# "Brenda's Got a Baby": Black Single Motherhood and Street Life as a Site of Resilience in Wilmington, Delaware

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## Abstract

This secondary analysis examines low-income, street-identified single Black mothers aged 18 to 35 years in Wilmington, Delaware. This study is guided by the following question: To what extent do family composition and criminal record/street activity shape notions of Black single motherhood? "Sites of resilience" theory informs this study by providing a reconceptualization of street life and the phenomenological experiences of street-identified Black women. This analysis draws on 310 surveys, 6 individual interviews, 3 dual interviews, 2 group interviews, and extensive field observations. Findings reveal how these women experience single motherhood within the context of blocked opportunity and structural inequality. Results also indicate that most women socially reproduced childhood attitudes and conditions, including "fatherless" homes and single motherhood. Use and sales of narcotics and incarceration were primary factors for why their children's father didn't reside in the home. Findings also suggest that number of children, arrest and incarceration rates, and educational and employment statuses are predictive of marital status in the women.

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> 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"[1] (1991) *2Pacalypse Now*

Analyses of Black single motherhood in urban communities often frames such motherhood as a contemporary phenomenon, one ravaged by urban poverty, welfare dependency, and absent fathers (Anderson, 1999; Burton & Tucker, 2009; Cherlin, Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008; Haney, Michielutte, Vincent, and Cochrane, 1974; Lewis, 1975; Moynihan, 1965; Nadasen, 2007). Seldom do social scientists contextualize the phenomeno-logical experiences of low-income, street life–oriented Black women.[2] Most research focuses on the supposed "deviance" and cultural "pathol-ogy" of such mothers (Anderson, 1999; Cherlin et al., 2008; Moynihan, 1965; Rowley, 2002; Sharp & Ispa, 2009) or on the experiences of middle-class, low-income, or non-street-identified Black women (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2004; Collins, 1990; Giddings, 1984; Mullings, 1997). This study provides an alternative framing of street-identified Black women in par-ticular and strings together family composition and criminal record or street activity as predictive of shaping experiences of single motherhood within the Black community. Ruptured homes lead to high drop-out rates, unemployment, and criminal involvement among Black street-identified women. Also, we examine these women's phenomenological 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.

The present community-based phenomenological study elucidates the experiences of low-income, urban, street-identified Black women from Wilmington, Delaware, with a particular focus on these women's experiences with motherhood. This analysis is guided by the following question: To what extent do family composition and criminal record or street activity influence notions of Black single motherhood?

## Demographic Profile

There are nearly three million more adult Black women than men in Black communities (Alexander, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). These data are particularly relevant for Black women who seek to marry and bear children with heterosexual Black men. In fact, 47% of Black women have never been married (as compared with 28% of Caucasian women), and 70% of professional Black women are also unmarried (Alexander, 2010; Roberts, 2007). One-in-three Black households are female headed, and almost three-quarters of all births to Black women occur outside of marriage (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Nearly half of Black female-headed homes with children are living in poverty (Entmacher, Robbins, Vogtman, & Frohlich, 2013). Nevertheless, despite the disparities Black women face, White women still have the majority of nonmarital births (Shattuck & Kreider, 2011) and also receive more food stamps and public assistance than Black women (Gray 2014).

Locally, Blacks make up less than a quarter of Delaware's population and over 56% of the population of Wilmington, Delaware (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). While nearly 41% of all births in Delaware are to unmarried women (Shattuck & Kreider, 2011), slightly over one-fifth of babies in New Castle County are born to unmarried 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. Over half of all births in Wilmington are to single Black mothers, and nearly three-quarters of births to single mothers in Wilmington were to Black women (Delaware Health Statistics Center, 2007). Nearly 25% of homes in the city of Wilmington are female headed (Shattuck & Kreider, 2011). However, in the two Wilmington neighborhoods under study, Eastside and Southbridge, 70% of homes in Eastside are female headed, and 74% of homes in Southbridge are female headed (Garrison & Kervick, 2005). Additionally, although nearly a quarter of Wilmington residents live below the poverty line (Shattuck & Kreider, 2011), this number reaches 40% for both Eastside and Southbridge residents (Garrison & Kervick, 2005).

These national and local numbers reflect the very real impact of mass incarceration, high unemployment, entrenched poverty, and other forms of systematic inequality that push Black men and women out of their communities. This inequality exacerbates conditions in urban Black communities and can facilitate street lifestyles that ultimately lead to incarceration (Fagan, 1994). Nearly two thirds of women in prison are mothers (Sabol, West, & Cooper, 2008). Although rates of incarceration among Black women have declined to 30.7% from 2000 to 2009 (Mauer, 2013), Black women remain

disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system. They account for nearly a third of all incarcerations (Sabol et al., 2008) and are incarcerated at a rate that is 2 to 3 times that of White women (Carson & Sabol, 2011). In fact, 149 Black women per 100,000 were imprisoned in the United States, as opposed to 50 White women per 100,000 (Sabol et al., 2008). According to the Pew Center, 1 in 100 Black women in their mid- to late 30s are incarcerated, as opposed to 1 in 355 White women (Urahn, Grange, & Lynch, 2008). Black women are largely imprisoned for nonviolent, drug-related offenses (Mauer, 2013; Sabol et al., 2008), although Whites are more likely to actually use illegal narcotics (Mauer, 2009).

Black female incarceration in Delaware reflects the disproportionate national rates. Although Delaware is the second smallest state, it has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the nation (Eichler, 2004). Delaware incarcerates 811 per 100,000 residents, compared with the national average of 702 per 100,000 residents (Eichler, 2004). Forty-five per 100,000 women in Delaware are imprisoned (Sabol et al., 2008). Men are 11 times more likely than women to be imprisoned in Delaware state or federal correctional facilities (Sabol et al., 2008), and Black men and women in Delaware are disproportionately imprisoned for nonviolent, drug-related offenses (Eichler, 2004). Blacks in Delaware represent 42% of those arrested for criminal offenses, 64% of the prison population, and 86.8% of those incarcerated for drug offenses (Eichler, 2004). In Delaware, as throughout the United States, Black men and women fare the worst within the criminal justice system.

This article grapples with street life–oriented Black women's involvement in street activity and how such activity can inform their notions of single motherhood.

## Theoretical Framing

Sites of resilience theory provides an alternative framing of resilience and resiliency by conceptualizing a street identity in terms of (a) phenomenology, (b) relational coping, (c) historical patterns/trends, (d) structural systems, and (e) incidents of social injustice (Payne, 2001, 2011, 2013). This study applies this theory to better understand how street-identified Black women frame their experiences with motherhood in relation to the individual and structural conditions that shape their lives.

*Street life* or a street identity is a phenomenological term viewed as an ideology centered on personal, social, and economic survival. This study frames these notions of survival as a "site of resilience" and solely examines street identity through the racial, sociocultural, gendered, developmental, and class lens of low-income urban Black girls and women who "come of age in

the same distressed neighborhoods as those of [their] male counterparts" (Jones, 2010, p. 20). Attitudinal and behavioral characteristics of these women's street identity ultimately 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, p. 429). Also, the streets have been found to fundamentally offer *psychological* and *physical* spaces of resilience that operate concurrently to produce sites of strength at both the individual and group/community levels (Payne, 2011).

Furthermore, Black men and women understand street life as a system of behaviors maintained through bonding and illegal activities. For Black women collectively, *bonding activities* include interpersonal acts such as attending parties or bars, participating in social clubs such as motorcycle or 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 (Brunson & Stewart, 2006; Bush-Baskette, 2010; Jones, 2010).

Street life is also passed on through intergenerational transmission, in which attitudes and behaviors or cultural practices are transmitted by mostly older street generations and regulated through the "code of the streets" (Anderson, 1999; Payne, 2011). Intergenerational patterns of single motherhood and a street-life orientation have been found in generations of low-income Black women. Butterfield (1995) asserts that 25% to 40% of temperament can be passed on to subsequent generations, especially when the living environment and conditions remain the same across generations. Black mothers in particular face a unique challenge of raising their children in the same or similar conditions as their mothers and grandmothers, because they are trapped in a cycle in which structural inequality, violence, and crime play a significant role in their lives (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Thus, many of these women have been socialized to accept and even expect single motherhood, because of their experiences in childhood (Edin & Lein, 1997). These experiences and conditions facilitate street lifestyles and are influential in shaping single motherhood throughout low-income Black communities.

Finally, this study is 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, p. 269); this connection gives Black women a certain group perspective. In addition, this epistemology demands that Black women's experiences should be at the center of the analysis (Mullings, 1997; Richie,

2012) rather than an afterthought. Crenshaw (1993) contributed to standpoint theory, suggesting that the intersectionality of race, gender, and class creates marginalized and exclusionary conditions for women of color, and shape the social world and identities of these women.

## Literature Review

The literature on Black women, family, and motherhood often do not reflect the phenomenological experiences of street-identified Black women and mothers. The terms *Black "fatherless" homes* and *single motherhood* connote a Black woman raising children without a significant male partner or biological father (Alexander, 2010; Barras 2002; Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001; Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998). Scholars have challenged these connotations (Collins, 1987; Mullings, 1997; Stack, 1974), given Black families are often an extended family network of support in which kin and "fictive kin" (Collins, 1987, p. 7) help in child rearing. Therefore, Black women may raise children with a grandmother, aunt, close family friend, or any familial member present in the home.

"Black single mother" is potentially a crippling social stigma, especially for women living in urban or street life–oriented environments. Stereotypes emerge suggesting a dependent, inept, and uneducated Black woman (Moynihan, 1965) or "welfare queen" who greedily lives in public housing and abuses governmental assistance. This perception 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 these women for decades (Jaffe & Polgar, 1968). This literature legitimizes the "criminalization of poverty" (Chunn & Gavigan, 2004; Richie, 2012) and singularly holds low-income Black women responsible for their socioeconomic conditions, criminal experiences, and absent father figure for their children.

In fact, too many studies focus on the absence of Black biological fathers from the home, rather than the bond between child and father outside of the home. Black fathers are more active in their children's lives than ever before (Coles & Green, 2010; Connor & White, 2006; Edin & Kefalas, 2011; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Livingston & Parker, 2011). Among nonresidential fathers, Black fathers are far more likely than White or Hispanic fathers to talk with their children several times a week about their day (Livingston & Parker, 2011). In addition, a higher percentage of Black fathers (27%) take their children to and from daily activities than White fathers (20%), and more Black fathers (41%) help their coresidential children with their homework everyday

in comparison to only 28% of White fathers (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Black fathers also value "imparting love, maintaining a clear channel of communication, and spending quality time" (Edin & Nelson, 2013, p. 2) with their children. In fact, male figures often help raise Black women's children inside the home. Male cohabitation, coresidence, or "kinship networks" (Collins, 1990; Edin & Lein, 1997) in which other male family members (grandfather, uncles, older brothers, or cousins) or family friends live in the household need to be considered in analysis of family dynamics. This varied family composition suggests that a complex social network of support surrounds Black mothers.

Many of these women are reared in interrupted family dynamics wherein street life is a method of coping or resilience. Also, poverty is integral to the persistence of Black female-headed homes and structural inequality in the shaping of these women's participation in street life and carceral institutions. Black girls and women are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, and some utilize crime to cope with structural inequality and negative lived experiences—such as growing up without a father in the home (Chesney-Lind, 2012; Jones, 2010; Payne, 2011; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). Fagan (1994) argued some Black women's households had "incomes below the poverty line, and participation in the growing informal economy in inner cities became part of the diverse network of income sources for poor women" (Fagan, 1994, p. 180).

The literature on Black women and drugs narrowly frames them as "deviants" who use and abuse illegal drugs as opposed to agents who engage in and profit from illegal narcotics (Anderson, 2005; Evans, Forsyth, & Gauthier, 2002; Dunlap, Johnson, & Maher, 1997). Research on drug markets centers on male drug dealers as dominant characters in the drug trade, and "gender" has not been examined except in reference to female exploitation and prostitution (Denton & O'Malley, 1999; Fagan, 1994; Bourgois & Dunlap, 1993). Most women are introduced to illegal drug organizations through associations with men, that is, a boyfriend or husband (Evans et al., 2002; Fagan, 1995). Although the "streets" in urban Black communities are highly gendered and male dominated (Anderson, 2005; Maher & Daly, 1996; Miller, 2008; Payne, 2011; Steffensmeier, 1983), homes in these communities are largely female dominated, including those homes for persons involved with the streets (Anderson, 2005, p. 379). Street-identified Black women traverse across "gendered networks" and act as vital, "supporting" actors in the drug world (Anderson, 2005; Maher & Daly, 1996).

Black women are primarily incarcerated for drug offenses and often receive harsher punishment for these offenses (Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2006). A "primary hustle" (Payne, 2011) for a number of street-identified

Black women is preparing drugs for sale, selling or holding drugs or drug money, and facilitating drug deals. LeBlanc (2003) uses the term *millworkers* to describe Black women and Latinas who are involved in the drug trade as preparers and holders of illegal narcotics for men. Much like 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 manufacturing, weighing, and packaging narcotics for sale. Anderson (2005) analyzes Black women's participation in the illicit drug economy in four core activities: providing housing and sustenance needs in female-headed homes, purchasing drugs as users, subsidizing male drug dependency, and participating in drug sales (Dunlap, Johnson, & Maher, 1997; Venkatesh, 2008). In addition, some street-identified Black women help facilitate drug deals and robberies through using sexual prowess and manipulation (Contreras, 2009, 2012; Shakur, 1993).

Existent literature on Black women in the streets and urban communities suggests that family composition, criminal record, and street activity as a function of structural inequality shape these women as both females and mothers. This study examines the nuances of Black single motherhood from the women's own perspectives and provides evidence of how family composition and criminal involvement shapes experiences of Black single motherhood.

## Method

A secondary analysis was conducted on data from "The People's Report," a street participatory action research (PAR) project organized in Wilmington, Delaware, in 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 (Payne, 2008). Also, PAR projects require a social justice–based analysis to be organized in response to the data collected by the study. Street PAR explicitly organizes active and formerly active street-identified persons of color to document the lived experiences of others involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system (Payne, 2013). The People's Report is a pilot study that examined physical violence, by organizing 15 individuals formerly involved with the streets and/or the criminal justice system to study street-identified Black men and women aged 18 to 35 years from the Eastside and Southbridge neighborhoods of Wilmington, Delaware. 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 years) who were formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system. All data were collected on the 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 aged 18 to 35 years from the larger study. The 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.

## Sample

*Survey Subsample.* A total of 310 females completed surveys, which encompass 59.6% of the total survey sample ($N = 520$). Ninety-eight females are aged 18 to 21 years (or 31.6%); 122 females are aged 22 to 29 years (or 39.4%); and 90 females are aged 30 to 35 years (or 29%). The survey sample for men and women was 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, 12% of the women reported living outside of these two neighborhoods but reported visiting these two neighborhoods on a regular basis.

*Individual Interview Subsample.* Individual interviews were used to explore intimate subjects. A total of six female participants completed an individual interview, or 35% of the interview sample ($N = 17$). The average age for this subsample was 26.3 years while ages ranged from 18 to 35 years.

*Dual Interview Subsample.* Dual interviews were conducted with two participants. A total of six female participants completed dual interviews, 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. The average age for this subsample was 31.2 years while ages ranged from 27 to 35 years.

*Group Interview Subsample.* Group interviews are 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 aged 27 to 29 years, and one group interview had two female participants and one male participant. The females in the second group interview were aged

28 to 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 Design.* Street PAR members codesigned the survey and interview protocols for the study with the principal investigator and graduate students. The survey consisted of 251 items covering attitudes toward and experiences with (a) psychological well-being, (b) social cohesion, (c) employment, (d) education, (e) overall crime, (f) physical violence, (g) prison reentry, (h) interactions with law enforcement, and a (i) demographic inventory. Descriptive analysis was used to examine survey data for this article.

*Interview Protocol Design.* Semistructured interviews were conducted predominantly in the Hope Zone Center[3] in Southbridge, Wilmington. All interviewees completed a brief demographic inventory or questionnaire. Each participant also completed an interview protocol, which included (a) demographic information, (b) attitudes toward community violence, (c) attitudes toward education, (d) attitudes toward employment, (e) attitudes toward their community, (f) attitudes toward civic and political leadership, (g) attitudes toward law enforcement, and a (h) debriefing section completed after interviews.

## Procedure

*Organizing the Wilmington Street Participatory Action Research Team.* The Wilmington Street Participatory Action Research (WSPAR) team is made up of 15 Wilmington residents formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system, who are aged 20 to 48 years. Twelve of the Street PAR members are male and three are female. The 15-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 WSPAR members were selected through a citywide search, completed internal review board training, and, subsequently, were rigorously trained in all phases of research for a 2-month period. They met 3 to 4 times per week for 3 to 5 hours per session and completed 18 research method workshops in total. Research methods training centered on research theory, method, analysis, and social activism. On 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 and received a formal certificate of completion of research methods training.

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 to 45 minutes to complete whereas interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours. Participants received $5 for completing a survey and $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.

"Family" was coded as the broad domain for both core codes: (a) *Childhood Home Experiences With Nonresidential Biological Fathers* and (b) *Present Home Experiences With Non-Residential Biological Fathers of Children*. Four subcodes informed the qualitative coding process: (a) Substance Abuse and use/sale of drugs, (b) Incarceration, (c) Entrenched Anger, and (d) Attitudes toward the personal safety of their children (see Table 1 for Qualitative Coding Scheme).

*Interrater Reliability.* Three individuals and one professor; 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. Raters convened in a conference room and were each given nine transcripts ranging between four and 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 (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Qualitative Coding Scheme: Data Analysis Process.

| First phase of qualitative coding | Second phase of qualitative coding | Interrater | Third phase of qualitative coding | Interrater |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Broad Domain | Core Code | Coding Alpha | Subcodes | Coding Alpha |
| 1. Family | Childhood home experiences (nonresidential biological fathers) | .93 | Substance abuse Sales and use | .75 |
| | | | Incarceration | 1.0 |
| | | | Anger | .93 |
| 2. Family | Present home experiences (nonresidential biological fathers of children) | .72 | Substance abuse Sales and use | .72 |
| | | | Incarceration | .66 |
| | | | Anger | .83 |
| | | | Personal safety of child | .88 |

# Results

## To What Extent Do Family Composition and Criminal Record or Street Activity Influence Notions of Black Single Motherhood?

Data reveal varied perspectives on notions of "fatherless" homes and single motherhood in street communities as it relates to family composition and criminal record or street activity. Street-identified Black women hold both positive and negative attitudes toward their biological fathers and the biological fathers of their children. In addition, these women reveal similar experiences in both childhood and adulthood with female-headed homes. Content analysis and descriptive survey analysis were conducted to examine women's childhood and present home experiences. Results suggest that, to a larger extent, family composition and criminal record or street activity influence notions of single motherhood in this sample.

*Childhood Home Experiences.* In both survey and interview data, women report that they grew up around violence and criminal activity in their neighborhood as children. Almost 75% of women surveyed claim that street activity was widespread where they grew up ($N = 310$). Interview responses indicate that 12 out of the 17 women in the sample grew up without a biological father in the home. Women hold both positive and negative attitudes toward their fathers and the relationship between their biological parents in the home.

Brandy[4] (29) lost her mother to complications from HIV and dropped out in the ninth grade due to her embarrassment about her mother's condition. Her father was in prison for the majority of her life. 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.

> *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. (Dual interview participant)

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 with each other, and she maintained a volatile relationship with both parents as a result.

> *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 . . . (Dual interview participant)

Several women in the interviews express an entrenched level of anger toward their nonresidential biological fathers, and over half of the women interviewed hold negative attitudes toward 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 as stemming from hurtful childhood experiences due to a lack of a father figure and the yearning for stability from both the absent parent and the biological mother. As demonstrated later, this anger influences their notions of motherhood as several women who were embittered by their father's absence also became embittered as mothers toward the fathers of their children.

Some of the women interviewed grew up without a biological mother consistently in the home. In some cases, women were raised solely by their biological father, and in other cases, a grandparent raised them as children.

> *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 . . . (Dual interview participant)

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 and her biological mother was largely absent due to drug addiction. Thus, she holds negative attitudes toward her mother for her absence but holds positive attitudes toward her father for raising her and her brother. Michelle's (31) interview suggests that some children in similar neighborhoods are in fact raised by Black single-parent fathers.

Several women maintained positive relationships with their fathers as children although the majority of the women in the qualitative subsample report their father was not in the home. 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. These experiences provide an interesting commentary on the presence of fathers in the home and the relationship between the father and the child. Black men outside of the home can provide both emotional and financial support, as well as be positive role models for their children.

*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." (Group interview participant)

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

*Erica (22)*: . . . my dad put his kids before anything. (Dual interview participant)

## Why Weren't Their Biological Fathers in the Home?

*Substance Abuse and Incarceration.* Several 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.

*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. (Dual 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. (Individual interview participant)

The women reflect on the volatile relationship between their parents as a result of such substance abuse, and the way drug and alcohol use pushed fathers and mothers out of the home. Also, women reported 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. Biological fathers were incarcerated for extended periods of time due to crimes such as armed robbery or use/sale of narcotics. Women reflected on unstable relationships with fathers due to recidivism and repeat encounters with law enforcement.

*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 that's how it's always been. (Individual interview participant)

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

*Present Home Experiences.* Approximately 88% of women surveyed currently live in either Southbridge or Eastside ($N = 281$), and almost all of the women interviewed currently live in either Southbridge or the Eastside. Most women

interviewed reside in low-income housing. At least 65% of the women surveyed report residing in low-income housing, and 15% note living in mid-income apartment complexes ($N = 310$).

*Nexus of Education and Economic Opportunity*. High drop-out rates due to pregnancy result in large numbers of teenage mothers and young women raising children without a father. 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 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 women interviewed received a high school diploma, and a third obtained a GED. Educational level and employment opportunities affect and stifle women's abilities to maintain economic self-sufficiency as single mothers. Nearly two thirds of women in the survey data ($N = 303$), and more than half of women interviewed, report being unemployed but actively looking for work. Most women in the study struggle to provide for their children without a father in home, which makes it difficult to break the cycle of single motherhood in their own children's lives.

*Street or Criminal Activity*. Most women in both qualitative and quantitative data were presently or formerly street identified. A number of 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.

*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. (Dual 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. (Group interview participant)

Personal, social, and economic survival led these women to becoming street identified. Many of them grew up around criminal activity in their homes and

communities, and participated in such activity in their youth and adult lives. Street life influenced these women's notions of motherhood, as 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 study argues that welfare, crime, and/or a street identity are, in fact, adaptive—as most participants regarded the streets as a "means to an end."

*Interpersonal Violence.* Survey and interview data reveal only some women experienced physical violence. Over 15% of 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 women have been threatened with serious physical harm by someone ($N = 309$), and over 40% of women surveyed said that they have been slapped, punched, or hit by someone at least once ($N = 308$).

> *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. (Individual 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 aggressively) like [boys]. . . . They don't know what their place is. Like they don't know what [being] a lady is about. (Dual interview participant)

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-identified Black women negotiate maintaining personal safety, and deal with economic poverty and community tension due to poor living conditions. Rightly or wrongly, street-identified Black women often participate in interpersonal violence as a method of coping and survival. These women were also found to speak about physical violence in relation to motherhood and/or raising their children in potentially violent communities.

> *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 [to Southbridge] it 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. . . . I thought I was on TV. (Group interview participant)

The women struggle with issues of physical violence and safety for themselves and their children. They fear losing their sons to gun violence or losing their daughters to prostitution or drug use. These fears are echoed in the literature on Black women and community violence (Jarrett & Jefferson, 2004; Jenkins, 2002). Over 53% of women surveyed had a relative shot and killed by a gun, most of whom were male figures. Yadira (31), a Southbridge single mother of three, lost her 17-year-old son, Dayveair, as a result of gun violence. 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. Also, nearly two thirds of women surveyed have children ($N = 300$), and all women interviewed have children. The issue of teen motherhood echoed in the interviews. Nearly half of women ($N = 8$) interviewed had their first child before the age of 18 years, some as young as 14 years ($N = 3$). Subsequently, these same teen mothers became single mothers without a consistent father figure in the home for their children. Camille (24) never met her biological father, and her stepfather left the home when she was 12 years old. Although she was an honor roll student, she had her first child at 14 years, and dropped out of school in 10th grade.

*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. . . . (Dual interview participant)

Although Camille's (24) 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 also a detachment from her birth father and neglect from her stepfather. Adverse home conditions played a significant role in not only Camille's attitude toward 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.

Most women interviewed were raising children without their children's father present in the home ($N = 13$). These women hold both positive and negative attitudes toward their children's fathers and reflect on the struggle of single motherhood in their communities.

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

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. Aneshia would rather raise her children alone and rejects forcing Black men to support their children by "White men" or state child support agencies.

> *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. (Group interview participant)

Aneshia's (29) anger toward her biological father and the fathers of her children reveals the effect of growing up without a father and how this shaped her notions of single motherhood as an adult.

## Why Aren't the Fathers of Their Children in the Home?

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

> *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. (Group interview participant)

Brandy (29) is very angry with her children's father and attributes sales of narcotics to him not visiting his children more regularly. This anger deeply informs Brandy's social identity as a Black single mother and reverberates more strongly when she reflects on how she is forced to raise her children alone without male support. Anger and negative relationships toward the father of her children echoed through women's interviews. Several 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 women's present home experiences, as many of their children's biological fathers are removed from the home due to incarceration. Over 75% of women surveyed believe fathers sometimes leave the home when they are unable to provide for their families ($N = 309$), which results in unstable relationships between fathers and their children due to this removal.

> *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 he got out, my son was already a teenager and [didn't want] to hear anything [his father] had to say . . . (Dual interview participant)

Tasha (29) discusses her lack of hope for father involvement in the home and how such lack shapes her conceptions of single motherhood, 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*

Family composition and criminal record or street activity were found to greatly shape experiences of Black single motherhood. Survey and interview data reveal varied perspectives on "fatherless" homes in street communities, as participants' childhood and present home experiences influence these women's interpretations of motherhood and relationships with men. Also, findings suggest evidence of social reproduction of attitudes toward single motherhood, as most women in the sample who grew up without their father in the home are now raising their own "fatherless" children. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in our findings, female-headed 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 most low-income Black women.

Use and sale of narcotics influenced the presence of "fatherless" homes in women's childhood and present home experiences, particularly because of the negative effect substance abuse had on family composition. 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.

Nevertheless, a smaller critical mass of Black women express positive attitudes toward their fathers and children's father, despite the problem of "fatherless" homes primarily due to the obvious injustice that deeply pervade their communities. We include these positive experiences to reframe popular conceptualizations about the Black family unit and to provide nuance about the relationships held between low-income Black fathers and their daughters. Black men outside of the home can and have been found, in many instances, to 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 continue in the demonization of the men as inadequate "deadbeats." This demonization only stagnates sociocultural conditions faced by Black men, and distracts us from having critical, progressive, and frank conversations about race relations and inequality in America.

## Implications

Black single motherhood in street life–oriented communities move 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 resilience to more deeply address the complex developmental process of unwed, street-identified 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 mobility. Structural issues such as the mass incarceration of Black men, welfare policies 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 normative for many Black women. Social and governmental policy must be remedied before there can be a decrease in female-headed homes. Most important, 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.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. Popular song written by the late hip-hop rapper Tupac Shakur in 1991 on his debut album *2Pacalypse Now*. This song discusses teen pregnancy in urban communities.
2. "Street life-oriented" (Payne, 2001, 2008, 2011, 2013) is a phenomenological term that refers to low-income Black men and women who adhere to a *street-life* ideology or criminal activity as a way of life. This ideology is centered on notions of personal, social, and economic survival.
3. The Southbridge Hope Zone Center is located in Wilmington, Delaware, and serves as a community outreach center.
4. 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.

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