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“Brenda’s Got a Baby”:

Single motherhood in the streets of Wilmington, Delaware

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Abstract

This secondary analysis examines a group of low-income, street-life oriented, single Black mothers ranging between the ages of 18 and 35 in the Eastside and Southbridge sections of Wilmington, Delaware. This study is guided by the following question: *To what extent are family composition, criminal record or street activity, and educational level predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood?* This multi-method secondary analysis drew on the following forms of data: (a) 310 surveys; (b) 6 individual interviews; (c) 3 dual interviews; (d) 2 group interviews; and (e) extensive field observations. Qualitative data suggest that most women socially reproduced childhood attitudes and conditions, including “fatherless” homes and single motherhood. According to most women, use and sales of narcotics as well as incarceration were the primary factors for why their children’s father did not reside in the home and participate in their children’s lives. Survey results suggests that number of children in the home, arrest and incarceration rates, educational status, and employment status are predictive of marital status in the women. Ultimately, this study proposes methods of intervention for these street-life oriented Black women.

“Brenda’s Got a Baby¹”: Single motherhood in the streets

*“I hear Brenda’s got a baby.
But, Brenda’s barely got a brain.
A damn shame,
The girl can hardly spell her name.
(That’s not our problem, that’s up to Brenda’s family).
Well let me show you how it affects the whole community.”*
- Tupac Shakur “Brenda’s Got a Baby” (1990) *2Pacalypse Now*

Although single motherhood in the Black community is amongst the highest in the nation, the authentic voices of these women and their children are often silenced in the academic realm. Through examining the lives of low-income, street-identified Black women, this study strings together family composition, criminal record or street activity, and educational levels as predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood within the Black community. These three variables oftentimes work in tandem to create high levels of single, female headed homes, as ruptured homes often lead to high drop-out rates and criminal records amongst low-income, street-identified Black women. This analysis also examines street-identified women’s experiences with “fatherless” homes both in childhood and adulthood, and the impact of such family dynamics on the lives of the women and their children. Black women, particularly those who are street-identified, are vulnerable to adverse living situations, poor socioeconomic conditions, and crime. Dysfunctional family dynamics, urban crime, and low educational attainment are all results of profound structural inequality that plague low-income Black communities. Moreover, these same Black women are challenged with raising children and balancing relationships in oftentimes egregious and oppressive environments. This study contextualizes the experiences of low-income, street-life oriented Black women from

¹Popular song written by the late hip-hop rapper Tupac Shakur in 1991 on his debut album *2Pacalypse Now* and was the first single from the album. This song discusses teen pregnancy in urban communities and describes a fictional twelve-year old girl named Brenda who lives in the ghetto and has a baby.

Wilmington, Delaware, and analyzes the lived experiences of these women in ways that can be useful and progressive. This study is guided by the following question: *To what extent are family composition, criminal record or street activity, and educational level predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood?*

Demographic Profile

According to the 2008 US Census Bureau, 44% of African American women have never been married (as compared to the 22.5% of Caucasian women), and 70% of professional Black women are also unmarried (US Census Bureau, 2009; Alexander, 2010). Fifty-five percent of Black families were mother-headed in 2002, and of that 55%, 41% of these families are living in poverty (McCreary & Dancy, 2004). African Americans are said to have the highest rate of single motherhood, more Black children are reared in impoverished single mother families than any other race (Rendall, 1999), and there are nearly 3 million more Black adult women than men in Black communities across the United States (US Census Bureau, 2002; Alexander, 2010). Single parents account for about 65% of all Black family groups, or stated differently—about 65% of Black births are to single parents (US Census Bureau, 2000). This percentage is more than twice the rate of their White counterparts.

Locally, single motherhood in Delaware reflects the startling numbers found on the national level. Overall, in the state of Delaware, 40.8% of women between the ages of 15-50 have nonmarital births (Shattuck & Kreider, 2011). According to the Delaware Health Statistics Center, 58% of Black births in New Castle County are born to teenage single Black mothers (Delaware Health Statistics, 2009). In addition, 71.6% of Black babies born in New Castle County are born to single Black mothers (Delaware Health Statistics Center, 2007). New Castle County is the northernmost county in the state of Delaware, and includes the city of Wilmington.

Finally, 85.7% of Black births in Wilmington, Delaware are reportedly to single mothers (Delaware Health Statistics, 2009).

Although admittedly, there are grave issues pertaining to Black single motherhood, it is imperative to analyze these data in the full context of the phenomena, and the numbers that encompass these so-called “single mothers.” For example, according to the 2011 American Community Survey Reports, White women between the ages of 15-50 accounted for over double of nonmarital births in comparison to Black women (ratio of 820,975 to 403,820), although the percentage of Black women having nonmarital births is double that of White women (Shattuck & Kreider, 2011). Nonetheless, in terms of absolute numbers, more White women are having children out of wedlock than Black women. Additionally, as aforementioned, the African American family and household composition is historically diverse, and thus a mere percentage cannot accurately reflect the lived experiences of these women or the social outcomes of their children. Thus, the same Westernized framework used to fit middle-class European Americans cannot also be used to categorize low-income African Americans.

Critically, much of the literature grounded in these data does not move from sites of resiliency theory (Payne, 2008), or from the premise that these low-income, street-life oriented Black women and children can overcome their adversity and cope with environmental, economic, and social stressors. In addition, “sites of resiliency” theory (Payne, 2008) suggests that the attitudes and behaviors of Black women living in urban environments reflect how they “organize meaning around feeling well, satisfied, or accomplished and how [the women] choose to survive in relation to adverse structural conditions” (Payne, 2011:4). Literature that negates low income Black women’s opportunity for success through coping is detrimental to subsequent analysis of these women and their lived experiences. At what point does racial bias encasing

street-life oriented Black mothers shift to an accurate, fresh perspective on the functionality of these urban communities?

Theoretical Framing

This study conceptualizes street life as a “site of resilience” in street-life oriented Black women and mothers (Payne, 2008 & 2011). While this particular sites-of-resilience theoretical analysis argues that street ideology is passed on by older Black males, this argument contends that such analysis can be extended to Black women, particularly those in low-income and street environments. It must be noted that Black low-income girls and women “come of age in the same distressed neighborhoods as those of [their] male counterparts” (Jones, 2010:20), and thus have similar lived experiences. As such, this theoretical analysis argues that the streets offer particular psychological and physical spaces that operate concurrently to produce sites of strength on both the individual and group/community levels. In turn, these sites ultimately create resilience for street-life oriented Black women. Street life is a phenomenological term viewed as an ideology centered on personal and economic survival (Payne, 2008 & 2001). Black men and women also understand street life as a system of behaviors maintained through bonding and illegal activities. For Black women in particular, bonding activities include interpersonal acts such as attending parties or bars, participating in social clubs such as motorcycle and car clubs, “hanging on the block” or street corner, attending group gatherings with friends, or organizing and sponsoring local events in the community.

Illegal activities for Black women are generally employed to confront the effects of economic poverty, and include interpersonal violence, prostitution, preparing drugs for sale, selling or holding drugs or drug money for others, gambling, and bookkeeping (Jones, 2010). It is important to understand that this theory assumes that low-income Black women acquire a

street-life orientation primarily as a means for economic survival, due to a lack of equal opportunity in education and employment sectors (Payne & Brown, 2010).

This particular sites-of-resilience model theorizes that street life is passed on through intergenerational transmission, in which attitudes and behaviors are transmitted by the older Black male generation through the “code of the streets” (Anderson, 1999). This study argues that inner-city Black women are also affected by this code, as well as intergenerational patterns of single motherhood and street-life orientation. Butterfield (1995) writes that 25% to 40% of temperament can be passed on to subsequent generations, especially when the living environment and conditions remain the same. In this light, low-income Black mothers face a particular challenge of raising their children beneath the same or similar conditions as their own mothers and grandmothers. However, rather than viewing these women as “culturally pathological,” (Rowley, 2002; Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton & Garret-Peters, 2008; Sharp & Ispa, 2009) or somehow to blame for their socioeconomic conditions, this analysis calls for more useful methods in the study of low-income Black women and mothers. Furthermore, this study argues that these women are not “pathological,” but they are instead trapped in a cycle wherein structural inequality, violence, and crime play a significant role in their conditions and lived experiences. Thus, this role creates scenarios that are conducive to street-lifestyles and are predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood in low-income Black communities.

Finally, this study is also grounded in standpoint epistemology as conceptualized by Black feminists (Collins, 2000), and argues that, “a Black woman’s standpoint should reflect the convergence of [being Black and female]” (Collins, 2000: 269), and that this connection gives Black women a certain group perspective. In addition, this epistemology demands that Black women’s experience should be at the center of the analysis (Richie, 2002) rather than as an

afterthought. Crenshaw (1991) built on the standpoint theory, suggesting that the intersectionality of race, gender, and class create marginalized conditions for women of color and shape the social world and identities of these women.

Literature Review

Family composition. Much of the literature found on single motherhood in the Black community frames such motherhood as a contemporary phenomenon, one plagued by urban poverty, welfare-dependent mothers, and absentee fathers (Moynihan, 1965; Lewis, 1966; Haney et al., 1974; Anderson, 1999; Nadasen, 2007; Cherlin et al., 2008; Burton & Tucker, 2009). However, single motherhood in street-life oriented populations is no new circumstance, as racism, and structural and economic inequalities are instrumental in creating high numbers of teenage and unwed Black mothers. Oftentimes, when applied to the Black community, the terms “fatherless” homes and single motherhood connote a Black woman raising her children without a significant male partner or biological father (Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998; Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001; Alexander, 2010). The social stigma of the “Black single mother” has become a crippling symbol of the state of African American affairs, specifically for women living in urban or street-life oriented environments. With this stigma comes a litany of stereotypes that suggest a dependent, inept, and uneducated Black woman who falls short in comparison to her White counterpart (Moynihan, 1965). The literature is saturated with misinformed discourse on Black “Welfare Queens” who greedily live in public housing and abuse governmental assistance. This idea of “economic dependency” (Iversen & Farber, 1996) wherein poor Black women recreate cycles of poverty through personal fault, and would rather rely on welfare funds than to “get a good job” has been utilized in the political and social assault of urban Black women for decades (Jaffe & Polgar, 1968). Such literature reveals the

“criminalization of poverty” (Chunn & Gavigan, 2004; Richie, 2012) that points the finger at low-income Black women for their poor socioeconomic conditions, lack of a father figure for their children, and criminal experiences.

Not only is this incrimination of Black women ill-informed, but the Black family composition as a whole is misunderstood and skewed. Monolithic and Eurocentric conceptualizations about the Black family are inaccurate, as the African family structure has always been an extended-family network of support (Collins, 1987). Often these women depend on extended family members and “fictive kin” (Collins, 1987:7) or non-kin relations for help in child rearing. The Black community has a long tradition of such African-centered ideology. Therefore, Black women may be raising her children with a grandmother, aunt, or close family friend present in the home. In addition, “othermothers” (Collins, 1987:5), or women who support biological mothers in child rearing responsibilities, are also central to the African American and African diasporic family institution. Indeed, “it takes a village to raise a child,” and in this vein, this research calls for a fundamental shift in the cultural assumptions and social biases surrounding Black women and their children.

Several scholars are challenging the theory of Black “fatherless” homes and the biases of Black single motherhood. Although many Black men are pulled out of the home due to issues with incarceration, broken relationships with their children’s mother, lack of economic resources, challenges with substance abuse, or limited access to stable housing (Edin & Nelson, 2013), Black single motherhood often focuses on the absence of the biological father from the household, rather than the bond between children and father outside of the home (Livingston & Parker, 2011). In fact, some scholars argue that more Black fathers are active in their children’s lives than ever before. And among those fathers living outside of the home, Black fathers are far

more likely to talk with their children several times a week about their day in comparison to White or Hispanic fathers (Livingston & Parker, 2011), and they value “imparting love, maintaining a clear channel of communication, and spending quality time” (Edin & Nelson, 2013:2) with their children.

Furthermore, traditional arguments often shuts out the possibility of male cohabitation, co-residence or “kinship networks” (Collins, 1990) of other male family members (grandfather, uncles, older brothers, or cousins) or even male family friends. It is possible, and often the case, that these male figures help raise Black women’s children inside the home. This varied family structure and composition suggests that a complex social network of support surrounds these Black mothers, and that they are not always raising their children alone.

Criminal record or street activity. Family composition has been known to inform trajectories such as criminal record and street activity in Black women, particularly because many of these women are reared in interrupted family dynamics wherein street life becomes a method of coping. The literature is saturated with negative depictions of Black women, and they are often viewed in terms of “cultural pathology,” (Moynihan, 1965; Anderson, 1999; Rowley, 2002; Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008; Sharp & Ispa, 2009) which suggests that Black women are ‘diseased’ due to their race and class levels and ‘destined’ to repeated cycles of single and teenaged motherhood and other examples of so-called ‘deviant’ behavior. Nonetheless, this study rejects such notions, and contextualizes the lived experiences of these women in ways that can be more useful for the women and those studying them.

It is important to understand that Sites of Resilience theory assumes that low-income Black women acquire a street-life orientation primarily as a means for economic survival, due to a lack of equal opportunity in education and employment sectors (Payne & Brown, 2010; Payne,

2011). Low-educational attainment and street activity often result as a function of fatherless homes, as many of these women grow up without the consistent guidance of their father, and are thus more likely to drop-out of school or engage in crime. The importance of fatherhood in the home and/or positive relationship with fathers outside of the home cannot be understated. Ironically, many of these women not only grew up in homes without fathers, but socially reproduce these same fatherless homes in their adulthood. This concept of intergenerational transmission of motherhood styles and attitudes towards parenthood suggests that these women have been socialized to accept and even expect single parenthood—because of the way in which they have been raised in their childhood.

Low-income Black girls and women are susceptible to a myriad of social issues, including crime or street-life. This susceptibility is exacerbated without fathers in the home. A small but critical mass of Black women participate in illegal criminal and street activity, largely to confront the effects of economic poverty (Payne, 2011; Jones, 2010).

Preparing drugs for sale, selling or holding drugs or drug money. Much of the literature surrounding Black women and drugs revolves around women's use and abuse of illegal drugs, rather than their participation in the preparing, selling, and holding of illegal drugs and narcotics (Denton & O'Malley, 1999). Literature abounds about Black women and prenatal substance abuse and transmission of HIV infections amongst Black women due to substance abuse. Additionally, many prison statistics claim that a disproportionate amount of women inmates are "low-income, with low levels of educational attainment and high rates of substance abuse and mental illness" (Mauer, Potler, & Wolf, 1999:1). Additionally, many of these women prisoners were heading a single parent household prior to incarceration (Mauer, Potler, & Wolf, 1999).

Black and Latino women make up a disproportionate amount of incarcerated women for drug offenses, as well.

However, although the government's crackdown on "the War on Drugs" was implemented in effort to eliminate Black male violence and illegal activity, Black street-identified women play minor yet important roles in the illegal drug trade and often receive harsher punishment for these roles (Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2006). Often called "millworkers" (Le Blanc, 2003), Black women involved in the trade are employed as drug and stash holders, or preparers of drugs for sale for the men. Much like the scenes in the 2007 film *American Gangster* or the 2013 TV series *Orange is the New Black*; these women are often girlfriends, ex-girlfriends, or sisters of the men and are responsible for producing the narcotics for sale. The Sentencing Project discusses the "girlfriend problem" (Mauer, 2013) or the issue women involved with drug dealers face when threatened with large sentences. Although some of these women cooperate with police to receive lesser sentencing, many of them still aren't involved enough to trade significant amounts of information.

Drug activity connects to fatherless homes because low-income and street-identified Black women are often coming from homes where drug activity is already rife—either from parental involvement or members within the home. Thus, many fathers are removed from the homes due to incarceration or substance abuse issues. Some women reproduce these environments of drug activity in and around the home, as they are more likely to engage in such illegal activity when men are not in the home.

The literature surrounding discussion about Black women in the streets and urban communities suggests that family composition, criminal record/street activity, and educational level have an influence on these women as both females and mothers. Although much of the

literature is limited in scope about street-life oriented women and their specific experiences with motherhood, this study seeks to examine the nuances of Black single motherhood from the women's perspectives themselves. Moreover, this study will fill in some of the holes as it relates to this question: *To what extent are family composition, criminal record or street activity, and educational level predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood?*

Methods

This paper is a secondary analysis on the data gathered from the Wilmington Street Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project (Payne, 2013). PAR includes members of the population under study on the research team and gives members the opportunity to participate in all phases of the research project (Payne, 2008). Also, PAR projects require a social justice-based analysis to be organized in response to the data collected by the study. The Wilmington Street PAR Project was a pilot study developed to examine physical violence in Wilmington, Delaware, by organizing fifteen individuals formerly involved with the streets and/or the criminal justice system, from two low-income neighborhoods in Wilmington. Wilmington is organized by approximately 6 neighborhoods, including Northside, Edgemoor, Northeast/Eastside, Westside, Riverside, and Southbridge. This study specifically explored the Eastside and Southbridge sections of Wilmington, Delaware, collecting data from street-identified Black men and women between the ages of 18-35. Mixed methods were employed to collect data in the form of (a) 520 surveys; (b) 23 individual interviews; (c) 3 dual interviews; (d) 3 group interviews; and (e) extensive ethnographic field observations. Also, a fourth group interview, not initially proposed or planned, was conducted with a group of mostly older men (ages 41-53) who were formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system. All data

were collected in the actual streets of Wilmington, Delaware (e.g. street corners, local parks, barbershops, local record/DVD stores, etc.).

This secondary analysis solely examines street-identified Black women between the ages of 18 to 35 from the larger study. The design for this analysis drew from 310 female surveys (N=310), 6 female individual interviews (N=6), 3 dual interviews (N=6), 2 female group interviews (N=5), and extensive field observations.

Survey Subsample

A total of 310 female participants completed a survey for this analysis, or 59.6% of the entire survey sample (N=310). All female participants were between the ages of 18-35 years. Ninety-eight of the females were between the ages of 18-21 years (or 31.6%), 122 females were between the ages of 22-29 years (or 39.4%), and 90 females were between the ages of 30-35 years (or 29%). Age categories were based off how age groups are determined by the US Census. Also, the survey sample for men and women were organized as a function of a quota sample based on census data for the Eastside and Southbridge sections of Wilmington, Delaware. Sixty-three percent of the women reported currently living in Eastside and nearly 25% of the women reported living in Southbridge. Approximately, 22% of the women reported living outside of these two neighborhoods but report frequenting these two neighborhoods.

Individual Interview Subsample

Individual interviews were used to explore intimate or extremely personal subject matter. A total of 6 female participants completed an individual interview for this analysis, or 35% of the interview sample (N=17). Six individual interviews were conducted with street-life-oriented Black women living in the Southbridge, Eastside, and Riverside sections of Wilmington,

Delaware. The average age for this subsample was 26.3 years while ages ranged from 18 to 35 years.

Dual Interview Subsample

Dual interviews were interviews with two participants. A total of 6 female participants completed dual interviews for this analysis, or 35% of the interview sample (N=17). These women were scheduled for individual interviews but decided they would be more comfortable conducting their interview with a friend. Three dual interviews were conducted with street-life oriented Black women living in the Southbridge and Eastside sections of Wilmington, Delaware. The average age for this subsample was 31.2 years while ages ranged from 27 to 35 years.

Group Interview Subsample

Group interviews were the least intimate and offer a group analysis. A total of two group interviews were conducted with both street-life-oriented men and women living in the Southbridge section of Wilmington, Delaware. One group interview had three female participants between the ages of 27-29 years, and one group interview had two female and one male participant, for a total of 5 female participants. The females in the second group interview ranged between the ages of 28-30 years, and the male in the second group interview was 29 years. The average age for this subsample was 28.6 years.

Instrumentation

Survey. PAR members constructed the survey and interview protocol for the study. The survey packet includes 19 pages, with a cover page with directions for completing the survey. The survey consisted for a total of 251 items. The major domains of the survey were attitudes toward and experiences with: (1) psychological well-being; (2) social cohesion; (3) physical violence; (4) crime; (5) employment; (6) prison reentry; (7) education; (8) interactions with law

enforcement; and a (9) demographic inventory. This descriptive analysis was only used to examine survey data for this paper.

Interview. Semi-constructed interviews were conducted predominantly in the Hope Zone Center in Southbridge, Wilmington. Each participant completed an interview protocol which included: (1) demographic information; (2) attitudes towards community violence; (3) attitudes towards education; (4) attitudes towards employment; (5) attitudes towards their community; (6) attitudes towards civic and political leadership; (7) attitudes towards law enforcement; and a (8) debriefing section completed after interviews.

Procedure

Organizing the Wilmington Street PAR Team

The Wilmington Street Participatory Action Research (PAR) team is made up of 15 Wilmington residents formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system who were between the ages of 20 to 48. Twelve of the Street PAR members are male and three are female. The fifteen member Street PAR team was joined by a robust institutional partnership that included: (a) three academic project partners (University of Delaware, Delaware State University, and Wilmington University), and (b) four nonprofit project partners (Wilmington HOPE Commission, Christina Cultural Arts Center, Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League, and United Way of Delaware). The street-life oriented Black men and women were selected through a citywide search and were rigorously trained in all phases of research for a two month period. PAR team members met 3-4 times per week for 3-5 hours per session, and completed 18 research method workshops in total. Research methods training centered on research theory, method and analysis, and social activism. Upon successful completion of the training, responsibilities for the research team included (a) literature reviews, (b) data collection, (c)

qualitative and quantitative analysis, (d) writing contributions, and (e) professional presentations. All street PAR researchers were monetarily compensated for all time contributed.

The research team then mapped out street communities and sites of interest into street locales classified as (a) “cool” sites—low street activity; (b) “warm” sites—moderate street activity; and (c) “hot” sites—high street activity. In each location, the research team identified “street allies,” gatekeepers, or leaders to these street communities in order to gain permission to collect data in the street community. The team then collected surveys from various sites including street corners, barbershops, parks, and record stores and conducted most interviews in the Hope Zone located in the Southbridge section of Wilmington, Delaware. Surveys took about 30-45 minutes to complete whereas interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours. Participants received US\$5 for completing a survey and US\$10 for completing an interview. In addition, participants received a consent form as well as a resource package with information about employment, educational opportunities, counseling and social programs.

Qualitative Data Coding Process

Content analysis was used to generate codes for this study. The coding session was centered on the frameworks of Sites of Resilience (Payne, 2011) and Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and subsequently, transcripts of qualitative interviews were coded in relation to these theories.

Two domains were developed from the data coding: (a) Childhood Home Experiences and (b) Present Home Experiences, organized into Core Codes of (a) Non-residential biological fathers and (b) Non-residential biological fathers of children; Sub Codes of (a) Substance Abuse and use and sale of drugs, (b) Incarceration; and Sub Themes of (a) Entrenched anger and (b)

Attitudes towards the personal safety of their children (see Table I for Qualitative Coding Scheme).

Interrater Reliability

Three individuals, one tenured Professor and Chair of Black American Studies; one graduate student well versed in PAR, interrater reliability, and the experiences of Black women in the streets; and one undergraduate student with formal experience with PAR, interrater reliability, and the experiences of Black women, were selected to be raters for this study. Also, both student raters have taken a graduate course that specifically focused on Black urban communities and street ethnography. Raters convened in a conference room and were each given nine transcripts ranging between four to five pages. Raters were instructed to highlight all passages perceived to be congruent with codes presented and defined for the raters. Raters' transcripts were averaged out against a master copy. Reliability codes were generated for the following core codes: (a) *Childhood Home Experiences with Non-Residential Biological Fathers of Women* (0.93) and (b) *Present Home Experiences with Non-Residential Biological Fathers of Children* (0.72). A subset of three codes and corresponding reliability alpha coefficients were generated for the core code, *Childhood Home Experiences with Non-Residential Biological Fathers of Women*: (a) Substance Abuse (both use and sale (0.75); (b) Incarceration (1.0); and (c) Anger (0.93). A subset of four codes and corresponding reliability alpha coefficients were generated for the core code, *Present Home Experiences with Non-Residential Biological Fathers of Children*: (a) Substance Abuse (both use and sale) (0.72); (b) Incarceration (0.66); (c) Anger (0.83); and (d) Personal safety of child (0.88; see Table 1).

Table I. Qualitative Coding Scheme: Data Analysis Process

1 st Phase of Qualitative Coding	2 nd Phase of Qualitative Coding	Interrater	3 rd Phase of Qualitative Coding	Interrater
Broad Domain	Core Code	Coding Alpha	Subcodes	Coding Alpha
(1) Family	Childhood Home Experiences (Non-residential Biological Fathers of Women)	0.93	Substance Abuse - Sales and Use Incarceration Anger	.75 1.0 .93
(2) Family	Present Home Experiences (Non-residential Biological Fathers of Children)	0.72	Substance Abuse - Sales and Use Incarceration Anger Personal safety of child	.72 .66 .83 .88

Results

To what extent are family composition, criminal record or street activity, and educational level predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood?

Survey (N=310) and interview (N=17) data reveal varied perspectives on “fatherless” homes in street communities. Street-life oriented Black women hold both positive and negative attitudes towards both their biological fathers and the biological fathers of their children. In addition, these women reveal similar childhood home experiences as well as similar experiences with raising their own children in female-headed homes. Content analysis and descriptive survey analysis were conducted to examine the women’s childhood and present home experiences. Results suggest family composition, criminal record or street activity and educational level were predictive of intergenerational transmission of attitudes of single motherhood.

Childhood Home Experiences

According to survey data most women were raised in the Southbridge and Eastside sections of Wilmington, Delaware (N=248). In fact, almost 40% of the women lived in Eastside during their childhood, while over 22% of the women report living in Southbridge as a child. However, according to interview data, very few of the women report living in Eastside or Southbridge as a child, but instead lived largely in urban communities in the Northside or

Riverside sections of Wilmington, or the Philadelphia and Chester sections of Pennsylvania².

Overall, women in both survey and interview data report that they grew up around violence and criminal activity in their neighborhood as children. Almost 75% of the women surveyed claim that street activity was widespread where they grew up (N=310).

Interview responses indicate that 75% of the women in the qualitative sample grew up without a biological father in the home (N=12). The women hold both positive and negative attitudes towards their fathers and the relationship between their biological parents in the home.

Brandy³ (29) lost her mother to complications from HIV, and dropped out in the 9th grade due to her embarrassment of her mother's condition. Her father was in prison for the majority of her life, and although he kept in contact with her as a child, Brandy now refuses to keep in contact or financially support him because of the entrenched anger, bitterness or resentment she still holds. Brandy says her father was unable to contribute primarily because he was incarcerated for most of her life. Nonetheless, she loves her father, although she never received child support from him, compounded by the fact her mother was a single-parent on welfare.

Dual interview participant

Brandy (29): My dad went to jail when I was five years old, got 25 years [in prison]. [He] came home when I was 25. I'm 29 now. He got out [of prison] when I was 25, he went back when I was 27 and got life [in prison]...So basically I know his first and last name.

Gloria (35) also grew up without a father consistently in the home and was raised largely by her mother. Neither of her parents got along as a child, and she maintained a volatile relationship with both of her parents.

Dual interview participant

² Chester, Pennsylvania is approximately 15 miles from Wilmington, Delaware

³ These names are not pseudonyms. All participants signed a consent form that allows their real names to be used. Participants are fine with releasing their names for the purposes of this study.

Gloria (35): I loved my father and I can honestly say now that I love my father more because he was an absent parent and my mother was discipline...but as I'm growing up, I'm like "My dad wasn't there for me," and I hated him for it for a very long time...I had to come to grip with that...

Several women in the interviews express an entrenched level of anger towards their non-residential biological fathers. For instance, over half of the women interviewed hold negative attitudes about their biological father (N=11). These negative attitudes vary in severity, but many of the women reflect on growing up in female-headed homes with little or no financial support from their biological fathers. This anger can be contextualized by hurtful childhood experiences due to a lack of a father figure, and the yearning for acceptance from both the absent parent and the biological mother.

Interestingly, several of women interviewed grew up without a biological mother consistently in the home (N=12). In some cases, the women were raised solely by their biological father and in other cases a grandparent raised them as children.

Dual interview participant

Michelle (31): My mom left when I was two...She didn't want nothing to do with me and my brother. So my dad...took on what he had to do. So from then on it's been me, my dad and my brother. My dad raised me from age two and that's it...

Michelle's (31) story sheds light on the complexities that often emerge in low-income, distressed households. She was raised with her biological father as a child, but her biological mother was largely absent due to drug addiction. Thus, she holds a negative attitude towards her mother for her absence but holds a positive attitude towards her father for raising her and her brother. **Michelle's (31)** interview suggests some children in similar neighborhoods are in fact raised by Black single-parent fathers.

It must also be noted, that while the majority of women in the qualitative sample report their father was not in the home, several of the women maintained positive relationships with

their fathers as children. The women provide examples of being able to communicate with and receive advice from their fathers, spend time outside of the home with their fathers, and feel a level of connectedness with their fathers even while outside the mother's home. The women overall recognize the significance of their fathers in childhood, and many of the women maintain positive relationships with their fathers in adulthood. These experiences provide an interesting commentary on the presence of fathers in the home and the relationship therein between the father and child. Black men outside of the home can provide both emotional and financial support, as well as be positive role models for their children.

Group interview participant

Tisha (27): Me and my father's relationship is fair, you know? He was always around as far as somebody to talk to. You feel me? Me and my dad got...more like a brother and sister bond. We can laugh, we can talk about whatever...he always made it clear to me... "I'm the only man that's going to love you unconditionally, so you can come to me with whatever."

Dual interview participant

Kenyette (34): My father was the leader or head person inside the household.

Individual interview participant

Erica (22): "...my dad put his kids before anything."

Why weren't their fathers in the home?

Substance Abuse. Several of the women interviewed report not having a biological father or parent living in the home as a child due to substance abuse, which includes both use and sale of narcotics and excessive use of alcohol.

Dual interview participant

Yasser: What were some of the reasons why [your mother] didn't want to be a part of your life?

Michelle (31): She chose drugs over us. My dad gave her an ultimatum, and she chose drugs.

Individual interview participant

Yasser: What prevented you from being with [your parents]?

Dionne (29): Um, my mom was on drugs and my dad was an alcoholic.

Individual interview participant

Lanise (34): My father was a Vietnam vet...He ended up being on drugs [and became] an alcoholic.

The women in the interviews reflect on the drug and alcohol use in their childhood homes, and reveal how “fatherless” homes emerge as a function of substance abuse. The women reflect on the volatile relationship between their parents as a result of such substance abuse, and the way drug and alcohol use often pushed fathers and mothers out of the home. For example, a father’s alcohol use might cause family members to remove him from the physical home. Interestingly, many of the women interviewed report that both substance abuse and incarceration worked in tandem to remove their fathers from the home. For example, a father might use and sell drugs and become incarcerated due to his involvement with illicit substances (see example below).

Incarceration. “Fatherless” homes also emerge as a function of incarceration. Some women report not having a biological father in the home due to incarceration. Biological fathers were incarcerated for extended periods of time due to crimes such as armed robbery or use/sale of narcotics. Women interviewed reflect on unstable relationships with fathers due to recidivism and repeat encounters with law enforcement.

Individual Interview Participant

Dionne (29): [My relationship with my father] has always been the same...Just in and out... [I see] him sometimes. He stays in and out of jail. He’s still in jail. So...he would get out of jail, [and] my Grandmom would give him a chance, [and] he would come back [home]...[but] he kept coming home drunk, and Grandmom [would] say, “The next time you come home drunk, you’re not coming back...” And then he’ll be gone, and he’ll come around every once in a while. And that’s how it’s always been.

In fact, over 76% of the women surveyed agree that parents returning home from prison find it challenging to emotionally reconnect with their children (N=306). Over 82% of the women surveyed agree that it is difficult for fathers, returning home from prison, to provide for

their children (N=308). These women recognize the economic and emotional strain that incarceration has on family composition and share similar attitudes on their relationships with their incarcerated parent. Overall, the incarceration of their fathers in their childhood has influenced their perceptions of fatherhood and men in their present adulthood.

Present Home Experiences

The majority of women in both survey and interview data report that they currently live in the Southbridge and Eastside sections of Wilmington, Delaware. In fact, over 88% of women surveyed currently live in either Southbridge or Eastside (N=281), and almost all of the women in the interviewed currently live in either Southbridge or Eastside. A large majority of the women reside in low-income housing. According to survey data, at least 65% of the women report residing in low-income housing, and 15% note living in mid-income apartment complexes. Almost all of the women interviewed report living in the Wilmington Housing Authority and/or low-income housing.

Nexus of Education and Economic Opportunity. The educational and employment/economic status of street-life oriented Black women are predictive of attitudes towards motherhood and particularly female-headed homes. High drop-out rates due to pregnancy or future pregnancy create a high number of teenage mothers and young women raising children without a mature father figure. Although most women share positive attitudes about their own children's education, women in both the survey and interview data have struggled with school in their own lives. Interestingly, almost three-quarters of the women surveyed said that they cared a lot about their grades in high school. However, survey responses also reveal that only half of the women obtained at least a high school diploma and only 5.5% have obtained some college or college BA (N=310). About a quarter of the women interviewed

received a high school diploma, and a third obtained a GED. Educational level and employment opportunities impact and stifle women's ability to maintain financial stability as single mothers. Nearly two-thirds of the women in the survey data (N=303) and more than half of the women interviewed report being unemployed but looking for work. Thus, many of the women in the interview and survey samples struggle to provide for their children without a father in home and break the cycle of single motherhood in their own children's lives. Many of the women grew up with teenage single mothers and later became teenage and/or single mothers of their own, demonstrating intergenerational transmission of notions of single motherhood characteristic among street-life oriented populations.

Street or Criminal Activity. Most women in both qualitative and quantitative data were presently or formerly street-identified. Most women interviewed report having criminal charges and 34% of the women surveyed (N=209) report being incarcerated. According to survey results, of those incarcerated, about 55% report selling drugs/narcotics as their primary hustle before being incarcerated. Other street activities included prostitution, theft, and robbery.

Dual interview participant

Yasser: What drew you to the streets?

Camille (24): ...I was always enticed by the streets, you know, just because...of who I am, of who I grew up around, where I came from.

Group interview participant

Chantel (30): [I've sold] the drugs, I done the charges, I done did the jail time and did all that. So of course, I'm gonna tell [my son] that's not the right thing to do.

These Black women became street-identified due to issues surrounding personal and economic survival. Many of them grew up around criminal activity in their homes and communities and participated in such activity in their youth and adult lives. Some of the women tried drugs to cope with being single mothers during distressed economic periods and some

women sold drugs to help feed their children. Although, criminal activity is traditionally contextualized as “social deviance,” this paper argues that welfare, crime, and/or a street identity are in fact, adaptive. These Black women regard the streets as a “means to an end.”

Interpersonal violence. A number of Black women in the survey and interview data experienced physical violence, as well. Over 15% of the women surveyed have been attacked or stabbed with a knife at least once (N=308). Almost 12% of the women surveyed have been chased by gangs or individuals at some point (N=307). According to the survey data, 35% of the women have been threatened with serious physical harm by someone (N=309), and over 40% of the women surveyed said that they have been slapped, punched, or hit by someone at least once (N=308).

Individual interview participant

Toni (18): [Before my son, I was] wild, didn't care. Fought anybody, I've been arrested, I have charges, [I] just didn't care.

Yasser: Arrested for what?

Toni (18): Assault.

Dual interview participant

Camille (24): ...it used to be unheard...of a girl like slicing people up, you know, cutting people up...[now] it's like that...you got the girls that just go hard (fight hard) like [boys]...They don't know what their place is. Like they don't know what [being] a lady is about.

Both **Toni (18)** and **Camille (24)** separately discuss inner-city violence as both participants and witnesses of violence against women. Such violence can be understood in terms of the way street-life oriented Black women deal with structural inequality such as economic poverty, and community tension due to poor living conditions. Whether rightly or wrongly, oftentimes street-life oriented Black women participant in interpersonal violence as methods of coping and survival. Black mothers, in particular, speak about physical violence in relation to raising their children in potentially violent communities.

Group interview participant

Aneshia (29): Now you scared to let your child be born...it's a strain on your youth, and when your child goes outside. It's a shame...that they can't walk outside because you're afraid. When we first moved over here it was the Wild-Wild West. The first three days over in Southbridge was the Wild-Wild West. I mean, the movie scene, they were ducking on the basketball courts, and it was like a war zone. Like they were literally shooting in broad daylight like they were in the Wild-Wild West, I thought I was on TV.

Black mothers struggle with issues with interpersonal violence and safety for themselves and their children. They fear losing their sons to gun violence or losing their daughters to prostitution or drug usage. Over 53% of the women surveyed have had a relative shot and killed by a gun. This relative was often a male figure, such as a cousin, brother, father, nephew, or even a son. **Yadira (31)** is a single mother of three who lives in Southbridge. She lost her son, Dayveair, at the age of 17 due to gun violence on the streets of Southbridge. She fears losing her other children to violence and feels the need to be more protective of them.

Many of these women are single and live in homes without a male figure present. In fact, almost 53% of the women surveyed are single without significant partners, and only 2.9% of the women are legally married (N=300). In addition, none of the women interviewed are married, and only a few have significant partners. By and large the women in both the survey and interview data are unwed without significant partners. Over 64% of women surveyed have children (N=300), and of those women almost 47% have between one to three children (N=174). All the women interviewed have children, and most have between one to three children, as well.

The issue of teen motherhood echoed in the interviews. Nearly half of the women interviewed had their first child before the age of eighteen (N=17), some as young as age fourteen. Subsequently, these same teen mothers became single mothers without a consistent father figure in the home for their children.

Camille (24) never met her birth father and her stepfather left the home at age 12.

Although she was an honor roll student, she had her first child at age 14, and dropped out of school in 10th grade.

Dual interview participant

Camille (24): ...I've been through my things, my issues. I had my first child when I was 14 years old...leaving school early...not having nothing to do, sitting around all day [watching] the good shows on TV...you know, not wanting to go to school...

Although **Camille (24)**'s response reflects a stereotypical depiction of Black youth and their supposed disinterest in school, it is important for her response to be contextualized. **Camille (24)** experienced not only a fatherless home, but a detachment from her birth father and neglect from her stepfather. Thus, these adverse home conditions played a significant role in not only Camille's attitude towards parenting and motherhood but also education and graduating from school. Camille experienced a lack of male support and neglect throughout her life, and these experiences influenced her distrust in men's ability to be 'good fathers,' and demotivated her interest in school success.

Interview responses indicate that women are raising their children without their children's father present in the home (N=13). The women hold both positive and negative attitudes towards the fathers of their children, and reflect on the struggle of single motherhood in their communities.

Group interview participant

Chantel (30): I'm...being a strong black single parent. I gotta like, you know, straighten up and don't be too depressed around my daughter, you know.

Individual interview participant

Leslie (31): It makes me feel bad because there's no, it's like, hard raising 'em all by myself with no help.

Group interview participant

Tisha (27): It's hard to be a single mother out trying to raise your kids on your own. So the best thing you can do is just hold them tight and let them know everything's gonna be alright... you know, don't run to the streets.

This issue of “fatherless” homes and absence of a non-residential biological father in the home is reflected in both the childhood and present home experiences of the women. Most of women were raised without a father consistently in the home and in turn, the fathers of their children are not consistently in the home. The women also hold a level of entrenched hurt and anger for the fathers of their children and the lack of support received from these men.

Aneshia (29) is the mother of six children and two grandchildren. Her father was inconsistent in her life as a child, and none of the fathers of her children are actively in their lives. She believes that Black men should not be forced to support their children by “white men” or state child support agencies, and she would rather raise her children alone.

Group interview participant

Aneshia (29): ...If the white man (state child support agencies) gotta make you take care of my child, then we don't need you...it made me really dislike men too. 'Cause it started with my dad...Yeah, I'm a male basher...Like I was hurt by a man, really badly, deeply-rooted hurt by a man so that [has] a great impact on me to this day.

Aneshia (29)'s anger towards her biological father and the fathers of her children reveals the effect of growing up without a father and her own continuation of female-headed homes in adulthood.

Why aren't the fathers of their children in the home?

Substance Abuse. Several of women interviewed attribute their own non-residential fatherless homes to substance abuse, which includes the use and sale of narcotics. Nearly a quarter of the women interviewed report the fathers of their children sell or sold drugs, and a smaller but critical mass of women report that the fathers use drugs.

Group interview participant

Brandy (29): My children's father is not around, not in the household, sells drugs everyday...Like you live about a 20 minute walk from Southbridge, and it's been months since you looked my kids in their face...So no...I don't believe you love them.

According to **Brandy's (29)**, the father of her children is not in the home due to his propensity to sale narcotics. **Brandy (29)** is clearly angry for not visiting his children. This lack of a father figure due to sales/use of narcotics creates intergenerational notions of single motherhood because **Brandy (29)** is forced to raise her children alone without male support. Anger and the negative relationship towards the father of her children echoed through the female interviews. Several of the women believe that if the father is not currently involved emotionally or intimately with the mother, then the father will not provide for or be present in the lives of his children: "Some fathers feel like these days, if they're not with...the mother of their child then they don't want nothing to do with the child."

Incarceration. "Fatherless" homes as a function of incarceration are also apparent in the women's home experiences. Some of the women interviewed report that the biological father of their children is removed from the home due to incarceration. Over 75% of the women surveyed believe that fathers sometimes leave the home when they are unable to provide for their families (N=309). Women also reflect on the unstable relationships between fathers and their children due to this removal.

Dual interview participant

Tasha (29): ...[My children's] father is out-of-state, incarcerated...in and out of their lives. But it's...a shame 'cause us as mothers know that we have to be the mother and the father...We don't even look forward to the father no more.

Dual interview participant

Yadira (31): ...my oldest son, the one who was murdered, his father was incarcerated...all his life basically. And then when got out, my son was already a teenager and [didn't want] to hear anything [his father] had to say...

Tasha (29) discusses her lack of hope for father involvement in home, and **Yadira (31)** discusses the contentious relationship between her son and his father due to his father's incarceration. "Fatherless" homes are created as a function of incarceration of Black men, and almost two-thirds of women surveyed believe that having a mother and father in the home would help reduce rates of incarceration (N=271).

Discussion

*"You always was a black queen, mama.
I finally understand, for a woman it ain't easy tryna raise a man.
You always was committed:
A poor, single mother on welfare—tell me how ya did it?
There's no way I can pay you back,
But the plan is to show you that I understand:
You are appreciated."
- Tupac Shakur "Dear Mama" (1995) *Me Against the World**

Findings suggest that to a larger extent, family composition, criminal record or street activity, and educational level are predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood. Survey and interview data reveal varied perspectives on "fatherless" homes in street communities, as Black mothers hold both positive and negative attitudes towards their biological fathers and the biological fathers of their children. Also, findings overall suggest evidence of intergenerational transmission of attitudes towards single motherhood, because most women who grew up without their father in the home are now raising their own children without their father in the home. Women interviewed passionately discuss this family dynamic and the fact that they are maintaining female-headed homes. However, these homes are created and perpetuated by structural forces of inequality that remove low-income Black men from the home and make heterosexual marriage seem unobtainable for low-income Black women.

To a larger extent, use/sales of narcotics and incarceration were primary reasons why fathers weren't in the home of the mothers as children and adults. Use and sale of narcotics

functioned as a cause of “fatherless” homes in the women’s childhood and present home experiences, particularly because of the negative effect substance abuse had on their family structure. Father’s abuse of illegal substances often removed them from the home voluntarily or forcibly as a function of incarceration. In this way, both substance abuse and incarceration worked in tandem to create “fatherless” homes. Many women interviewed reflected on how their fathers were incarcerated due to substance abuse and in turn, their children’s father was also incarcerated due to substance abuse. Furthermore, issues of recidivism exacerbated the family and household stability as well.

Nonetheless, in part, Black women still hold positive attitudes towards their fathers and children’s father, despite the problem of “fatherless” homes primarily due to the obvious structural inequality that deeply pervade their communities. In addition, Black men outside of the home can and have been found, in many instances, to still provide emotional and financial support, as well as advice and guidance for their children. This study seeks to provide a balanced perspective of Black men as fathers rather than demonize them as inadequate or “deadbeats.”

Future Direction

Black single motherhood in street-life oriented communities moves through spaces of structural and social inequalities that influence the lives of mothers and their children. Thus, it is imperative to reshape the framework on notions of victimization, and more deeply address the complex developmental process of unwed, street-life oriented Black women with children. It is important to analyze these women in the context of their social phenomena and the societal forces that negatively affect their social well-being and progress. Structural issues such as the mass incarceration of Black men, welfare policy that make it financially beneficial for Black women to remain single and reside in low-income conditions and high-crime environments all

make single motherhood conducive for Black women. Social and governmental policy must be remedied before there can be a decrease in female-headed homes. Most importantly, subsequent discourse on Black single mothers should not merely add to the literary dialogue without action, but discourse should advocate for social change and advancement for these women and their families, including the men.

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