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Note: The opinions expressed in ***Race & Reason*** are those of the individual authors and are not necessarily those of the journal's editors, the Institute, or Columbia University.

forever, it seemed; and you kept your eye on that undertaker, because he was there to remind you that you only have so much time, and so you'd better be as good as you can, because soon the end will come, and after it judgment day. Back then, you see, we had our beliefs–nowadays, I don't know what our children believe in, other than the television set and the clothes they wear, and who is on the top and who isn't, and the fighting to settle it all."

Her (contemporary) sense of a moral vacuum, a moral hunger, was not unlike that of Tessie's grandmother, spoken more than three decades ago: a deep concern for what we ought be handing down in the way of a moral direction to our children–and what, in that regard, isn't being given them. I feel strongly that those two elderly women, their remarks, have much to tell us today about what our children need, in ghettos and way outside of them: people and beliefs to hold dear, to call upon as moral nurturance, as signposts in a secular world that has lost sight of the greatest need of all, a sense of ethical conviction and purpose in life. "Education for what?" the sociologist David Riesman once asked in an essay, and the moral implications of such a question ought haunt all of us who work with children, no matter their place of residence or their particular background. ■

The Crisis *of* Black Youth *in* New York City

by Natalie P. Byfield

Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge, I'm trying not to lose my head. It's like a jungle sometimes makes me wonder how I keep from going under.

Got a bum education, double-digit inflation, can't take the train to the job there's a strike at the station . . .

My son said daddy I don't want to go to school, cause the teacher's a jerk he must think I'm a fool . . .

I dance to the beat, shuffle my feet, wear a shirt and tie, run with the creeps . . .

You'll grow in the ghetto living second-rate and your eyes will sing a song that see hate.

You'll admire all the number-book takers, thugs, pimps, and pushers, the big money-makers.

Driving big cars spending twenties and tens saying you want to grow up to be just like them.

You say I'm cool, I'm no fool. But then you wind up dropping out of high school.

Now you unemployed all non void walking around like you're Pretty Boy Floyd.

Turned stick up kid, look what you done did, got sent up for an eight-year bid.

Now your manhood is taken and you're a maytag, spending the next two years as a undercover fag, being used and abused to serve like hell 'til one day you was found hung dead in a cell.

—*"Message" by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five*

The Legacy

New York City's African-American youths live on the edge, tottering between survival and getting by. As young people, by definition their rights are at the discretion of the adults who control their world. Any privileges they inherit correlate directly to the privileges within their community. After the 1970s, New York's white mainstream realized that there were no immediate, or even serious, repercussions for eliminating the civil rights gains of the previous decades, installed to right the wrongs of slavery and systemic oppression. So it launched into a social, economic, and political attack on the city's African-American communities. The federal portion of the city's budget that helped to pay for many social programs dropped to 11 percent in 1990 from 20 percent in 1978.

With very few resources at their disposal, many of New York's young black people are currently growing up in dry, barren landscapes dotted with brick and mortar rubble where buildings used to stand, making a mockery of the word "neighborhood." Their hard environment requires a sallow-faced, hooded-eye demeanor to negotiate the terrain. Their views–like those expressed in the epigraph from Grand Master Flash–are rarely heard beyond Harlem or Bed-Stuy except, of course, in the culture of rap.

Rap lyrics aren't often pretty. What most young African Americans see and experience doesn't represent the idyllic scenes depicted in television portrayals of bucolic suburban life. Nor do their days pass like those of the children of urbane

One of the barriers to employment facing African-American youths, said Hayes, is the lack of a "job-readiness attitude." "There are some attitude changes we have to instill in them," she said. "We have to teach them how to dress for interviews, how to conduct themselves, how to prepare themselves, basically [about] the world of work, the culture of work. . . . It's a conservative style, and that's what they have to learn."

Manhattanite families, who are flitted by cab from one planned activity to the next for the deliberate purpose of enhancing college entrance applications.

Nearly half of the city's African-American youths—45 percent according to a 1993 Community Service Society (CSS) study—live in poverty and cope with its distinctive features: poor health care, low-quality education, high incarceration, low employment rates, poor-quality housing and living conditions, police abuse of power, street violence, and drug abuse. Any analysis they have of their world—and these urgent issues—would have to be systemic.

Ergo, the hard bass line, staccato rhythm, and rhyming lyrics of rap extend beyond music, style, and speech. Rap denotes an ethos, a perspective, an "in-your-face" realism representing their haunting world. As with any belief system, it stands on its own in contrast to other cultures. One of the distinguishing features of rap culture is its relentless fury directed at the mainstream.

"It's a kind of antiassimilationist posture," says Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press/University of New England Press, 1994). Rose continues, "These young people have found that assimilation [into the mainstream] has not helped them. It's a kind of post-sixties and post-seventies disillusionment . . . coupled with the harsh realities of post-industrial urban economics."

This hard attitude inspires fear and loathing in a mainstream that makes a habit of forgetting the legacy of slavery, policies of segregation, and the drastic spending cuts in social programs ushered in by the Reagan "revolution" of the 1980s. In turn, the collective mind of the mainstream—its media—traipses out every night on the news a modern-day "Bigger Thomas" wearing hip-hanging baggy pants and a hoodie jacket that his hunched upper torso uses desperately to hide his face while the camera pans to his arms handcuffed behind his back. The media's mantra has been that these youngsters, "sloppily-dressed, hard-to-educate, oversexed, uncontrollable criminals," are somehow directly or indirectly responsible for the trouble they're in and for most of the social ills in the city (indeed, the country).

Late last year, as if to drive this point home, the mainstream went to a quarry older than inner-city slums and rehewed an old slavery-day stone—Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's thesis of black genetic inferiority promulgated in their best-selling book, *The Bell Curve* (Free Press, 1994). They tied this rock to the necks of the already deluged African-American youth population with this message: that poverty, welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock births, and crime are their legacy because of the low IQ of their "race."

The book reflects the theoretical underpinnings of the latest Republican Party advance. Murray and Herrnstein reportedly argue that IQ is largely inherited and determines who is a "have" and who is a "have-not." The "cognitive elite"—a group that is largely white and Asian—ends up richer and more powerful, while the "cognitive underclass"—a group that is disproportionately African-American—remains poor and economically disfranchised. They contend that the government makes a mistake by throwing money into "safety-net" programs because the problems of the underclass are largely hereditary and immutable. Hence, according to a *Newsweek* article published on October 24, 1994, Murray and Herrnstein's agenda includes "the abolition of welfare and limitations on affirmative action." The article continues to predict that these neo-eugenicist arguments will take hold in this climate, especially given the recent ascendancy of the Republican Party and its "Contract with America," led by the likes of Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey.

The cardinal point for African-American youth is what has been and will be bequeathed to them. Added to the contemporary racist claptrap of the Murrays and the Herrnsteins are the demeaning posture of chattel slavery, the isolation of Jim Crow segregation, and the current destructive social, economic, and criminal justice systems that have brought them to this point of crisis.

The mind-bending statistics on poor health care, low-quality education, high incarceration, low employment rates, and poor-quality housing for African-American youths have caused some leaders to term the crisis genocide. Ironically, so calloused are many of these young people to the conditions of their life that they are hesitant to define their circumstances as a "crisis." Some members of an interview group of nine young people (ages 14 to 19), who participate in the Countee Cullen Community Center on West 144th Street in Harlem, aren't sure if this situation can be aptly termed as a "crisis."

Carl, a 14-year-old student at Louis O. Brandeis High School in Manhattan doesn't see his life as constituting a crisis, even though he says has been arrested twice since his 12th birthday and on one occasion placed in a group home for six months. For him, it is simply a matter of what he has to endure as an African-American kid attempting to survive in urban America.

"Crisis?" asks Carl. "No. It's everyday."

Health

The disadvantages that could lead today's "Bigger Thomas" to take that shackled walk out of the New York Police Department's central booking–the name for the city's boroughwide holding pens covered by the media when a suspect is being moved–can easily be related to the poor health care African-American youths receive. The pattern of fourth-rate health care and systemic disregard for the health of poor African Americans generally begins before birth. Early and consistent health care give children the best start in life, a better chance of doing well in school, enabling them to take advantage of what may come their way. In many instances, black children never get this, and their very survival hangs in the balance.

Rap lyrics aren't often pretty. What most young African Americans see and experience doesn

The current Medicaid system may in part be responsible for the low quality of health care in the city's African American communities, says Ruth Browne, director of the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health. "Medicaid often offers very fragmented care. . . . There's no continuity . . . you're seeing different providers," says Browne. She adds that "people who have Medicaid often use Medicaid mills which . . . provide low-quality care." This poor health-care climate is made worse, says Browne, by the situation of the working poor who are too often ineligible for Medicaid but who do not earn enough money to buy their own insurance.

In 1992 and 1993, 68.2 percent of poor kids in the city–of whom 45 percent were black–were Medicaid participants, according to the CSS study on poverty. And nearly one in four, or 24 percent, lived without any health insurance at all. A look at some of the long-used indices to measure a community's health shows that the health status of New York City's African-American communities is substandard, even desperate, in the poorest black sections.

According to the New York Departments of Health and City Planning, from 1981 to 1990 African-American children had the city's highest neonatal mortality count (death within twenty-eight days) and infant mortality count (death within one year). In 1990, black babies numbered 42,844, or 30 percent, of the total births. In that year, there were 1,091 total neonatal deaths, of which 518, or 47 percent, were black babies (a neonatal mortality rate of 12.1 per 1,000 live births). Of the 1,620 infant mortalities, 797, or 49 percent, were African-American (an infant mortality rate of 18.6 per 1,000 live births).

In the same period, the number of black babies born relative to whites was about 31 percent annually. Yet, the neonatal death count for African-American babies relative to the total number of neonatal deaths has been anywhere from 41 to 49 percent. Sadly, the number of infant mortalities has been anywhere from 44 to 53 percent of the total infant deaths.

African Americans constituted the only group with a double-digit neonatal mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 births) each year for that period. Only one other group had a double-digit rate, occurring only once for Puerto-Rican babies in 1982. Based on the most recent available figures–in 1992–the city's black communities continue to experience disproportionately high infant death rates. There were 40,662 births of African-American babies that year, 30 percent of the total. But, of the 1,390 infant deaths in 1992, nearly half, or 47 percent, were African-American babies, which amounted to an infant mortality rate of 16.1 and a neonatal mortality rate of 10.6 per 1,000 births.

Low birthweight is another telling statistic about children's health because, according to Browne, low birthweight babies are at risk for a variety of developmental disabilities, even death. In 1990, the African-American community far outpaced other groups in the number of low birthweight babies. Of the 13,041 low birthweight babies that year, nearly half, or 46 percent, were black. Of those low birthweight babies, the neonatal mortality rate was 65 per 1,000 births, and the infant mortality rate was 87 per 1,000 births.

Low birthweight babies are often attributed to lack of prenatal care. In 1991, there were 6,963 women who delivered babies without the benefit of prenatal care. Nearly half of them–3,344–were African-American. In that same year, 10,987 women received prenatal care only in the last trimester of pregnancy; fully one-third of them were black.

Because there is a direct correlation between financial coverage and health-care delivery, it's important to note that for African-American women the primary source of funding for medical care during pregnancy and delivery has been Medicaid. The number of black women on Medicaid during pregnancy and delivery far outpaced all other groups. Of the 41,486 deliveries of African-American babies in 1991, at least 60 percent of them were covered by Medicaid.

Making it past the first year is by no means a guarantee that black children in New York will survive to adulthood. Life in Central Harlem provides haunting evidence of this. Harlem's African-American community–ironically, not a stone's throw from Columbia University, one of the nation's most elite schools–distinguishes itself as one of the poorest black communities in the city. A 1992 study of Harlem's social conditions and health, conducted by Leith Mullings and Ida Susser, isolated the astounding death rate for some of Harlem's children. Entitled "Harlem Research and Development: An Analysis of Unequal Opportunity in Central Harlem and Recommendations for an Opportunity Zone," the study called attention to some disastrous conditions in this area. Through an investigation of figures from the city's Health and Hospitals Corporation, Mullings and Susser found that the mortality rate for children in Central Harlem, ages 0 to 4, is almost triple that of the national rate. And "excess deaths in this age group increased 53 percent" for the period between 1985 and 1988.

Mullings and Susser also found that the number of childhood deaths for those between the ages of 5 and 14 is on par with children in other parts of the country only because children nationwide die more frequently in car accidents during this period of life. In Central Harlem, however, children in this age group "die more frequently from homicide." And during the years 1985 to 1988, there had been a 43-percent increase of death for this age range. Ultimately, they found that the mortality rate increased during this period as the children got older, and "homicide was the overwhelming cause of death."

present the idyllic scenes depicted in television portrayals of bucolic suburban life.

According to Mullings and Susser, children in Central Harlem who survived the violence were threatened healthwise in other ways. They reiterated that poor housing--as is customary in Central Harlem—"has been associated with increased accidents, childhood asthma, other respiratory diseases, and lead poisoning." Between 1985 and 1990, "asthma and other respiratory diseases were the main causes of childhood hospitalization" in Central Harlem.

Housing Segregation and Social Isolation

The shame and burden of the dismal conditions in their neighborhoods encourages surviving poor black youths in the city to turn their backs on the mainstream. In New York's five boroughs, the segregation of black communities--poor or otherwise—is evident upon observation. The 1990 census figures support this, despite the fact that the U.S. Bureau of the Census acknowledged that there was a "severe" undercount of the city's total population, especially for African Americans and other nonwhite groups.

Staten Island is by far the most segregated borough with 88 percent of African Americans residing in one of its three community districts (a subdivision of local government). Nearly 60 percent of black residents in the Bronx live in three of the borough's twelve community districts. In Brooklyn almost 60 percent of its black residents live in six of eighteen community districts. Forty percent of the black population in Queens is concentrated in one of the borough's fourteen districts. Likewise, in Manhattan 26 percent of the borough's African Americans reside in four of twelve community districts.

In the portion of Staten Island that is disproportionately African-American, 42 percent of those living below the poverty line are 18 years old or younger. In the Brooklyn community district including Brownsville and Ocean Hill, 81 percent of the people are black, and 42.7 percent of those living in poverty are under 18. Similarly, in the Bronx community district most heavily concentrated with blacks, 33 percent of the residents living below the poverty level are children and teenagers. In Central Harlem, which boasts Manhattan's largest African-American population, 33 percent of the residents living below the poverty line are in this age group. And in certain sections of Queens, the number is the same.

Many of the poorer African-American areas are dotted with stark high-rise public-housing projects where people are afraid to come out at nights, where the elevators, if they exist, are essentially hazardous traps. Some of these high-rises have metal doors, tiled floors, thick coats of paint accumulated over the years, and heavy chain-link fencing covering some of the glasswork inside. They sit in large cement compounds strewn with broken glass and, perhaps, a basketball rim in an area for half-court ball. Mullings and Susser found that in Central Harlem, 70 percent of all housing was publicly owned, more than 12 percent lacked complete plumbing, only 14 percent had any form of air-conditioning, 33 percent lacked telephones, and more than 50 percent, if they had more than four floors, lacked elevators.

Large high-rise buildings are the least preferred form of housing, according to a 1994 survey of 1,000 Harlem residents 16 years and older conducted by Phil Thompson of Columbia. However, resident preference hardly matters. The housing condition in Central Harlem, say Mullings and Susser, is related to federal and state spending that "virtually ground to a standstill in 1975." Although new housing has gone up in Central Harlem since 1985, "the rate of new housing per year built in New York City between 1980 and 1989 was still less than one-third of the federally funded housing built between 1961 and 1970." This has had a devastating impact on the area: Over the past twenty years, the number of units declined by 10,000, and the population dropped by 50 percent, Mullings and Susser found.

"What most people see is a trend of increasing segregation by class" in the New York metropolitan area, says Alan Abramson of The Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., who coauthored a study of racial distribution in one hundred of the nation's largest metropolitan areas. However, class has become a bigger factor in New York City because the black middle class has been migrating outside its parameters, according to Abramson.

This forced isolation of poor black kids has had a direct impact on what they feel is available to them. Recently, the director of a youth employment service agency, whose clients are low-income nonwhites, expressed her distress with the lives her clients are forced to endure. She relates a story of two young people who participated in her organization's trip to

Central Park, the city's preeminent green space. Two had never been to Central Park nor did they know there was a lake in the park, she says.

The world for many African-American youths is confined to their neighborhood. Most Countee Cullen teens interviewed rarely or never deal with whites in their everyday life of school and socializing. Stacia, a 14-year-old from the Bronx who attends private school–Mother Cabrini High School in Washington Heights–is the only one who regularly encounters whites. Even she only sees them in school.

But Carl's experiences are more typical. He only sees whites on the streets and in the subways when he leaves his haunts in Harlem near the city-run Polo Grounds project, which houses between three thousand and five thousand people in four brick buildings, each thirty stories high. His familiar surroundings include a bumpy stretch of Harlem River Drive in the background and a sprawling Eighth Avenue in front. Carl said that the white people he encounters when he ventures down to the chi-chi boutiques, gourmet food stores, and sidewalk cafes on Columbus Avenue in Manhattan's Upper West Side tend to be afraid of him.

On the surface, many of these teens, like Carl, appear to be accepting a life of inherent inequality. "Their [whites'] environment is different from ours. They don't have to pass a whole bunch of drug dealers, [or] worry [if] there['s] going to be a shoot out," says Lasharr, a resident of Central Harlem who attends William H. Taft High School in the Bronx. She ponders for a moment, however, and finds an advantage to their lives. "In a way it [the environment in black communities] gets you ready for the real world."

The message being sent to African-American children is: "You are the other. . . . You are t

They speak as if they are given a choice. But says James Carr, Vice President for Housing Research for the federally chartered mortgage company Fannie Mae, "There is no choice without options."

Education

These kids wish education could be a real option. But in the New York City public school system, the odds against them receiving a good–or even adequate–education are tremendous. It's as if the vast majority are set up to fail.

Of the more than one million students in the city's school system, about 40 percent are black, according to Board of Education figures. The race and class segregation that exists in the housing patterns also repeats itself in the schools. Study after study of the city's public school system has found a correlation between the race and class of the student population and the amount of resources available for their education (i.e., money and instructional materials and supplies).

Based on a computer analysis of 1992 figures from the Board of Education–published between March 7 and April 13, 1993, in *New York Newsday*–it is clear that schools with the poorest students "scored 43 points lower on the last citywide reading test and 37 points lower on the math test than the schools with the richest students." This analysis also shows that 35 percent of the teachers from schools in the poorest communities had less than six years teaching experience, as compared to 14 percent from schools in wealthier communities. Moreover, the school buildings designed to accommodate poorer children are in a far greater state of disrepair than public school buildings tucked away in the city's more affluent neighborhoods.

At P.S. 144 in the Central Harlem community district, every child received free lunch or was from a family on public assistance. While the school reported an 89-percent average attendance, only one in five students read at or above the grade level. At P.S. 146 in the Bronx, near the borough's community district that is predominately African-American, the figures reflect a similar race and class dynamic; 70 percent of the students are black, and 97 percent of them receive school lunch or are from families on public assistance. Yet, the school has an 86-percent attendance average and a few more than one out of every four students read at or above the grade level.

These attendance records and reading scores beg the question: What do the students do in school all day? Some education advocates argue that what low-income students encounter in their lives outside of school significantly affects their ability to learn. In fact, some argue that the antiblack biases in the curriculum and testing system relegate African-American students to failure and constant feelings of inferiority.

"The real purpose of schools should be to affirm kids. Black kids are having trouble because schools are not affirming them," says Jon Moscow, head of the New York City-based Parents Coalition for Education, an umbrella group of parents' organizations citywide. Moscow goes on to say that the message being sent to African-American children is: "You are the other. . . . You are the one people tell their kids to be afraid of. . . . If you'd sit still long enough, we'd civilize you."

What people with this message conveniently forget is that the old curriculum hardly offers an explanation of their lives. And to ask for instructional tools comparable to what's available in many white suburban districts–like current textbooks, supplemental texts, computers, T.V.s, and V.C.R.s–is not asking for too much. Education in the city's secondary schools doesn't improve dramatically. Many of the high schools are operating beyond capacity. And, before the recent public school curriculum changes in math and science, general expectations for what black students could accomplish were very low.

In the Central Harlem community district, 1990 census figures show that the population is 88 percent black, including at least 6,637 people of high school age (15 to 19 years old). When the young people of Central Harlem are ready for high school, they are shipped primarily to two schools in the borough of Manhattan and sometimes into the Bronx because there is only one high school in the area. Education advocates have long stated that this kind of separation of schools from the communities they serve reduces the role parents can play in the educational lives of their children.

By the time students reach the secondary school stage, many have lost interest in school and scoff at the "merits" of formal education. In 1993, the chancellor for New York City Schools released a dropout report claiming that only 16.2 percent of the students who started high school in the fall of 1988 with an expected 1992 graduation date were still in school.

When released, these figures caused a storm of controversy because, some critics charged, the system for tracking graduates had changed to keep students on the rolls for up to eight years, even if they were no closer to graduating. One reason some critics cite for this practice is that state aid is based on attendance; keeping the rolls high results in more money for the schools. However, is the extra money actually being spent on the students who are in the school? In many cases, no.

Many young people are aware of how the dropout system operates, but their take on it is a bit more cynical. Victor, a 19-year-old Manhattan and Bronx resident who participates and works at the Cullen Center, says that the principal of his former high school received money to kick students out. Victor himself dropped out of Brandeis High School after two years because he thought he was "messing up" by missing a lot of school, due to problems in his life. He now plans to get his high school equivalency diploma.

ne people tell their kids to be afraid of. . . . If you'd sit still long enough, we'd civilize you."

Employment

The ranks of the unemployed multiply annually as the tide of black dropouts from New York City's public school system rises. Brooklyn Assemblyman Roger Green, who heads the State Assembly's standing committee on Children and Family, says the rate of African-American and Latino unemployment in the city is 74 percent, based on figures from the Department of Labor. These statistics, however, can't be confirmed by the Labor Department. While it has recent figures on unemployment in the city for white teens, ages 16 to 19–36.4 percent–it doesn't have reliable percentages for African-American youth, due largely to the inadequate number of people who responded to a recent telephone survey.

What is more clear is that many jobless black teenagers do not possess the necessary skills to join the employment force. In addition to a poor skill level, young African Americans are contending with the types of high-tech jobs currently being created and the kind of economy that requires them to compete with the elderly.

During "MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour" on June 3, 1994, Secretary of Labor Robert Reich told the public that "we're entering the summer in exceedingly good shape, and this is good news for college graduates and even for high school graduates, who face the best job market in years." But Reich's message included a warning: "Our data, particularly for last year, extrapolated to this year, show that most of the jobs [being created] are managerial, professional, and technical jobs. There is still a gap, an earnings gap, between the jobs available to the well educated and well skilled and the poorly educated and poorly skilled." Margaret Hayes, Director of Jobs for Youth, a city-based not-for-profit organization founded in 1960 to search for jobs for African Americans and Latinos between the ages of 16 and 24, appeared on the same program, insisting that Reich's assessment applied to New York City, as well.

Generally, Hayes reported, there were very few opportunities in the private sector for the African-American and Latino youths with whom she works. Typically, her young people were placed in the public sector, as library laborers and assistants and as park workers. In addition, said Hayes, the few entry-level positions that were once within the purview of her clients are now harder to obtain due to increasing competition from retirees seeking to augment their retirement income.

During a recent interview, Hayes said that Jobs for Youth is developing an ability to place people in the private sector by developing contacts with corporations. Some companies are willing to place her clients in entry-level positions in the mailroom, and her group aims to get them at least a $7 per hour starting salary, about $14,560 a year. Hayes said that her organization also offers career training to those individuals who are interested in further advancement. But when asked about the outcome of most Jobs for Youth clients–the 38,000 young people who come through its door–she offered only individual examples rather than statistics that reflect larger trends of employment success.

One of the barriers to employment facing African-American youths, said Hayes, is the lack of a "job-readiness attitude." "There are some attitude changes we have to instill in them," she said. "We have to teach them how to dress for interviews, how to conduct themselves, how to prepare themselves, basically [about] the world of work, the culture of work. . . . It's a conservative style, and that's what they have to learn."

She related the story of a young woman, who was promised a job at Time Warner, Inc., but who was told the job was no longer available when she showed up for her first meeting. Hayes says that when she learned the young woman had arrived on the job with a nose ring, she was certain this was the reason her offer was withdrawn.

Hayes' approach may conflict with the self-affirmative street culture young people have created for themselves. The teens at Cullen Community Center know that people outside their neighborhoods, especially whites, make judgments about them based solely on their racial and/or socioeconomic background. Most feel that whites look down on their urban culture, and this has had a profoundly negative impact on them.

"They'll think twice before they hire you [blacks]," said Carl.

Whether their aspirations for the future include assimilating into mainstream white, middle-class culture depends on what the rewards are for doing so. Most (all but one) teenagers in the Cullen Center expressed an interest in going to college, which they see as helping them achieve a good life. However, their dreams and aspirations are not far removed from their environment. Although age seems to be on their side, most don't know what they want to be "when they grow up." Almost all have very modest income goals; most consider annual salaries of around $20,000 to be "good." Their economic goals are consistent with what African-American families in New York currently earn. According to the report, "New York City's Black Family 1994," produced by the Office of the Manhattan Borough President, Ruth Messinger, the median income for black families at the end of the 1980s was $24,055 compared to $40,064 for white families.

Crime and Punishment

When Victor, the oldest teenager at Cullen, lost interest in school and couldn't find a job, he joined the drug trade. He says that he is out of it now and vehemently condemns the vicious cycle so many of his peers have fallen into.

"They want to put . . . drugs in one community so we can kill and fight over it because they know there ain't no jobs and there ain't no type of income. So the first thing that comes along, they see that pretty man on the corner with the car, and they want to know how to get that car. How you get that car is drugs, and when you're into drugs, that leads to violence, [then] either jail or death. Basically, that's it," Victor explains, with haunting clarity and candor.

He says he got out of the business because he saw many innocent people die. "A lot of my friends were dropping, dropping by the threes," he laments. "My cousin died and he [had] an 85 [school] average, graduated from Brandeis High School. . . . He caught one in the head and one in the chest. . . . It was a mistake." Desperation and loss of hope lead many people down similar paths, the final destination of which, more often than not, is prison. As of August 1994, there were 65,884 people in the New York State prison system, and 31.6 percent of all prisoners were black.

Of the black inmate population, nearly one in four are 24 years old or younger, according to the State Department of Correctional Services. Of the entire inmate population under 24 years old, African-American youths constitute about 55 percent of that group. Typically, says Henry Donnelly of the Department's research division, 70 percent of those incarcerated in the state system are from New York City.

The crime, violence, and negative attitudes of members of city law enforcement agencies make poorer African-American neighborhoods a target for trouble with the law. The ease with which one can get a gun is remarkable. Several teenagers in the Cullen group know how and where to obtain guns and all know how to identify them by make. Victor says his father and brother introduced him to guns, that he can get a gun "anytime." "You don't have to pay sometimes," says Carl. "My cousin sells guns," another chimes in.

Serious crimes are not the only times young blacks have encounters with the police. At least four members of the Cullen group cited such experiences without committing a crime. They had these encounters in the course of their everyday lives because so much of "the life" in their neighborhoods is consumed by illegal activity. Their stories read like scenes from "Menace II Society"; no intent or direct involvement is necessary for a young person to get "caught up" in the wave of crime and violence. Trouble is everywhere, and everyone is in the middle of it.

Victor says he was stopped by police one day when they recognized the friend he was walking with, who was carrying a gun. Inez, a 17-year-old at John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx, was held by cops for an entire evening. She and her cousin were traveling on the subway and began talking to a guy, a stranger, who was concealing a weapon. After it was spotted and reported to authorities, the three of them were taken into custody.

Carl says he was held in the borough lock-up for a week without a charge after false accusations were made against a group of fifteen friends he was hanging out with after school. This was the second time Carl had been detained without justification. Stacia, 14, was sent for two weeks to Spofford, a type of reform school, after stabbing a schoolmate during a fight. She didn't bring the knife to the fight, however; it was handed to her during the course of the altercation, and she used it.

The group laughed when Stacia said she had been to Spofford. "It's like being home," says Carl, "everyone's there."

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