1. Attending college
2. Desire to get HS diploma or GED
3. Desire to improve job
4. Desiring American dream
5. Planful job pursuits/goals
6. Plans to continue postsecondary school
7. Plans to leave the city
8. Staying alive

Straight Road-Outlets & Exile
1. Attending Private / Catholic / County
2. Attending Trade / Magnet School
3. Hobbies & Interests as outlets
4. Keeping away or to self
5. Moved out of the city
6. Participating in special program
7. Resisting drugs alcohol
8. Resisting peer pressure
9. Travels and activities
Straight Road-Positive self feedback
1. Being a "good" student / kid
2. Content with current job
3. Defining adulthood
4. Determined to finish school
5. Good work ethic
6. Positive Self Reflection
7. Self determination & resolve
8. Success & Achievements
9. Values and beliefs

Straight Road-Self-change
1. Fatherhood as influence
2. Motherhood as influence
3. Obtained GED
4. Post HS: Trade / Occupational Program
5. Realization point
6. Self Change

Straight Road-Social Support
1. Close relationship with biological father
2. Close relationship with biological mother
3. Close relationship with relatives
4. Close relationship with Siblings
5. Close relationship with Stepparent
6. Getting Support from Family
7. Good and "spoiled" childhood
8. Influential / Caring Teachers / School Officials
9. Positive parental rearing / expectations
10. Role models / good influences
11. Significant other as positive influence
# APPENDIX B

List of Pathways Interviewees from All Chapters

### List of Black Men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Education Attained at Pathways</th>
<th>Chapters Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts, Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road, Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road, Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road, Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road, Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Education Attained at Pathways</td>
<td>Chapters Mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lois</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shani</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasha</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of White Men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Education Attained at Pathways</th>
<th>Chapters Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of White Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Education Attained at Pathways</th>
<th>Chapters Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 6 Too Fast, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road, Chapter 4 Methodology, Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road, Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lelia</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts, Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Dropout</td>
<td>Chapter 5 Too Much, Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzy</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>Chapter 6 Too Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Chapter 7 Life on the Straight Road</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIOGRAPHY

Julie K. Lee was born in 1983 in Seoul, Korea.

Julie received her B.A. in Sociology and Criminal Justice with highest honors in 2005 from Rutgers College in New Brunswick, NJ. At Rutgers, she won the best undergraduate thesis award in Sociology for her research on the socialization and self-construal of immigrant students. Julie also co-investigated a qualitative study on head injuries among chronically battered women during her time at Rutgers.

Julie received her M.A. and Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in Sociology. At Johns Hopkins, she participated in a variety of research projects, including co-authoring research on the link between immigration and obesity. Through each of these projects, Julie has developed or contributed to proposals and grants, conceptual models, literature reviews, quantitative and qualitative analyses, and presentations. Her teaching experiences include courses in Medical Sociology, Introductory Sociology, and Criminal Justice. A common theme in much of her work and experience is related to issues of social inequality and growing up in urban poverty.