

Searching For Answers:
A Study of the Socio-Economic Issues Affecting African American Youth in the 1980s and 1990s

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

The central goal of this thesis is to explore several popular "talking points" that were believed to relate to high crime rates amongst African American male youth. I argue that in many instances, issues relating to employment, education, and family structure can operate in unison to greatly increase the likelihood that young black men would take part in criminal activity. The issues discussed within this thesis relate closely to those discussed earlier in Thomas Sugrue's pivotal work *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*. This thesis will focus on the period from 1980 through to 1999 to discuss how issues relating to crime and poverty persisted throughout urban areas within the United States. I have assembled a variety of primary and secondary sources from several different disciplines to properly develop my argument related to the various socio-economic issues surrounding the African American community during this period.

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Introduction

From the mid-1980s into the 1990s, an urban crisis emerged across the United States. Crime rates soared, fueled by drug related deaths and violence. The postwar era saw a mostly white upper-middle class abandon urban areas for the suburbs. At the same time, the nation's poor, consisting mainly of ethnic minorities, became concentrated in inner-city neighbourhoods. Crime and gang violence brought a considerable amount of attention focused towards African Americans living in urban areas. Statistically speaking, many of these concerns were justified as African-American males were jailed at alarmingly high rates in comparison to other Americans. They became over-represented within the criminal justice system. A study that examined the racial disproportionality in imprisonment within the United States was authored by Alfred Blumstein in 1982. Blumstein noted that imprisonment in the United States was severely disproportional along racial lines. A 7:1 ratio existed between black and white incarceration rates, with black males in their twenties incarcerated at a rate 25 times higher than the rate for the total population.¹ But statistics alone do not explain why one particular demographic became over-represented in the American criminal justice system.

The purpose of this thesis will be for it to serve as a historical corrective; it will study several debates that occurred between different scholars, commentators, and pundits as they attempted to explain to why disproportionately high levels of African American male youth committed crimes. To properly address these debates several key subjects will be addressed within this thesis that

¹ Alfred Blumstein. "On the Racial Disproportionality of United States' Prison Population", *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 73, 1982, pg 1259-1281.

The data for Blumstein's study came from a 1974 Department of Justice survey of state prison inmates and the 1974 Uniform Crime Reports(UCR). Uniform Crime Reports are published by the FBI and considered official data on crime in the United States.

were frequent “talking points.” Four subjects that will be approached within this paper will be: family structure, employment, education, and popular culture. These topics have been selected because they were often seen as potential indicators of social conditions within the United States that could be responsible for increased criminal activity amongst young black males. This is not to say that there is a definite link between employment, education, family structure, and crime. There is little evidence available that provides anything beyond a casual link between these three subjects and criminal activity. This thesis will only seek to look at what expert sociologists, psychologists, critics, and researchers have said on both sides of these debates and determine which side, if any, had more validity towards their argument. Ultimately, this paper will argue that employment, family structure, and education played the greatest role in the relationship between young black men and criminal activity. These three subjects will be described as co-dependant factors based on how they interacted with one another to create the conditions that have led to increased criminal activity amongst young black men.

This paper will argue that the likelihood that young African-American boys would become involved in criminal activity increased when two or more of these factors existed together. It wasn't enough for young black men to be jobless, or a high school dropout, or to come from a dysfunctional family. However, when these two or more of these factors existed simultaneously the likelihood that a young black male could become involved in criminal activity increased. Issues relating to employment, family structure, and education rarely influenced the behaviours or actions of young Black males in isolation from one another. Families could often become fractured due to a lack of jobs available to young fathers. A lack of family support had the potential to lead to young African American males becoming disillusioned with school and

dropping out before completing high school. Similarly, without a high school diploma, access to any type of employment beyond minimum wage positions was unlikely.

In order to properly address the aforementioned relationships between education, family structure, employment and crime, this paper will look at a variety of primary and secondary resources. Survey data obtained from the Black Youth Project, the African American Men Survey, and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth will be used throughout the paper to provide greater insight into the opinions and behaviours of black youth that may lead to criminal activity. Secondary literature from a variety of different disciplines such as sociology, family studies and film studies will be explored. This paper will define youth as children aged 8 to 18 years. Studying this age demographic is important because, at this stage, children are still developing emotionally and could still be heavily influenced by the cultural, social, and economic environments in which they were raised. Studying older African American males would overlook critical developmental stages in the childhood of male African American children that could potentially contribute to criminal activity later in life.

Chronologically speaking, this paper will look specifically at the period between 1985 and 1995. This time frame is crucial when attempting to understand which factors have affected the development of black youth. Looking at this ten-year period provides a window into the ongoing political shift to the right within the United States that began in the late 1960s and altered the social and economic landscape of the country. Drug use and the violence that accompanied the drug trade expanded, and with the growth of violence, it led to feelings of fear and suspicion directed towards the inner city and African Americans. The conditions that occurred throughout this period mirrored those referred to by Thomas Sugrue in his earlier book *The Origins of the*

Urban Crisis. In his book, Sugrue described the decline of urban areas within the United States. While Sugrue looked specifically at urban Detroit from the 1940s to the 1970s, his book made several critiques and observations that were applicable to urban ghettos across America. Sugrue looked at three forces, suburbanization, deindustrialization, and the emergence of rights-based liberalism, as being particularly harmful to the future economic and social prosperity of African Americans.² Deindustrialization coupled with the racial discrimination of employers left working class African Americans unable to access blue collar jobs that had previously been available.

Moreover, Sugrue examined the rise of labour militancy as a reason behind the rise of automation and decentralization within the manufacturing industry. Automating the different segments of the manufacturing process was a cheaper alternative for many industries but it left many African Americans without employment. Suburbanization left African Americans confined to urban areas that became economically stagnant while businesses began to relocate to suburban areas. Racial practices were often widely utilized within housing markets. A frequent racial practise that was employed to prevent African Americans from moving into predominately white neighbourhoods was “red lining.” “Red-lining” referred to the red line that was drawn around certain neighbourhoods within a city that would indicate areas that were a risk to purchase property or invest in property. This practise was initiated by Federal Housing Administration in the National Housing Act of 1934. The practice of “red lining” certain districts was frequently used to make it difficult for African Americans to obtain bank loans as collateral to purchase homes in predominately white neighbourhoods.³ This often forced African Americans to settle

² Thomas J. Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996

This book is an excellent introduction into the political and economic shifts that occurred within the United States that attributed to what social scientists and historians now call the Urban Crisis of the 1960s.

³ *Ibid*, 172.

down in older, more dilapidated neighbourhoods. In the rare instances that African Americans attempted to self-finance a move into a white suburb, they were often faced with racial persecution and intimidation by white homeowners. These unfair housing practices, coupled with the deindustrialization of urban centers, led to the establishment of primarily black ghettos in areas such as urban Detroit, that were largely isolated from any sources of wealth.

While much of Sugrue's argument is centered around the geo-economic factors that led to the establishment of black ghettos in the United States, he is also critical of the rise of rights-based liberalism which he sees as creating an atmosphere of entitlement and victimization.⁴ These issues arose in relation to the feelings of discontent between white and black Americans when the possibility of housing integration was brought forward. White Americans saw their rights as home and property owners as equal to the desires of African Americans to move into more prosperous suburban neighbourhoods. African Americans believed they had the right to choose any area in the city to live in regardless of the feelings of their neighbours. The notion of victimization spread amongst caucasian Americans who believed that they were being bullied by government agencies who were attempting to provide equal access to housing.⁵

In their book, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton document the continued isolation of African Americans within urban ghettos. The socio-economic gap, between those who lived in the inner city and suburbanites who had since fled, had grown progressively wider since the 1970s. By 1990, the population of the city of Chicago (excluding the surrounding suburbs) was roughly 40% black, in Detroit the

⁴ Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 172.

⁵ *Ibid*, 173.

number rose to roughly 76%.⁶ They attributed this racial isolation to increased instances of crime within the inner city. Criminal activity within major metropolitan areas made the idea of living within the inner city even less appealing to caucasian Americans. Besides the geo-political issues, mentioned by authors such as Massey and Denton, distinct cultural trends emerged as well that focused upon the inner-city. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the American news media frequently used the term “urban crisis” to refer to the increased rates of crime, drug use, violence, and poverty within urban centers. At the same time, popular films and musical genres emerged that did little to sway the general public away from the image of a dangerous inner city. Musical genres such as hip-hop and “gangsta” rap were utilized by young Black men to voice their opinions on issues affecting them. Within film the “New Jack” genre emerged focusing entirely on African American communities and often frightening audiences with realistic depictions of crime and gang violence. While these films and musical artists proved commercially successful, they also highlighted the sometimes negative realities that black youth faced while growing up in ghettos. Black youth were in no way less susceptible to the issues that revolved around the inner city than adults. Studying this period from the 1980s through to the 1990s helps to provide a greater sense of how the socio-economic shifts described in Sugrue and Massey and Denton’s books had continued to accelerate within the black community. Looking at this period could also potentially provide insight into contemporary issues that are affecting the African American community.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s scholars, pundits and commentators engaged in several debates concerning the relationships between race and a variety of factors such as crime, lack of

⁶ Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 63.

educational and employment opportunities and the myth of the absentee African-American father. These factors were thought to have influenced the rapidly rising rate at which African Americans (specifically young males) engaged in criminal activity. These debates that frequently pitted conservatives against liberals occurred within the larger scope of what was known as the “culture wars” argument. The idea of a “culture war” within the United States was popularized in 1991 by James Davison Hunter in his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. Davison argued that Americans had become polarized on a variety of “hot-button” issues covering a variety of topics such as sexuality (e.g. gay marriage), race and crime.⁷ Conservatives held more traditional stances on these hot button topics and saw themselves as defenders of family values and religious tradition. Opposing these individuals were liberals who often took on more progressive stances towards these volatile issues. These men and women were more willing to break from tradition than conservatives were in regards to issues such as abortion or gay rights. This divide between liberals and conservatives extended to how issues relating to race were approached. When race became an issue it usually did so in relation to poverty and crime. When conservatives critiqued African Americans in inner city ghettos they often pointed to high levels of crime and poverty as evidence of an overall moral decline in these communities. In

⁷ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. (New York:Basic Books, 1991) 47.

There have been several studies published that explore the “culture wars” within the United States. One of the pioneering studies on this topic was Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York City: W W Norton & Company Incorporated,1992). This book looked at the shift in the balance of power as a conservative voting majority emerged to challenge progressive liberals on issues relating to race, culture, sexuality and poverty. Several studies have also been published that look at how race has been approached by liberals and conservatives in the “culture wars” debates. *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press,2001) by African American scholar Cornell West explores a variety of issues surrounding the African- American community including exploring myths related to black sexuality and studying the new black conservatism. A more recent study on this topic is *Debating Race* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007) by Michael Eric Dyson. Dyson looks at a variety of issues relating to black Americans as he engages in debates with several pundits and commentator such as Ann Coulter, John McCain, Cornell West and Jesse Jackson.

1992 Vice Presidential Nominee Dan Quayle blamed the violence that occurred in the 1992 Los Angeles riots on what he saw as an overall decay of American morals. Quayle stated that, “ the lawless social anarchy” that emerged in Los Angeles emerged from a broader breakdown that had fostered a “poverty of values.”⁸ Quayle was known as a staunch defender of traditional family values and he gained notoriety for his conservative criticism of the inner city poor, particularly absentee fathers whom he believed were the root cause of poverty. This thesis will not attempt to explore these “culture war” debates. However, it is beneficial to acknowledge that they existed, as many of the authors cited throughout this paper likely belonged to one of the opposing sides. This thesis will focus on examining the relationships between high crime rates among African American youth and other socio-economic factors that were prevalent in African-American communities.

The themes of education, employment, family structure, and popular culture are all significant in attempting to determine what factors trigger criminal behaviour amongst Black male youth. Popular culture contains not only mediums such as film, music, or television, but also the method in which the media has handled certain issues. The section on popular culture will look at how African American male youth were represented within cultural mediums, as well as, how they were influenced by images of fellow African Americans depicted within cultural mediums. The period between 1985 and 1995 is significant to African American popular culture because of the emergence of a variety of different trends, genres, and themes that concentrated on urban life. Within music, two distinct genres emerged within the 1980s and 1990s that contained stylistic elements and lyrical content that focused on the inner city. These genres included hip hop and

⁸ Douglas Jehl. “Quayle Blames Recent Riots on “Murphy Brown” Type Morals”, *Los Angeles Times*, May 20th 1992, A13.

“gangsta rap.” While it can be said that the musical genre of hip hop emerged in the 1970s with pioneers such as DJ Kool Herc, it wasn’t until the early 1980s that the genre began to explode in popularity. Artists such as Run-D.M.C, Public Enemy, Grandmaster Flash, and LL Cool J were among those most popular with African-American youth at the time. Lyrically, many of these artists focused on socio-political commentary on contemporary issues facing African Americans. Much of this commentary was critical of the Reagan administration and the perceived lack of effort to aid poverty, drug addiction, and joblessness within the black community. While some saw the message of these rappers as positive in attempting to inspire change, others were threatened by what they saw as unwanted criticism from the underclass.

The emergence of “gangsta rap” in the 1990s intensified some of the trends that had begun in the 1980s. While hip-hop music could be politically conscious, “gangsta rap” tended to focus on themes of violence and poverty that accompanied the drug trade. This led critics to dismiss the music as a corrupting force toward American youth. This paper will look at some of this criticism and if it was warranted. Articles from *New York Times* critic Jon Paralles and Tipper Gore, co founder of the Parents Music Resource Center, will be studied. To contrast the voices of these critics will be those of popular hip hop artists at the time such as “Chuck D” of Public Enemy.

Within the cultural mediums of film and television, the inner city emerged as a reoccurring motif. The early 1970s saw the beginnings of this trend with the emergence of Blaxploitation films. Blaxploitation films were a sub-genre of exploitation films that catered specifically to a black audience. Common features within these films were the inclusion of an African American protagonist usually male but occasionally female, these films were set in rundown neighbourhoods resembling inner city America. The soundtracks of these films often included

contemporary genres such as funk and soul that were popular amongst African Americans at the time. While these movies fared well in the black community, they did little to challenge or bring to light socio-economic inequalities between black and white Americans. The majority of Blaxploitation films focused on violence that accompanied the drug trade and often portrayed black males as over sexualized and hyper-violent. This changed in the 1980s due to the contributions of directors such as Spike Lee. Lee was one of the first directors to introduce African American protagonists that did not follow popular stereotypes directed towards blacks.⁹ Lee won widespread applause by film critics for his realistic take on racism within the United States and in particular the honest portrayal of racial dynamics within the socially stratified area of Brooklyn.

The dominant sub-genre of black cinema that emerged in the 1990s was the “hood film,” which focused on the issues that arose in the inner city, with a particular focus on the drug trade and the violence that continued around it. These films borrowed some of the more negative elements from the earlier Blaxploitation films but applied them to the contemporary settings of inner-city communities such as Compton, California or Harlem, New York. While Spike Lee was significant for introducing more varied African American characters and his expansion of genres and themes included in his films focused on the black community, “hood films” will be the key film sub-genre focused on within this paper. This film genre was widely criticized for promoting violence and glamorizing the “gangsta” culture that was prominent at the time. When looking at

⁹ Spike Lee emerged as a significant figure in black cinema in the mid 1980s with the release of his first feature film *She's Gotta Have It*. By the mid 1990s he had directed several commercially successful films and received two nominations for best director at the Academy Awards. Lee frequently approached themes related to the African American community such as racism, gang violence, unwed pregnancy and lack of available jobs for African Americans. Lee's use of these themes made his films controversial, however, despite their controversial nature, Lee's films were able to present these issues to a larger audience and increase the visibility of problems plaguing black communities.

what, if any, influence “hood” films had on young black males a variety of secondary sources will be consulted. This section will cite work from noted historian of black films and prominent African American author Donald Bogle and author and Professor of Film Studies at the City University of New York. Other sources that will be consulted include newspaper articles from *The Wall Street Journal* as well as films released during the 1980s and 1990s such as *Do The Right Thing* and *Boyz N The Hood*.

Family structure will be studied in a similar manner to determine whether unique cultural circumstances that occur within the black community have influenced black youth negatively. Family structure became a “talking point” within the black community after the release of the Moynihan Report in 1965. Moynihan was employed by the U.S Department of Labor and came upon the conclusion that the absence of nuclear families within the black community would lead to greater instances of poverty and social inequality for future generations of African Americans. Moynihan blamed the absence of nuclear families on a “ghetto culture” that had emerged, which he believed had led many African Americans to become socially and economically stagnant. While Moynihan’s report was not universally applauded it made several lasting arguments about issues that had plagued the black community.¹⁰ Moynihan popularized numerous points relating to Black family structure, such as the impact of fatherless households on child development and

¹⁰ Daniel Patrick Moynihan. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor. March 1965.

This report was commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson in the hopes that Moynihan would recommend policy that would add towards the Great Society Program. At the time, African Americans were quickly becoming an part of an “underclass” that was seen as vulnerable. Moynihan was tasked with discovering why African Americans lived in such poor conditions in comparison to other Americans. Moynihan concluded that the poor economic conditions that the majority of working class African Americans faced were caused by the breakdown of traditional family structure within the Black community.

the influence of predominately matriarchal households in weakening the ability of Black men to act as authority figures.

The chapter on family structure will examine both cultural and socio-economic circumstances that have influenced the creation of various forms of black families. Of particular interest here is the influence that single-parent families have had on the development of black male youths. This section on family structure will also explore the influence that job availability has on family structure. A great deal of secondary source material has approached this issue of single-parent families in the black community and the effect this particular type of family structure have had on childhood development. The section on family structure will cite the existing secondary material on black family structure while also attempting to determine whether the conclusions made by various authors indicate that family structure can be seen as a legitimate factor in leading black male youth towards criminal activity. This section will examine the writings of African American sociologist Bette J. Dickerson, who has published valuable works on black single mothers. It will also explore several studies published by those within the fields of family studies, sociology, and psychology.

Education will be approached in a similar fashion in that both cultural and economic factors will be explored. Authors who have studied the connections between the successes and failures of black students in public schools often point to curriculum and educational environment as a cultural factors placing black students at a disadvantage. Public debates about this topic have focused on the question of whether the standard curriculum within the American public school system has catered towards ensuring the success of Caucasian students. Authors making this argument see the need for separate Afro-centric curriculum, or in some cases separate schools to

provide a more suitable environment for black students to learn. Central to this argument is the notion that existing curriculum fails to properly engage black students who come from a separate and unique cultural background. The American public school system has been criticized for failing to account for the differences in culture between black and white students when disciplining students. African-American male students are often disciplined or suspended from schools at rates much higher than students from other cultural backgrounds.¹¹ There has been no consensus over whether these statistics can be attributed to cultural or economic differences between black students and those from other ethnicities.

The goal of this chapter will be to look at the various schools of thought about the relationship between various public schooling systems and how black male youth respond to curriculum to determine whether any evidence exists that links the struggles of black youth in school to later instances of criminal behaviour. This chapter will also explore the relationship between family support and structure and how it can possibly impact a student's academic success. Data from the *Student Life in High School Project* will be used to discuss the potential negative impact that a lack of family support could have on the likelihood of a child succeeding in school.

Employment will be the final factor examined within this paper. This issue will be crucial when attempting to understand whether a lack of job opportunities or proper vocational training led black youth to resort to criminal activity between 1980 and 1995. Historically, employment has served as one of the more predominant issues affecting the African American community.

¹¹ Raefaele Mendez and HM Knoff. "Predictors of suspension and negative school outcomes: A longitudinal investigation". *New Directions for Youth Development*. Vol 99, 2003, pg 17-33.

This study conducted by Mendez and Knoff finds that while black youth comprise only 17% of students within the American schooling system, they account for 32% of school suspensions. Nationally, black students are twice as likely as white students to be suspended or expelled and in urban districts this disparity can range from three to twenty two times as likely.

The legacy of slavery and later Jim Crow Laws meant African Americans were often forced to accept menial jobs with little security in the North and South.¹² Unemployment and joblessness amongst Black youth remained a looming issue within the African American community in the 1980s and into the 1990s. Of particular interest in this portion of the study will be its attempt to determine whether black youth truly face an empty job market or if this idea is simply a common misconception. Issues relating to employment did not occur in isolation. These issues tended to interact with similar factors related to education and family structure to create the potential conditions for young black men to become involved in criminal activity. This chapter will explore the influence that a lack of education can have on job prospects, as well as, the role that extended kinship networks play in aiding individuals in finding work. In order to better understand this issue, a variety of secondary and primary sources will be discussed within this section to understand the relationship between crime and employment. Among these sources will be two studies by sociologist and economist Richard B. Freeman. Freeman was one of the leading labour economists in the United States and has published several works concerning the relationship between the labour market and African Americans.

¹² Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 174.

Chapter 1: Socio-Political Developments in the Late 20th Century United States

Before launching into a discussion of what factors may have contributed to criminal activity amongst black youths, it is worthwhile to discuss the political and social contexts that influenced the early development of African American youth from 1985 to 1995. Of particular interest here will be looking at the different political initiatives that emerged during this period such as “The War on Drugs” and “The War on Poverty” and what effects these measures had on the black community. The idea of a “War on Drugs” originated in 1971 under then President Richard Nixon.¹³ This phrase was used to describe the growing heroin epidemic in the United States that had emerged as a result of American servicemen returning from Vietnam. Roughly 10-15% of American Servicemen returning from Vietnam were addicted to heroin. The War on Drugs of the 1980s was fought between American legislators and law enforcement and those involved in the drug trade. During the 1980s a significant amount of attention was devoted to combating the use and sale of crack cocaine. Cocaine had replaced heroin as the drug of choice within the United States of America. In 1992, President George Bush outlined a law-enforcement program that would target drug users, suppliers and producers of illegal drugs.¹⁴ The goals of this plan were to curb drug use by making drugs difficult or too expensive to obtain. This would be done by arresting suppliers en masse with the hopes of increasing the price of drugs by limiting the supply. This approach also attempted to limit demand by threatening to punish users through the

¹³ Dan Baum. *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure* (New York City: Little, Brown, and Company, 1996) ix.

¹⁴ Morris J. Blachman and Kenneth E. Sharpe. “The War on Drugs: American Democracy Under Assault”, *World Policy Journal*, Vol 7, no 1, Winter 1989/90, pg 136.

use of fines and jail time.¹⁵ Drug use was treated as not just a crime but a nationwide epidemic that needed to be eradicated by the use of force and extensive punishment.

To treat this epidemic, the American prison system was used to house those who would be convicted of drug-related offenses. The majority of these individuals were African Americans. According to the Sentencing Project, approximately one in four African American males in their twenties were either on parole, in jail, or on probation.¹⁶ Only six percent of white males in their twenties were in the same situation and roughly 10 percent were latinos.¹⁷ White Americans also made up the majority of drug traffickers and manufacturers, while African Americans usually held lower level positions, as street dealers. These lower-level dealers were often the most visible figures within the drug trade and easiest targets for law enforcement agents. The War on Drugs brought about sentencing deficiencies between different varieties of the drug cocaine. Crack cocaine (or, simply, crack) rose in popularity in the mid 1980s, as the low-cost version of powder cocaine that could be smoked rather than consumed through the nose by sniffing or through one's mouth by rubbing the powder on the user's gums. Due to its lower cost, crack was popular in low-income communities, while powdered cocaine tended to be the affluent caucasian's drug of choice. Under federal law, the possible punishment for possession and distribution of crack

¹⁵ Blachman and Sharpe. "The War on Drugs: American Democracy Under Assault", 136.

¹⁶ Marc Mauer and Tracy Huling. "Young Black Men in the Criminal Justice System: Five Years Later", The Sentencing Project, October 1995.

The Sentencing Project was established in 1986 as a non-profit organization. The organization seeks to reform the American criminal justice system by bringing attention to trends that display racial inequities in sentences handed out to criminals.

¹⁷ Clarence Lusane. *Pipe Dream Blues: Racism and the War on Drugs* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) 45.

cocaine was roughly 100 times more severe than powdered cocaine.¹⁸ This law was seen as racially unfair as crack cocaine was more likely to be distributed and consumed by minorities than caucasian Americans.

Critics attacked the “War on Drugs” for eroding individual civil liberties by invading privacy, promoting censorship, and weakening safeguards against arbitrary search. Concern also mounted over whether the legal measures enacted by Congress only served to increase the profits of drug producers, rather than curb demand. These concerns over the loss of civil rights and liberties were felt strongly across the African American community. In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. This Act was the first major law passed under the guise of aiding the “War on Drugs.” The Anti-Drug Abuse Act was intended to decrease the availability of illicit drugs and discourage the use of drugs by stiffening penalties established for drug possession, manufacturing, and use. What emerged instead was an extreme racial disparity with regards to who was being arrested for drug-related crimes. In 1989, African Americans accounted for roughly 13% of all drug users, however, they represented 41% of those arrested for drug related offenses.¹⁹ As statistics emerged that displayed a racial disparity in regards to those arrested, critics of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act attempted to explain why African Americans were arrested for drug related offenses at such high rates in comparison to other ethnicities.

Critics of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act pointed at disparities in sentencing, based on the type of drug in which an offender was found. When an offender was found with crack cocaine he or she

¹⁸ James D. Unnever and Shaun L. Gabbidon. *A Theory of African American Offending: Race, Racism, and Crime* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2011) 38.

In 2010, under President Obama, the Fair Sentencing Act was passed reducing the sentence disparity from 100:1 to 18:1. While this was a substantial improvement in reducing racial inequalities within the law it did not eliminate the racial divide within sentencing.

¹⁹ Othello Harris and R. Robin Miller ed. *Impacts of Incarceration on the American Family*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2003, 179.

faced sentences that were decidedly harsher than when an individual was caught with powder cocaine. Some critics saw this as evidence of prejudice within the law as crack cocaine was much cheaper to obtain and more likely to be found on minority and ethnic offenders. Increased police presence in black communities led to a general increase in arrests and charges filed against African Americans. In this regard, the most significant impact the War on Drugs had on African Americans was to reinforce negative stereotypes and notions that African Americans were prone to violent behaviour.

Movements in the black community emerged to attempt to combat drug use and violence. Community-based groups found some success in deterring drug dealers from operating in their regions. Muslim organizations, black men's groups and other community activists aggressively challenged corner dealers for their "turf." These efforts often took the form of nonviolent activism. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organized anti-drug programs throughout various churches that sought to curb drug abuse amongst African Americans. However, vigilantism was not uncommon and in some cases crack houses were burnt down by vigilante mobs.²⁰ While community activism was prevalent, drug use and drug violence continued to disrupt African-American communities. Nowhere was this more apparent than in African American families. The typical family structure in African-American communities was dramatically altered by the expansion of drug use in the United States. As African American activist and author Clarence Lusane argues, "The extended family system that had operated since slavery had been eroded as black communities found themselves under siege."²¹ Single-parent families became a significant issue when discussing the African American community. From

²⁰ Lusane. *Pipe Dream Blues*, 51.

²¹ *Ibid*, 55.

1980 to 1989, female incarceration rates were higher than for men.²² The increase in women's incarceration rates was related to drug related offenses and crimes that were being committed by African American women. Women were also jailed at higher rates than usual for child abuse and neglect. Crack cocaine was often involved in child abuse cases that resulted in children being sent to foster care.²³ This increase in drug related offenses for African American women only increased the number of women prisoners in the American prison system and decreased the opportunities for youth to experience a healthy childhood.

While the War on Drugs played a significant role in affecting the upbringing of black youth, the assault on the welfare state led by the Clinton administration heavily impacted African American family structure. The idea of a war on poverty began in the 1960s, under President Lyndon B. Johnson. This platform was part of Johnson's Great Society program that sought to eliminate hunger and deprivation from American life. To accomplish this goal, Johnson enacted several pieces of legislation that utilized federal and state funds to create or improve infrastructure to aid potential at risk targets. Many of these individuals or families were African Americans. Historian Alan Brinkley argued that, "A significant achievement of the Great Society programs was aiding African Americans by passing legislation that limited housing discrimination (Civil Rights Act of 1968) and forbade job discrimination (Civil Rights Act of 1964)."²⁴ As the United States shifted towards the right both politically and socially, the desire

²² Scott Armstrong, "U.S Women's Prisons Overflow," *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 July 1990,pg 1-2.

²³ *Ibid*, 2.

²⁴ Alan Brinkley, "Great Society" in *The Reader's Companion to American History* ed. Eric Foner and John Arthur Garraty, 479 (Boston:Houghton Mifflin Company,1991).

Alan Brinkley is an American historian and Professor at Colombia University. Brinkley has published several works on post-war American history, several of which have looked at the changes New Deal Liberalism has undergone. For an overview on this topic see also: John. A. Andrews III. *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher,1998).

to aid the impoverished was replaced with the need to conserve the money being spent federally by the United States government and privately by taxpayers.

In the 1980s under President Reagan, the scaling back of the liberal welfare state was undertaken in earnest. This is not to say that attempts to diminish the welfare state did not occur under Nixon or Carter, but that under President Reagan the most visible attempts to wean the poor off of government financial support took place. The basic argument that Reagan and his conservative supporters advanced towards liberal welfare programs was that they encouraged people to work less. In 1988, the Reagan administration enacted the Family Support Act(FSA), which was one of the first major reforms of the Aid to Dependent Children Act.²⁵ The Support Act introduced several changes in how welfare payments were received and the prerequisites needed to collect welfare. A new requirement was introduced via the FSA calling for women to identify the fathers of their children as a condition for obtaining welfare. This was particularly problematic for African-American women who had children out of wedlock. This placed single-parent families at risk because often African-American mothers were unaware of the biological fathers of their children.²⁶ This had the effect of shifting black mothers into the labour force at the expense of raising their own children. The FSA also included provisions for transitional programs meant to train or provide education for the poor for the purposes of entry into the job market. The policies of the Reagan administration had two separate effects on the American

²⁵ Frank Stricker. *Why America Lost the War on Poverty* (Chapel Hill:University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 192

The Aid to Families with Dependent Children Act was passed in 1935 under then President Franklin Roosevelt. This piece of legislation was created by the Social Security Act and was meant to provide financial assistance to children of single parents or whose families had low or no income. Common critiques of the Act were directed at the perception that it encouraged women to have children rather than joining the workforce. By 1996, it was estimated that the Act was costing roughly 24 billion dollars a year to aid impoverished families.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 193.

population. On one hand, white middle class Americans were told that the economy was back on track and more Americans were joining the workforce leaving welfare behind. In reality, policy and economic conditions affected social groups differently. In 1991, the child poverty rate for blacks was 46% and 40% for hispanics. The rate was much lower for Whites at only 17%.²⁷ Thus, a strange contradiction occurred under Reagan that saw a grim picture of welfare depicted throughout the news. This picture consisted of ghetto slums rife with crack cocaine and gang violence. However, this grim picture was due in part to the programs that he helped to create. Cuts to welfare and social programs hurt the poor far more than other Americans. Conservatives profited from this, by placing the blame on liberal welfare programs that were unable to save the poor from themselves. This conservative outlook on welfare programs continued into the 1990s under the Clinton Administration.

As the first term of his presidency drew to a close, Bill Clinton's administration began to dramatically reduce entitlement to welfare benefits. Despite the decline in poverty rates and the increase in average wages, most people who left the welfare program stayed poor. Clinton's approach to welfare was dramatically different from his Democratic predecessors. Clinton adopted what was called the "Third Way" approach to welfare.²⁸ Clinton intended his approach to be a middle ground between welfare liberalism and the conservative outlook. However, Clinton's approach towards welfare mirrored the outlook of conservatives. This could be attributed to the conservative congressional victory that left Clinton catering to the Newt Gingrich led Republican GOP. What resulted from this conservative victory? In 1996, the

²⁷ Jared Bernstein and Lawrence R. Mishel. *The State of Working America: 1992-1993* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 286.

²⁸ Brendan O'Connor. *A Political History of the American Welfare System* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2003), 185.

Clinton administration passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This act drew largely on Conservative critiques of the liberal welfare system set up by Franklin Roosevelt and later Lyndon B. Johnson.

PRWORA attempted to eliminate the stigma of welfare dependency that many Conservatives claimed was commonplace amongst the poor. By tightening the preconditions needed to obtain welfare, it would force those currently using the service to enter the workforce. Specific clauses were inserted into the Act that significantly cut the food stamp program, set new time limits on welfare, and established concrete guidelines on the responsibility of single mothers to identify the biological fathers of their children.²⁹ A major component of PRWORA was the creation of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Family Program (TANF) which was specifically designed to assist single parents with children. TANF was administered at the state level with a block grant being administered to each state with the ability to add restrictions or limitations upon those imposed by the federal government.³⁰ Individual states were also able to add their own time limits and work requirements if they saw fit. These new clauses were intended to instill more personal responsibility within welfare recipients. This idea of responsibility was key to the new welfare plan as Clinton stated, “We are honoring a moral obligation to help the poor from themselves. We will provide people with the education, training, job placement assistance, and childcare they need for two years so they can break the cycle of dependency.”³¹ In Congress, Newt Gingrich promised to end chronic abuse of the American welfare system. Gingrich and the Republican Party targeted single parent families and welfare mothers in particular as chronic

²⁹ O'Connor. *A Political History of the American Welfare System*, 223.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 230.

³¹ Douglas Besharov. “That Other Clinton Promise: Ending Welfare As We Know It”, *Wall Street Journal*, Jan 18 1993, A10.

welfare abusers. The goal of this crusade against welfare abuse was to reinvigorate the work ethic of welfare recipients to make way for the shift to workfare programs.

What did this welfare debate mean for blacks, specifically African-American mothers and their children? The clauses within PRWORA shifted a great deal of responsibility towards shaping welfare programs and welfare collection towards the individual states. This created inequalities in how welfare was distributed from state to state affecting the income that welfare recipients would receive as well as the specific requirements needed to obtain welfare. The results differed from state to state as well. In the District of Colombia, fairly permissive welfare rules were enacted which resulted in non-marital births dropping. Puzzlingly in the state of Wisconsin, where welfare laws were among the most strict, non-marital births actually rose.³² As a whole, the conservative political and social shift beginning in the 1980s and continuing throughout the 1990s hurt the economic and social prospects of African Americans. The image of the welfare mother raising several children was used by Conservative politicians as the representation of all that was wrong with the liberal welfare system. The belief within Congress was that PRWORA would influence welfare recipients to enter the workforce and refrain from having children out of wedlock. However, in reality the changes made to welfare placed many African American children at risk. This paper will show that the continuing shift to the Right brought forth changes that negatively affected African American family structure and employment and educational opportunities. Popular culture was influenced by these changes as well, but in a different manner than the previously mentioned subjects. African Americans were a constant presence within the news as well as certain genres of film and music. But rarely was this presence acknowledged as

³² O'Connor. *A Political History of the American Welfare System*, 232.

positive by critics and social commentators. This section on popular culture will look at the rise of “gangsta rap” within music, the “New Jack” or “hood” style of film and the constant presence of inner-city African Americans within the news. This chapter will discuss these factors to better determine the relationship between popular culture and criminal activity amongst Black youths.

Chapter 2: Popular Culture

Popular culture plays an important role in any society. It represents ideas, perceptions, and trends that resonate across the greatest segment of a country's population.³³ Popular culture can also be dangerous, as it can represent popular images presented by commercial entities. It can also be sensationalist, provoking fears by focusing on negative aspects or trends in society. African Americans have played a significant role in influencing and absorbing popular culture within the United States. Within the mediums of television, film, and music, African Americans were well-represented both positively and negatively. The 1980s and 1990s saw the re-emergence of an urban subculture that quickly spread throughout the United States. In some regards, this subculture was reminiscent of the Black Power and Black Pride movements of the 1960s and 1970s. What separated these two periods was that by the 1980s, African Americans had moved past the initial elation that came with the enfranchisement granted by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The 1980s saw a different kind of frustration build within the greater African American community, one that was based upon a dissatisfaction with the progress that African Americans had made socially and economically, following the conclusion of the Civil Rights Movement. Journalist Edward George argued in his article, "Beneath the Hats" that, "black anger sells records and black anger comes from all the usual suspects bad housing, bad education, dead-end jobs if any, and the retraction of the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement."³⁴ This anger and deep dissatisfaction from black Americans with their place in

³³ For further definition of what constitutes popular culture and a greater examination of American popular culture. See George Lipsitz, *Time Passages : Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

³⁴ Edward George. "Beneath the Hats," *Sights and Sound*, November 1994, 26.

society could be heard within “gangsta rap” and hip hop music and seen within the emerging “hood film” subgenre of black films. While this anger may have been used creatively within film and music it was seen fearfully by many within the news industry.

Perhaps the most influential facet of pop culture, at least towards African American representation within popular culture, would be the news media and television. Under the umbrella of the War on Drugs, the mainstream media began to aggressively report on and discuss the crime and drug violence rampant within the inner-city. Throughout the 1980s, the mainstream news media treated the drug violence and crack cocaine within urban areas as a pandemic and began to create “moral panic” amongst Americans.³⁵ This moral panic could be seen as the conservative reaction to the racial and economic polarization within American metropolitan areas. At the same time, the portrayal of the “dangerous” underclass was used to justify the Right’s attack on the liberal welfare state. In his book, *Urban Nightmares*, Steve Macek argued that the news media could always be found leaning towards the dominant political and economic power because reporting had become a for-profit business. Media outlets could not afford to alienate sponsors or owners. Between 1985 and 1988, the majority of guests who appeared on the ABC news program *Nightline* were classified as either government officials (34%) or professionals in the fields of sociology, economics, or politics (39%).³⁶ The message coming from the majority of these officials echoed that of those in the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations and called for increased police presence, harsher penalties and a crackdown on the leniency the liberal welfare system.

³⁵ Steve Macek. *Urban Nightmares: The Media, The Right, and the Moral Panic Over the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) xiii.

Macek defines moral panic as any sudden upsurge of public concern or alarm about a condition or group socially defined as “threatening” or “dangerous”.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 140.

So how did the news media influence the lives of African Americans and more specifically African American youth? The narrative presented through the news depicted African Americans living within the inner-city as dangerous and prone to violence. Journalist Kirk A. Johnson found disturbing evidence of this while monitoring over 3,200 news stories across two papers, three TV stations and one radio station. Johnson found that 85% of stories concerning black neighbourhoods reinforced negative stereotypes of blacks.³⁷ Johnson added, “Stories featuring crime and violence dominate, almost to the exclusion of stories that would reflect the true diversity of the black community, so that a typical news-consumer might easily come to associate negative images with all inner-city blacks.”³⁸ Focus was usually narrowed down to the worst the inner-city had to offer, stories of depravity, violence, and strife were commonplace. Little attention was paid to the structural socio-economic issues that shaped life in the inner-city. These reports had the unintended effect of distorting African American’s self representation. A crucial role that popular culture plays in any society is depicting images and representations of groups or individuals for mass consumption. The images and representations presented nationally on the news between 1985 and 1995 of African Americans were rarely accurate or flattering.

A similar trend developed in newspaper coverage of African American neighbourhoods. Research conducted by James Ettema and Limor Peer on newspaper coverage of different neighbourhoods within Chicago revealed that news concerning Chicago’s white and black communities were highly skewed. Austin a mostly poor black neighbourhood and Lincoln Park a

³⁷ Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon. *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990) 243.

³⁸ Kirk A. Johnson, “In the Major Media”. *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 1987, 50.

The major media monitored were the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, WGBH-TV (PBS affiliate), WBZ-TV (CBS affiliate), WCVB-TV (ABC affiliate), and WBCN-FM Radio.

more affluent white community were covered throughout the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1993. Roughly 70 percent of the stories of the stories concerning Austin framed crime in terms of a “social problem”. In comparison, roughly 22 percent of the stories covering Lincoln Park were related to crime or social problems.³⁹ Austin was portrayed within newspapers as a “crime-ridden and drug-infested” community despite the fact that Austin (10,370) had slightly fewer reported criminal offenses than Lincoln Park (10,550).⁴⁰ While both neighbourhoods were faced with similar issues relating to crime, the residents of Lincoln Park faced far less scrutiny from newspapers. Lincoln Park did not face the same treatment as Austin and the residents of the predominantly white community were not subjected to the same social criticisms and biases as those in Austin. By briefly examining the treatment of various African American neighbourhoods by the news media, it can be seen that throughout the 1980s and 1990s Black Americans were portrayed significantly differently from their White counterparts. This had the immediate effect of heightening social paranoia towards African Americans and black neighbourhoods, which were consistently portrayed as dangerous and destitute. All of these negative representations of African American communities had a long-term side effect of influencing the outlooks and self-representations of black youth.

The daily news was not the only program portraying the lives of African Americans on television. Fictionalized African Americans families appeared on on television sitcoms in the 1980s and 1990s dealing with issues that arose in their day-to-day lives. The majority of these shows depicted middle-class African-Americans families that lived in fairly affluent areas and were economically well-off. The most popular, *The Cosby Show*, was created in 1984 and stayed

³⁹ James Ettema and Limor Peer. “Good News From a Bad Neighbourhood: Towards an Alternative to the Discourse of Urban Pathology”. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no.4: 840

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 840.

on the air until 1992; comedian Bill Cosby produced the show. The program depicted the life of the Huxtable family led by Cliff Huxtable (Bill Cosby), his wife Clair (Phylicia Rashad) and their four children. *The Cosby Show* was a departure from earlier sitcoms that focused on African Americans such as *Sanford & Son* and *Good Times*. These earlier sitcoms relied more on blue-collar themes than their later counterparts. More specifically, *Good Times* was particularly honest on the topics of racism and socio-economic inequalities between black and white Americans. Such topics were never seriously broached in *The Cosby Show*. Over the course of its existence, *The Cosby Show* frequently promoted artists and individuals that were seen as major contributors to black culture.⁴¹ These individuals were often key figures in the musical genres of jazz and soul, while others were influential Civil Rights figures of the 1960s.

While many of these individuals were influential amongst older generations of African Americans, few of these men and women would have had any standing towards the majority of black youth living in the 1980s and 1990s. This is not to say that these individuals were not nationally notable or popular. Figures such as Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, were important because of their crossover appeal towards black and white audiences and inoffensive personalities that would appeal to the majority of television audiences. Ellington's music was featured in *The Cosby Show* while Gillespie made a guest appearance on the program as himself.⁴² Figures such as Ellington or Gillespie were less likely to appeal to black youth as it was not as likely they would have been exposed to classical jazz growing up. *The Cosby Show*

⁴¹ James Poniewozik. "All-Time 100 Television Shows". Time Magazine 2007-09-25, 44.

The *Cosby Show* frequently showcased prominent Jazz musicians throughout its run. Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington were only a few of the many popular musicians that visited the *Cosby Show*. The *Cosby Show* also utilized musicians who were prominent civil rights activists. Notable figures included Lena Horne and Miriam Makeba.

⁴² *The Cosby Show* (Casey-Werner Company, 1984-1992).

began a trend of sitcoms depicting upper middle-class African American families dealing with watered down issues relating to race. Sitcoms such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters*, and *Charlie & Company* focused on the black middle-class and rarely discussed issues relating to poverty or drug use. These shows were not the only variety of programming aimed towards a black audience.

Several television programs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that aspired towards a more realistic portrayal of the socio-economic issues affecting the black community. *A Different World* and *South Central* became two of the more noteworthy programs dealing with serious issues affecting African Americans. Unlike *The Cosby Show*, both of these programs directly approached controversial topics such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, drug and gang violence, and single parent families. In the case of *A Different World*, which was a direct spin-off of *The Cosby Show*, this was surprising. *A Different World* looked at the lives of black college students who presumably came from wealthy families that could afford college education for their children. The series took place at the fictional college, Hillman College, the series lead was Cliff Huxtable's (Bill Cosby) daughter, Denise Huxtable (Lisa Bonet).⁴³ *A Different World* did adopt a similar formula as *The Cosby Show* in utilizing famous Black actors, musicians, and figures. However, *A Different World*, made use of more contemporary figures such as rapper Tupac Shakur, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and popular hip-hop artist Heavy D. What separated these men from the celebrities on *The Cosby Show* was not their popularity, but their controversial attitudes and contemporary appeal.⁴⁴ For instance, while he was an extremely popular black leader and activist, Jesse Jackson was criticized for his anti-Semitic remarks made during his 1984

⁴³ Different Touch to Different World. Los Angeles Times, Oct 2, 2010.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Presidential campaign.⁴⁵ Despite its more controversial premise than its predecessor, *A Different World* enjoyed six seasons before ending its lifespan.

While similar to *A Different World* in its mature take on issues involving the African-American community, *South Central* took an even more controversial stance on what levels of realism could be portrayed on television. *South Central*, a short-lived 1994 television show on Fox, dealt with the lives of an African American family living in a South-Central neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Joan Moseley (Tina Lifford), the protagonist of the series, was in charge of raising three children with no assistance from her husband while she faced the looming presence of gangs and drugs. *South Central* only lasted one season before being cancelled. However, the program was notable for its portrayal of more mature themes than what was considered the norm on television at the time. In the first three episodes of the series, *South Central* had approached issues relating to welfare use among single mothers, drug use, the widespread income gap between middle and lower class African Americans and gang violence. Despite its short lifespan, *South Central* was applauded by black leaders for its frankness and honesty.⁴⁶ While *South Central* contained an honest portrayal of the issues working class black Americans could face it only lasted for ten episodes. While it is difficult to ascertain why the show only lasted for such a short period of time, the subject matter of the program that focused on inner-city poverty may not have interested the majority of American television viewers. The effects of television programming on black youth are usually described as negative. Various studies have been

⁴⁵ In 1984, Jackson was criticized for his use of derogative terms relating to those of the Jewish faith. These views were later forgotten and in 2000 Jackson offered his support to Jewish senator Joseph Lieberman at the 2000 Democratic National Convention. Throughout his career, Jackson has been a vigorous defender of Civil Rights. Jackson received a great deal of support from the African American community despite his controversial opinions relating to the causes of black poverty.

⁴⁶ Howard Rosenberg, "Did Jackson Save FOX Series With Boycott Threat?", *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 19, 1994.

released that link violence portrayed on television or film with causing emotional distress and erratic behaviour linked to witnessing similar violence in person.

In a 1991 study titled “Co-Victimization of African American students who Witness Violence,” sociologists Bambade H. Shakoor and Deborah Chalmers explored the relationship between violence witnessed within popular culture and violence witnessed in person. Co-Victimization is described within the article as, “the experience of directly observing the violent assault of another person.”⁴⁷ The authors saw co-victimization as linked to violence displayed on television. Violence seen on television is often based on violence seen in day-to-day life whether it is robberies covered on the daily news, or murders seen on television crime dramas.

Witnessing violent acts on the daily news that mimiced those seen in reality could often cause emotional distress or erratic behaviour in youth. Shakoor and Chalmers argued that of the 1000 students surveyed in a Chicago neighbourhood, roughly 75% of the participating boys and 10% of the participating girls had witnessed a crime being committed.⁴⁸ They found that of those who had witnessed criminal behaviour, it was more likely that the witness would experience “deleterious effects on cognition, memory, school performance and learning.”⁴⁹ These negative effects brought on by witnessing violent crimes were likely to reoccur if the witness viewed similar events on television. While this study does not provide concrete evidence that violence on television can be directly linked to violent behaviour in young males, it does provide insight into the long-term effects that witnessing violence may have on children.

⁴⁷ Bambade H. Shakoor and Deborah Chalmers, “Co-Victimization of African American Children Who Witness Violence: Effects on Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioural Development”. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, Vol 83, No 3(March,1991) 236.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 236.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 236.

In this regard, several different messages were being delivered to African American youth through television programming. It is difficult to know exactly how many African Americans viewed the news on a daily basis but network news programs were available on several channels, many of which were available via an antenna rather than cable networks, which required a paid subscription. The news media offered a view of African Americans that was alarmist and representative of only the worst that the African American community had to offer. Programs like *The Cosby Show* emphasized positivity within the black community but only offered a view that was relatable if the viewer belonged to the upper-middle class demographic. Finally, programs such as *South Central* and *A Different World* were more controversial based on the topics they chose to explore. At the same time, both programs were able to portray issues that were greatly relevant to the black community at large, while these programs differed in levels of success and popularity, they were similar in their attempts to present an honest interpretation of African American issues.

In a similar fashion to television, film was an important cultural medium in the United States. However, unlike television, African Americans played greater roles in producing, creating, and distributing films created specifically for a black audience. The 1980s brought a change to what was called “black cinema.” New directors emerged and played significant roles in influencing the content and subject matter that appeared in black films. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of films targeted African Americans focused on city life. Common settings of African American films included visibly identifiable neighbourhoods, such as Harlem in New York or the South Central and Watts neighbourhoods in

California.⁵⁰ While many of these films focused on a black motif, it was not uncommon for a significant white audience to attend and enjoy black cinema. A major source of contention within black cinema was the messages that many of these films contained. As the narrative focus of black cinema shifted towards an urban motif, the plot and marketing focus of several black films were criticized for promoting violence and criminal behaviour amongst youth.⁵¹ Journalists Joanne Lipman and Alix M. Freedman argued, “while all black films aren’t the same, the advertising for many of them would suggest they are focusing on just the violence.”⁵² The response to this criticism was that Black cinema did not promote criminal behaviour, but rather it attempted to showcase the realities of urban life and the structural inequalities within the black community that had become commonplace. Author Paula J. Massod argued that, “films of the 1990s such as *Juice* (1992), *Boyz N The Hood* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993), included signs of the effects of economic shifts within the United States, such as rising rates of unemployment amongst young men, an increasing association of criminality with black youth, and the growing influence of rap music.”⁵³ Despite this apparent controversy, many African Americans enjoyed film as an art form and a cultural medium. Film gave African Americans another medium to express their culture and their criticisms of American society.

Before examining the impact that film had on the self-representation of African American male youth, it helps to look at the significant developments within black cinema from the early 1980s into the 1990s. Examining these shifts is crucial when attempting to understand what if any, impact popular culture had on the development of African American youth. Spike Lee, emerged

⁵⁰ Paula J. Massood. *Black City Cinema* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) 2.

⁵¹ Joanne Lipman and Alix M. Freeman. “Ad for Boyz Create Debate Over Violence,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 16 1991, B1.

⁵² *Ibid*, B1.

⁵³ Mantha Diawara ed. *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1993) 143.

as arguably the most influential African American in the film industry in the 1980s. Lee became a significant figure in black cinema in 1986, with the release of his film *She's Gotta Have It*. Within five years, Lee had not only reinvigorated independent black cinema, but he also emerged as a sought-after director for mainstream studio funded films. How had this happened? *She's Gotta Have It* was produced with a budget of only \$175,000 yet it grossed well over \$7 million domestically at the box office.⁵⁴ What separated Lee from other directors at the time was his use of the urban aesthetic and his unorthodox portrayal of black characters. *She's Gotta Have It* was significant in its portrayal of black women. Lee was one of the first to portray African American women in a more realistic light in comparison to films of the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁵ Lee's female protagonist Nola did not fit the standard representation of black women in film at the time. Unlike the typical characterization of black women Nola, was sexually independent yet pragmatic, in contrast to black female characters from the 1960s and 1970s.

The release of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) became a significant event in black cinematic history. *Do the Right Thing* focused on the day-to-day life of residents in a small neighbourhood in Brooklyn. This setting is populated with dozens of diverse and colourful

⁵⁴ Mantha Diawara ed. *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1993) 160.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 161.

Previously black women had been contained within two dominant stereotypical roles in film. From the 1930s into the 1960s the most popular role for black women was the mammy. The name "Mammy" was popularized by the film *Gone With the Wind* (1939). The Mammy stereotype referred to African American women who worked as domestic servants or slaves during the Antebellum era in America. Hattie McDaniel famously portrayed Mammy a motherly character who was complacent towards her white owners but more aggressive towards other African Americans. These character traits were common among roles played by black women until the mid 1960s. With the Civil Rights movement in full force, a second major black archetype emerged, the over sexualized black heroine. These characters were made popular in Blaxploitation films such as *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) by actresses such as Pam Grier. These archetypes were similar to their hyper-sexualized male counterparts such as Shaft and Sweet Sweetback in that they were hyper-sexualized and hyper-violent. However, these female characters were unique in that they adopted character traits from their "mammy" predecessors such as protectors and nurturers of the weak and poor. While later black female characters sometimes borrowed from these earlier predecessors, these two dominant archetypes largely disappeared after the 1970s.

characters. Throughout the film these characters tackle issues of race and inequality, which leads to the racial riot at the film's climax. At the time of its release, Lee's film was seen as controversial by Right leaning critics and even by some prominent African-American commentators. Critics of the film questioned the implications brought forward by its ending. What was "the right thing"? Was Lee attempting to express that African Americans should violently rebel against white racism? At the film's conclusion, two dual quotes are shown on screen. The first quote originated from Martin Luther King Jr. advocating that violence is never justified under any circumstances and the second quote was from Malcolm X where he argues that violence is not truly violence when it is used in relation to self-defense.⁵⁶ Despite the ambiguity of the film's ending, Spike Lee was adamant that it was not trying to provoke violence in the African American community.

Besides the confusion over the implications of *Do the Right Thing's* ending, the film was significant in its unique portrayal of urban cityscape. *Do the Right Thing* explored racism within a small microcosm of a single neighbourhood the United States. Lee's vision of the inner-city was positive despite its frank depiction of racism. Earlier Blaxploitation films, in the 1970s, depicted the inner city as a dilapidated burnt-out region. In contrast to this, Lee's inner city was much more colourful and complex. As Paula Massood states in her book *Black City Cinema*, "By providing a view of black city space that is more diverse than the majority of representations of African American neighbourhoods, Lee is able to change representations of the inner city away from earlier negative representations of the ghetto."⁵⁷ This environment was not defined by criminality and drug violence, but rather by African American characters with a diverse array of

⁵⁶ Spike Lee, *Do the Right Thing* (1989).

⁵⁷ Massood. *Black City Cinema*, 130.

personalities and motivations. Lee's vision of Black neighbourhoods can be seen as positive despite the violence at the end of his film.

While Lee was greatly influential in changing the dominant aesthetic within films set in an urban environment, other African Americans were also active within the film industry and making strides of their own. Donald Bogle, author of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, regards the 1980s as a mixed period for African Americans in film. He applauded the work of directors like Lee, which he saw as refreshingly honest towards the issues that African Americans faced. Contrastingly, Bogle expressed concern over the roles of African Americans played in other genres of films. In particular, he analyzed the buddy-cop and comedy genres as casting African Americans in retread supporting roles as comedic relief. In these films, African Americans were depicted as over sexualized, quick to violence, and usually subservient to the demands of their often-white partners. In this manner, African Americans take on stereotypical roles held by Black actors from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the film *48 Hours* (1982), Eddie Murphy plays a convict who repeatedly and crudely expresses his desire for female companionship after his release from prison. In 1984, while starring in the film *Beverly Hills Cop*, Murphy played Axel Foley, a hot-headed police officer from Detroit whose colour is often used as a running joke.⁵⁸ Murphy became a star during the 1980s; yet the majority of the characters he portrayed played on African American stereotypes. Richard Pryor was an African - American film star throughout the 1980s, yet despite his popularity and success as a box office draw, many of his later roles involved playing characters that were dim-witted or mentally unstable.⁵⁹ Despite their popularity at the box office, both Murphy and Pryor often represented

⁵⁸ Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group 2001) 277.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 286.

African Americans negatively in film. Bogle attributes this to black actors being forced into roles deemed entertaining in a white context. He calls this the “Era of Tan,” a period where Black actors were encouraged to take on roles that de-emphasized their cultural differences in hopes of appealing to a greater white audience.⁶⁰ A common characteristic of many of these films was the ethnicity of the director, as the majority of directors of these “tan” films were white. This is not meant to imply that the ethnicity of a director influences the roles that black actors fill. Rather, it may be more representative of which roles the director assumed black actors could be profitable at the box office in.

What separates this “Era of Tan” from the films of Spike Lee would be the different representations of African Americans presented to the audience. Spike Lee’s characters were more than just one-dimensional figures meant to serve as comedic relief. Characters, such as Mookie from *Do the Right Thing* or Nola from *She’s All That*, provided examples of African Americans that showcased real emotional depth and complexity related to how black Americans faced their separate racial realities within day-to-day life. While Spike Lee was one of the first to explore the psyche and motivation of the modern urban young black American, it wasn’t until the 1990s that the social issues concerning black male youth became the focal point for commercially popular films.

African American representation within film shifted significantly from the mid 1980s into the 1990s. Across all segments of popular culture a new aesthetic emerged which became known as the “New Jack” style. This style took its name from one of the more popular films of the genre *New Jack City* (1991), directed by Mario Van Peebles, son of Melvin Van Peebles, who had

⁶⁰ Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group 2001) 290.

directed and starred in one of the more influential Blaxpolution films of the 1970s, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song* (1971). Not surprisingly, many of these “New Jack” styled films borrowed heavily from earlier Blaxpolution movies. Male protagonists almost always overshadowed women, extreme violence was commonplace, and drug use (particularly crack cocaine use) was routine.⁶¹ These films were a dramatic departure from the earlier works of Spike Lee. Yet, despite the focus on violence and drug use many “New Jack” films contained clear messages and critiques concerning the state of African Americans nationwide. Many issues brought forward in these films reflected troubling realities; black youth faced slim job prospects, single female families were on the rise, and the crack cocaine trade along with the violence that accompanied it was widespread.⁶² The film *Boyz N The Hood* (1991), directed by John Singleton looked at the development of a black male Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and his friends from adolescence through into adulthood. In the first segment of the film, Tre, as a child (played by Desi Arnez Hines II), is faced with issues relating to racism, police brutality, and gang violence. Raised for a time by his single mother, Tre is sent to live with his father after repeatedly acting up in school. During the first act of the film, Tre is shown experiencing a burglary in his home as well as witnessing the looming presence of gangs throughout his father’s Central Los Angeles neighbourhood.⁶³ Using time to progress the narrative allows the audience to see how traumatic incidents, involving violence or racism as a child, can impact the development of a youth over time. Act two of the film shows how Tre through the ongoing tutorship of his father has avoided gang affiliation and has nearly secured acceptance into college. In opposition to Tre’s upbringing is his childhood friend Doughboy (Ice Cube). Doughboy is depicted as aggressive and street-

⁶¹ Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 285.

⁶² Massood. *Black City Cinema*, 154.

⁶³ *Boyz N The Hood*. John Singleton 1991.

smart as a child in opposition to his more placid friend Tre.⁶⁴ As the film jumps to the boys' teen years, the audience is reintroduced to Doughboy who has recently been released from prison for theft at seventeen years of age. At the climax of the film, Doughboy is shown murdering members of a rival gang in retaliation for the death of his own brother. While initially accompanying his friend Doughboy, Tre after heeding his father's warnings leaves before the crime is committed. Films such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and *New Jack City* (1991) performed incredibly well at the box office despite depictions of black-on-black violence within troubled neighbourhoods. Regardless of their violent content, films such as *Boyz n the Hood* resonated with black audiences, identifying perhaps with the cultural representations presented to them. New Jack Films focused specifically on the consequences that socio-economic inequalities within the black community had on the development of male youth.

Despite the graphic violence depicted within *Boyz N the Hood*, the film was not intended to glorify inner-city gang violence. Rather, it was the goal of the director John Singleton to use the film as a tool to bring to light issues within the segments of the greater African-American community that may have increased the likelihood of black youth becoming involved in criminal activity. The film was often interpreted as sending a strong message about the necessary existence of a strong father figure in the lives of young black males. In his article, "Boyz N the Hood: Father Absence in America", Matthew Edison argues that, "Tre's father's involvement in his life allows him to learn about responsibility, dedication, and morality. As a result, Tre avoids the social problems that pervade his South Central Los Angeles neighbourhood, such as selling drugs, gang involvement, addiction, and violence."⁶⁵ This is in contrast to Tre's peers, who fall

⁶⁴ *Boyz N The Hood*. John Singleton 1991.

⁶⁵ Tim Swanson. "Boyz N the Hood: Twenty Years Later". *Los Angeles Times*. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/26/entertainment/la-et-boyz-anniv-20110726/2> (Accessed August 17 2012).

victim to gang violence and drug use. The film suggests that these young men are worse off because of the lack of any older male influence in their lives. Discussing the relationship between Tre and his father, Singleton told an interviewer: "Furious [the father] doesn't know that his son has done the right thing," but he doesn't need to, Singleton says. "The audience knows." Unbeknownst to the father, Tre has actually taken in all his advice, the director says, "and become a man by making his own decisions."⁶⁶ In this manner, *Boyz N the Hood*, fits more into the genre of a social commentary film akin to those of Spike Lee, than a violent criminal drama.

Films such as *Boyz N the Hood* and *New Jack City* were frequent targets of criticism from conservative and middle class commentators who worried what effects the film would have on impressionable youth. Singleton, himself, defended his film as anti-violence and went on record as saying that the main message of his film was to encourage African American fathers to remain as a presence in their children's lives.⁶⁷ Critics of these New Jack films also focused on the marketing campaigns that took place and often made light of the serious structural inequalities between black and white America. S. Craig Watkins author of *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* and Jonathan Munby, author of *Under a Bad Sign*, both critiqued the promotional campaigns behind many New Jack films. Of great concern to Munby was the tendency of Hollywood to market New Jack films in a similar manner to older gangster films. The tag-line from the *New Jack City* poster said, "They're a new brand of gangster. The new public enemy. The new family of crime."⁶⁸ This brand of tagline not only encouraged viewers to equate African American male youth with organized crime groups such as the Mafia,

⁶⁶ Tim Swanson. "Boyz N the Hood: Twenty Years Later". *Los Angeles Times*. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/26/entertainment/la-et-boyz-anniv-20110726/2> (Accessed August 17 2012).

⁶⁷ S. Craig Watkins. *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 172

⁶⁸ Jonathan Munby. *Under a Bad Sign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 160.

but it also made the claim that urban environments should be feared because of the violence that accompanied the drug trade. Making the connection between an entrenched organized crime syndicate such as the Italian mafia and semi-organized gangs of African-American youth may have been commercially profitable, but it was socially and ethically troubling. The Hollywood marketing system seemed to play upon stereotypes and fan racial tensions to promote “New Jack” films. The popularity of *New Jack City* is attributed to cultural mood shifts and the ghetto becoming a newsworthy topic in the early 1990s. Watkins studied the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots in Los Angeles and concluded that they attracted white interest to the subject of the ghetto and to films that depicted the ghetto and gang violence.⁶⁹ This increased the fascination with “New Jack” films among white audiences. Subsequently, films that covered these topics became commercially popular due to the increased interest from White audiences introduced to the topics of drug and gang violence by the news media. New Jack films became popular with both black and white audiences; a trend that also developed within earlier Blaxploitation films.

Outside of television and films, music was a significant form of expression within the black community. The explosion of hip hop and later “Gangsta” Rap culture helped to create an urban aesthetic throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Both of these genres became extremely popular amongst black youth. Hip Hop culture grew in the Bronx, New York during the 1970s. Hip Hop grew to include a form of stylized dress, language, and gestures that exemplified an urban street aesthetic. The first major hit recorded that fell within the genre of “Hip Hop” was “Rapper’s Delight” (1979) by the Sugarhill Gang. The commercial success that this hit single provided to

⁶⁹ Watkins. *Representing*, 173.

the Sugarhill Gang led to the emergence of several other acts that allowed Hip Hop to emerge into a mainstream commercially successful genre.

By the 1980s, Hip Hop was frequently receiving scorn from critics who had deemed it lowbrow, violent music that would corrupt the mind of youth. In an interview on Fox, music critic Lisa Robinson argues, “Rap’s affiliation with black urban culture is seen to be threatening to the Conservative middle-class ethos.”⁷⁰ Rap was so heavily associated with urban African American culture that those outside of that demographic were threatened by the style and manner in which Rap artists presented themselves. This was presented not as an issue of race, but rather an issue of class. On an episode of the New York radio show “Rap Attack,” music journalist Nelson George argued, “People make assumptions, because the primary participants are black urban men, that race is an issue. They speak aggressively, they dress in an assertive manner, this turns off a lot of middle class black folk as well.”⁷¹ While the dress and attitudes of these artists were perceived as aggressive, many Hip Hop artists in the 1980s were lyrically focused on socio-political issues that were affecting African Americans. Artists, such as Public Enemy, Gil-Scott Heron, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, released several hit songs that questioned the legitimacy of political decision makers in the United States and whether issues within the African American were truly a concern of American politicians. These artists were not as commercially successful as other Hip-Hop performers such as Run DMC or LL Cool J, but they were infinitely more controversial.

⁷⁰ Cheryl L. Keyes. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 2.

⁷¹ “Rap Attack”. *Positively Black*(NBC-TV New York), December 7 1986.

Rap Attack debuted in 1981 as a radio show on WHBI-FM New York. It was the first rap-exclusive show aired on a major radio station. The program was critical in expanding the reach and influence of rap music.

What made artists such as Public Enemy so controversial in the view of the media and concerned parents? The most obvious answer would involve examining prominent themes found in the group's lyrics. Journalist Jon Parales found that, "On Public Enemy's first two albums Chuck D (Public Enemy lead vocalist) praised the Rev. Louis Farrakhan who had called Judaism a "gutter religion" and denounced FBI infiltrators of the Black Panther party as "grafted devils."⁷² Like other socially conscious Rap artists, Public Enemy also focused on issues that were relevant to the African American community. Violence, drug use, poverty, racism and the seeming absence of any aid from state or federal agencies were all reoccurring themes in Public Enemy's songs. How these lyrics were interpreted by media outlets, advocacy groups, or the parents of younger children added to the perception that Rap groups that were politically or socially conscious, were also dangerous and disruptive towards the minds of youth. The release of *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back (1988)* pushed Public Enemy into the mainstream. The album was widely acclaimed for its strong stance on black nationalism and its frequent critiques of socio-economic structural issues within the United States that had led to inequalities within the black community.⁷³ Numerous references to black Nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam were made throughout the album, while speeches and quotes from men such as Malcolm X and Gil-Scott Heron were interwoven into the music. Chuck D, frontman of Public Enemy, explained, "We're nationalist, people who have pride and who want to build a sense of unity amongst our people."⁷⁴ With the emergence of groups such as Public Enemy,

⁷² Jon Parales. "Public Enemy, Loud and Angry, Is Far From Its Own Best Friend", *New York Times*, Dec 26 1989, C15.

Public Enemy faced criticism from several Jewish rights groups who charged Public Enemy with anti-semitism after member Professor Griff (Richard Griffin) suggested that "Jews were responsible for the majority of wickedness in the world." These comments led to Griff's firing, although he was later rehired by the band in a different capacity.

⁷³ Cheryl L. Keyes. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 87.

⁷⁴ Mike Elliot. "Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage." *Krush*, August-September 59-60.

politically conscious rap artists became commercially successful. By August of 1989, *It Takes a Nation of Million's To Hold Us Back* had sold over a million copies in the United States. Public Enemy's follow-up album, *Fear of A Black Planet* (1990), enjoyed even greater popularity, selling roughly 1.5 million copies within four months of its release.⁷⁵ While the motivations behind Rap artists such as Public Enemy may have been benevolent, many critics interpreted their music and lyrics in a much different manner.

The brand of black Nationalism that Public Enemy was promoting within their lyrics could be misinterpreted as a promotion of violence amongst young blacks. Public Enemy was compared to a glorified version of the Black Panther Party, espousing hate. Journalists such as Jon Parales, pointed to hits such as "Fight the Power," and "911 is a Joke" as provoking dissent towards the American political system and American structural institutions such as the police force. Chuck D himself went as far as to define his brand of black power as, "A self-defense movement that counterattacks the system of white world supremacy."⁷⁶ In their article, "Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny," Jeanita W Richardson and Kim A Scott argued that Rap music was the byproduct of an overall culture within the United States that promoted violence and hatred. "In an economic sense," the authors write, "what rap and hip-hop artists have done is apply the capitalistic skills and networks valued by society to catapult themselves into media moguls."⁷⁷ In this regard, Rap groups were still seen as the negative cultural by-products of a country that

⁷⁵ Greg Kot, "A+ for Chuck D. Public Enemy is a textbook for Race Relations", *Chicago Tribune*, July 8, 1990, pg 8.

This marked the second straight album for Public Enemy that had gone Platinum. The success of Public Enemy during this period led the way for more controversial rap artists such as N.W.A, The Geto Boyz, and Tupac Shakur to enjoy commercial and cultural success despite use of controversial lyrics and themes.

⁷⁶ Robert Christgau. "The Shit Storm: Public Enemy", *LA Weekly*, 1989.

⁷⁷ Jenita W. Richardson & Kim. A Scott. "Rap Music and It's Violent Progeny: America's Culture of Violence in Context." *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol 71, No.3, Summer 2002, pg 184.

had glamorized violence to the point where it became a commodity exploited by certain groups. The authors criticized the rap industry for using violence as a tool to attract impressionable youth towards the Hip-Hop/Rap sub-culture in the hopes of profiteering off of this susceptible demographic. While hip-hop groups such as Public Enemy were certainly not as controversial as newly emerging artists such as N.W.A, they did stir some controversy from journalists and critics who were weary of their ties to the Nation of Islam and the strong relationship to black power within their lyrics.

While the popularity of Rap did not decline in the 1990s, the subject matter and themes discussed by various performers did. While artists such as Public Enemy were criticized for their earlier political conscious lyrics, their successors took a much more aggressive approach both lyrically and visually. The new sub-genre of Rap music that emerged in the late 1980s was “Gangsta Rap.” Gangsta Rap did not achieve mainstream popularity until 1988, but the popularity and success of the genre influenced Rap and Hip Hop music even decades later. The most notable of these acts was Niggaz with Attitudes (N.W.A.). The group consisted of Easy-E, the Arabian Prince, Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, Ice Cube, and MC Ren.⁷⁸ The N.W.A. originated in Compton, California in 1986 assembled by Easy-E and partnered with Ruthless Records executive Jerry Heller. The N.W.A. would quickly become the poster-group for the parental advisory warning stickers on music albums. Lyrically, the group covered topics such as supposed corruption within the police force, drug use within the black community, and gang and gun violence. Despite the controversial nature of these topics N.W.A. were extremely popular, their second album *Efil4zaggin* (1991) sold over one million copies within a week of its release. The

⁷⁸ Harry Allen. “Time Bomb: Clocking the History of Hip Hop 15 Years after Rapper’s Delight.” *Vibe*, December, 71-75.

album became the first “Gangsta Rap” record to reach number two on the Billboard chart; it also made the highest album review since Michael Jackson’s *Bad*.⁷⁹ The N.W.A. was hardly an anomaly in the world of rap music at the onset of the 1990s.

Several artists emerged that would contribute to the Gangsta Rap genre. 2 Live Crew, a rap group from Miami, Florida, released *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* which was heavily criticized for its sexually explicit lyrics, so much so that the district attorneys of Florida and Alabama charged the men with violating obscenity laws. After citing the First Amendment the group was found not guilty. Ice-T, a rapper from the South Central area of Los Angeles, released the controversial single “Cop Killer” on his 1992 album *Body Count*. As a teenager, Ice-T was affiliated with the notorious Crips gang of Los Angeles. The song included lyrics such as “I got my twelve gauge sawed off. I got my headlights turned off. I’m ‘bout to bust some shots off. I’m ‘bout to dust some cops off.”⁸⁰ This song was so controversial that it prompted law-enforcement associations in Texas and New York to ask for a boycott of all Time-Warner(Ice-T’s label) products. The then President of the Los Angeles police union Bill Violante opined, “People who ride around all night and use crack cocaine and listen to rap music that talks about killing cops, it’s bound to pump them up. This kind of music is dangerous.”⁸¹ While the President of the police union would certainly be inclined to be concerned over the safety of his fellow union members, his close association of drug users and rap music consumers is disturbing. Artists such as Ice-T and the N.W.A. achieved nationwide popularity despite their extremely controversial

⁷⁹ Keyes. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 105.

⁸⁰ Tracy “Ice-T” Morrow. “Cop Killer”, *Body Count*, Sire/ Warner Bros Records 1992.

Body Count was a side project of Ice-T that attempted to blend the genres of punk, metal, and rap together. After the release of “Cop Killer”, Ice-T’s concerts were boycotted by police officers and personnel, making obtaining security for each show difficult.

⁸¹ Alan Light. “Political Candidates and Police Target Rap Music as a Bad Influence”. *Rolling Stone*, Dec 10 1992, 79.

nature. However, these groups and the gangsta rap genre they represented were far from the only brand of hip hop that achieved popularity in the 1990s. Artists such as the Beastie Boys, A Tribe Called Quest, DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince, and Salt-N-Pepa all enjoyed successful careers without using material that would be considered inflammatory. While the sub genre of Gangsta Rap received a great deal of negative press and commentary, it was extremely popular amongst youth. While the lyrical content within many gangsta rap songs was certainly controversial its popularity indicated that it certainly resonated with younger African Americans.

What drew black youth to the “gangsta” brand of inflammatory music? The University of Chicago’s “Black Youth Culture” survey sheds light on trends that emerged with regards to the relationship between popular music and criminal behavior amongst African American male youth.⁸² This survey examined the opinions of youth nationwide of black, hispanic and caucasian descent. The opinions of males and females were also studied. However, there is particular emphasis placed on the opinions and beliefs of black male youths and how their opinions compare to other ethnicities and genders. A particular section of the survey focused on the opinions that black youth had pertaining to contemporary youth culture. In particular, surveyors asked youth what their views were on Rap music and Rap culture in attempting to understand

⁸² Cathy J. Cohen. “Black Youth Culture Survey”, *Black Youth Project*, University of Chicago: Chicago, Illinois, 2005. Data Accessed [May 20 2012].

This survey was conducted by Cathy Cohen and several other researchers from the University of Chicago. Data was collected from 1,600 respondents from across the country including an over-sample from black and latino respondents. The data was collected in 2001 which is outside of time period being studied within this paper. However, this study is still relevant as the majority of children studied would have been 9 to 19 in the mid 1990s which could have given them some exposure to the hip hop or “gangsta rap” genres. The collection process involved a 45 minute computer assisted phone interview for eligible participants. Potential participants were given a five minute screen test to determine eligibility. Phone interviews were also supplemented by dozens of face to face interviews between black youth both male and female and researchers from the University of Chicago. The ages of participants ranged from 15 to 25. While the ages of some participants may be older than those being studied within this paper, the average age of the participants within the survey is relevant. The noted margin of error within the data set is less than two percent. The socio-economic demographics of those surveyed is not included within the data set.

whether or not Rap culture has influenced the decision-making and behaviour of young black males. According to the survey, only 3% of black youths reported never listening to Rap music. This was compared to 19% for white males and 12% for hispanic males. Of black youths surveyed, 25% answered that they watched Rap videos daily on television. That number dropped to 18% for hispanic youth and 5% for caucasian young people.⁸³ In regards to sheer consumption of Rap music and Rap culture, African American youth seem to outpace young people from other ethnicities, in terms of how often they enjoyed Rap music. So, if black youths seemed to consume and engage so passionately with rap music and rap culture, then it would stand to reason that their thoughts and opinions on Rap music and videos which they frequently consumed would help to indicate whether rap music affected black youth negatively, positively, or not at all.

African American youth possessed unique opinions relating to certain facets of Rap culture such as misogyny, violence, and negative images presented of blacks. When asked whether “Rap music has too many references to violence,” roughly 60% of black male youth responded that they agreed with that statement. This number rose to 70% when the same statement was presented to young black women.⁸⁴ This rejection of the violence, was not an uncommon point of view within the African American community. The majority of negative attention directed towards hip-hop or “gangsta” rap groups, was not usually generated from within the black community. In fact, the number of black males surveyed that agreed with the statement was only 2% less than white males that were asked the same question.⁸⁵ These numbers help to dispel the stereotype that black male youth were drawn to the violence within Rap culture. Having roughly

⁸³ Cohen. “Black Youth Culture Survey”.

⁸⁴ ibid.

⁸⁵ ibid.

60% of black males agree with the statement, that violent references are too widespread within Rap culture, does not necessarily indicate that black males reject violence in general. What it does tell the reader is that despite the mass consumption of Rap culture amongst black youth, young African Americans will make their own decisions based upon whether or not they agree with the images and lyrics presented within Rap music and videos. It also tells the reader that these young men have awareness of the violent themes they are viewing or hearing. Violence within rap music was not viewed as positive but negative and its use too commonplace within rap videos and music.

Similar results occurred when the participants were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “Rap music videos portray black women in bad or offensive ways.” Young black females agreed the most with this statement with 66% of those surveyed agreeing with the statement. Overall, black males agreed with the statement as well, with 57% of those surveyed stating they agreed with the statement.⁸⁶ This number was slightly lower than young white males surveyed (61%), but higher than hispanics of the same age (55%).⁸⁷ The participants within the black Youth Survey were also asked whether they agreed with the statement “Rap music portrays black men in bad and offensive ways.” The number of young black men that disagreed with the statement far outpaced those from other ethnicities. Roughly 45% of young black men surveyed disagreed with the statement compared to 35% for hispanics and 29% for caucasians.⁸⁸ These numbers help to show that African American youth were not heavily influenced by Rap culture. Rather, the survey data presents an interesting image of how young African American males

⁸⁶ Cohen. “Black Youth Culture Survey”.

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid.

interpret what they hear and see and how these interpretations affect their own self-representations.

The perspective of young black males towards the use of black women and men in rap videos can be seen as representative of their perceptions, attitudes and beliefs regarding the status of young black males in American society. On one hand, young black males indicate that violence is too prevalent in Rap culture. On the other hand, these same males do not agree with the statement that Rap music portrays African American males in a negative light. What this seems to indicate is that violence itself is not condoned or accepted by the majority of young black males. However, other elements of the Hip-Hop lifestyle seem to be tolerated or accepted, as the majority of black youth surveyed seem to believe that overall black men are not represented negatively. One could posit that the relative affluence of Hip Hop artists and the depiction of the wealthy Hip Hop lifestyle shown in Rap videos or mentioned in Rap lyrics could be more alluring than references of violence. While violence and crime were frequent themes within Rap and Hip Hop music, it doesn't seem as if they were intended to direct the behaviour of young men towards crime and violence. Groups such as N.W.A or Public Enemy were concerned with providing a voice towards issues affecting the black community such as drug use and gang violence. While those within police unions and the news media may have been concerned over potentially violent sounding lyrics, those within the African American community may have recognized the tones of frustration and anger within these lyrics directed towards the day-to-day conditions they live with. In the N.W.A song "Boyz N The Hood," Easy E raps, "Walkin home I see the G ride. Now Kat is drivin Kilo on the side. As they busted a U, they got pulled over. An undercover cop in a dark green Nova. Kat got beaten for resistin arrest. He socked the

pig in the head for rippin his Guess. Now G is caught for doin the crime. Fourth offence on the boy, he'll do some time.”⁸⁹ While the lyrics from these rap groups did contain violent references to crime and drugs in the majority of cases, they were simply describing conditions they were accustomed to while living in the inner-city.

Popular culture plays an important role in modern American society. Whether it is through television, film, or music, at some point most Americans have become exposed to some element of mainstream culture. African American culture in the 1980s and 1990s became part of the greater domain of American pop culture. African American culture had always enjoyed some levels of popularity outside of the black community. However, this process of breaking through to a wider audience reached new levels beginning in the 1980s. Part of this newfound mainstream popularity was due to the attention black Americans received daily from the news media. The inner-city became a “talking point” among social commentators, as gang violence and the drug trade spiraled out of control. As the levels of violence increased, so did the numerous theories attempting to explain why black male youth were involved in criminal activities in such high numbers. In January of 1990, Tipper Gore wife of future Vice President Al Gore, wrote an article for the *Washington Post* titled “Hate, Rape and Rap.” In this article Gore opined that, “Children 18 and younger now are responsible for 70% of the hate crimes in the United States. No one is saying this happens solely because of rap or rock music, but kids are

⁸⁹ Easy-E. “Boyz N The Hood”. Ruthless Records, 1986.

certainly influenced by the glorification of violence.”⁹⁰ Hip hop and rap culture (musical groups such as the N.W.A. and films such as *Boyz N the Hood*) were frequently blamed and targeted as negative influences in the lives of black youth.⁹¹ Was this true though? The “gangsta rap” and “new jack” genres, while extremely popular, were not the only representations of African Americans presented through television, music and film. Programs such as *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* depicted a view of black America more palatable to middle-class viewers, focusing almost entirely on prosperous African American characters. However, other programs such as *South Central* and *A Different World* contained a more realistic take on the issues affecting the African American community. On these shows, more controversial subjects were approached and the problems affecting the black community were explored in greater depth than the more cautious programs. However, even though these programs took a more contentious approach towards issues affecting the African American community, both *South Central* and *A Different World* never glorified issues such as violence and drug use. Instead, both programs depicted black protagonists attempting to escape cycles of crime and poverty.

Along similar lines, the film *Boyz N the Hood* contained violent scenes and tackled the issue of gang violence in black neighbourhoods directly. Despite this, the film was intended as social commentary meant to condemn violence and bring attention to neglected issues in black families

⁹⁰ Tipper Gore, “Hate, Rape and Rap”. *The Washington Post*, January 8 1990, A15.

Tipper Gore was closely involved in policing the music industry. In 1985 she co-founded the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) which aimed at increasing the control that parents had over what kinds of music were available to children. The group was successful in influencing the recording industry to place parental advisory stickers on all albums containing material that could be considered inappropriate for children. While they were praised by some the PMRC was criticized by artists such as Frank Zappa, Ice-T, Dee Snider, and John Denver for what they saw as censorship towards musicians. For more information on this topic see, Jeffrey L.L. Stein, “Music Lyrics as Censored as They Want to Be”, in *Bleep! Censoring Rock and Rap Music*, ed Betty Houchin Winfield and Sandra Davidson, 73-77 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 77.

and communities. It is almost impossible to place any kind of blame towards popular culture between the 1980s and 1990s when attempting to understand what drove black male youth towards criminal activity. While there were obviously negative representations of African Americans that were depicted in television, film, and music, they were hardly the only portrayals of black Americans presented to youth. These mixed representations of African Americans presented throughout cultural mediums may explain why black youth failed to identify popular music as a definite cause of violent behaviour. In the Black youth project survey studied, many children seemed to find the violence within music videos distasteful. This distaste for violence within cultural mediums combined with the sheer popularity of New Jack films and “Gangsta Rap” music may indicate that other factors led black youth to be drawn to criminal activities. Violence and crime were certainly common themes and topics within American popular culture but as a whole, images and lyrics dispersed through film, music and television do not seem to strongly influence black youth towards criminal activity.

Chapter 3: Family Structure

Looking at the relationship between African-American family structure and the development of male youth can be a difficult task. African-American families have long been the target of sociological surveys, conducted with the aim of trying to determine what, if any, differences exist between black families and families belonging to other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Social scientists and other theorists hoped that analyzing these differences would enhance the public's understanding of the diverse and complex institution of the black family. Historically, black families developed differently than the "traditional" Caucasian nuclear family. Researchers had to take into account not only the effects that slavery had on the development of modern black families, but also the cultural continuities or adaptations that took place with the forced transplant of individuals from Africa to the United States. The purpose of this chapter is not to survey the entire history of black family structures and attempt to pinpoint crucial developments or singularities, but rather to look at the existing scholarship on black family structure and determine if any unique traits of black families have led black male youth towards criminal activity. Other books and articles have done an excellent job of examining the historical contexts of black family structure.⁹² The aim here is to gain a sense of what contemporary authors have written on the topic of African American families, to determine whether family structure can be

⁹² There are many excellent books on that have traced the evolution of black families. The pioneering work on this topic is *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) by E. Franklin Frazier. More recent studies include *The Black Family in Freedom and Slavery, 1750-1925* (1976) by Herbert G. Gutman which provided evidence that the nuclear black family was not destroyed by slavery. Rather, it evolved from family and kinship patterns that emerged under slavery. Ira Berlin's book, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (1998) looked at the evolution of various forms of nuclear and extended family arrangements that emerged out of slavery.

A few helpful sources that look at black families in the 20th century are *The Black Family: Essays and Studies* (1991) by Robert Staples and Steven Ruggles', "The Origins of African American Family Structure." *American Sociological Review* Vol 59, No 1 (February 1994).

seen as a legitimate factor in driving young black males into criminal activity. This chapter will also explore the relationship between family structure and employment. In particular, this chapter will look at the negative effects that joblessness and unemployment can have on family structure and in particular single female mothers.

Black family structures differ from the standard nuclear family structure studied by sociologists. In the post-war period it was not uncommon for African American households to have only one provider or parent present at any given time. In particular, this commonly occurred in the form of female-headed households that emerged either due to marriage dissolution or births occurring out of wedlock. These problems were not specific to African American families; Yet, when similar patterns emerged within Caucasian families they were attributed as legitimate family forms growing out of the realities of modern American life.⁹³ This presented a very different narrative than the one attached to African American families. This difference between black and white families and whether black families are culturally deviant is still being debated within the overall literature on the subject. While this issue is important, this thesis will not attempt to build or focus upon that particular debate, rather it will seek to determine if there are any specific features of black families that could contribute to criminal activity amongst male youth.

It is crucial to study different forms black families can take, as well as analyze extended kinship networks that operate. Extended kinship networks are not a fixture in every black family but they are common within lower class black households. black families were more likely to be extended at the household level by the inclusion of family members beyond the nuclear family.⁹⁴

⁹³ Shirley J. Hatchett, Donna L, Cochran & J.S Jackson, "Family Life" in *Life in Black America* ed. James S. Jackson, 47 (California: Sage Publications, 1991)

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 48.

The U.S. census defines the traditional family unit as two or more persons living together and related by blood, marriage, or adoption. By this definition, persons living alone or with non-related persons are not considered a family. A survey of black households included as part of the National Survey of black Americans found that several different types of household structures existed within the greater black community.⁹⁵ The majority of households (27%) surveyed indicated that there was a male head of the family, who was joined by his spouse or partner as well as any children. Roughly 17% of those surveyed indicated that their family consisted of a single female head of household with children. Only 1.4% of households surveyed indicated that a male head of household was raising children alone, while 6% of household surveyed indicated that a female head of household was raising children with other relatives or non-related persons.⁹⁶ This data does not seem to indicate that there are any particular overwhelming discrepancies between particular types of households. While many households did fall under the stereotype of the single black mother raising children alone, the majority of households surveyed tended to fall under the definition of a nuclear family with a husband, a spouse or partner, as well as children.

Kinship networks and community support played an extremely important role in the nurturing and development of children within black families. Important kinship roles have often been filled by grandparents, community groups, and churches, each of which has experienced different

⁹⁵ The National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) was initiated in 1977. However, survey data was not collected until the early 1980s, so data within the survey is still relevant towards the subject being approached within this paper. The NSBA was a national probability household survey of 2,100 black Americans. The questionnaire included enquiries relating to racial identity, relationships with friends and families, as well as, community life. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by an all black male and female interviewing staff. See Jackson, James S. and Gerald Guin, *National Survey of Black Americans 1979-1980*. University of Michigan. Institute for Social Research. Survey Research Center.

⁹⁶ Jackson, James S. and Gerald Guin, *National Survey of Black Americans 1979-1980*. University of Michigan. Institute for Social Research. Survey Research Center.

challenges. Black grandparents that became responsible for the care of young children were often challenged both financially and psychologically. Due to their relation with the child, grandparents were often only eligible for a third of the financial assistance given to licensed group homes or foster parents.⁹⁷ Financial difficulties were often added to the stress that employed grandparents faced when attempting to balance work with childcare. Unemployed or retired grandparents were faced with even greater financial issues when faced with having to care for a child. In some cases to make ends meet financially, grandparents were forced to cash in life insurance policies or draw from emergency funds to pay for the child.⁹⁸ In their book *Black Families at the Crossroads*, Leonor Boulton Johnson and Robert Staples note, “A number of these grandparents are young, in their thirties and forties, reflecting their own early initiation into childbearing.”⁹⁹ Grandmothers were the most likely individuals within the immediate family of a child to take over caregiving, if the mother and or father were unable to provide for the child. In some regards, the role of grandmothers as caregivers reflected the overall cycle of disparity amongst black families. Grandmothers were faced in some cases with situations akin to when they were raising the parents of the children they were now being tasked to care for. These situations were not commonplace, but they help to highlight how in some cases grandparents were faced with similar problems that single parents were faced with when caring for adolescents.

The role of churches in aiding children is crucial though complex. The majority of churches became intimately involved in fulfilling the needs of Black family networks while providing

⁹⁷ Leonor Boulton Johnson and Robert Staples. *Black Families at the Crossroads* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2005) 259

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 259.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 259.

guidance on marriage and parenting and serving as an extended family network. Churches also provided outlets for children to become involved in communities intent on providing youth an outlet for their energies and keeping them off the street. In urban areas with high levels of poverty, churches played significant roles in attempting to alleviate the pressure of parents to supervise their children by maintaining daycare centers. Other programs were put in place such as food and clothing banks, job training, drug abuse centers, and emergency funds for families suffering economically.¹⁰⁰ For parents who had become incarcerated or whom could not take care of their children, churches often had adoption programs in place as well. In the late 1980s, the One Church, One Child program in Illinois encouraged parishioners to adopt at least one child.¹⁰¹ In the short term, this program resulted in the number of black children of all ages waiting for adoption to drop from seven hundred to roughly sixty.¹⁰² While African-American churches had played a significant role in attempting to alleviate the pressure placed on families, this began to change in the 1980s. The youths growing up in the 1980s were among the first generation of black Americans to grow up largely without the influence of the black church in their lives.¹⁰³ The absence of organized religion within the lives of these teenagers was in the eyes of some critics, a factor in the rising crimes rates amongst young black males.

While the Black church played and still plays an important role in the lives of black Americans, it is difficult to see the decreased presence of the church as a major factor in influencing black youth towards criminal behaviour. At its apex from the 1930s through the late 1970s, the church was influential in shaping the lives of young black Americans. However, as

¹⁰⁰ Johnson and Staples. *Black Families at the Crossroads*, 269.

¹⁰¹ Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham N.C: Duke University Press, 1990) 215.

¹⁰² Shirley et al. "Family Life" 270.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 271.

postwar America changed and issues such as extreme poverty, gang violence, drug use, and broken family structure, intensified within the black community the church was able to enact some programs to alleviate pressure from at risk youth and families. The increased criminal activity amongst black male youth cannot be directly attributed to the decreased presence of the black church. While the black church was less directly involved in the day-to-day activities of black families, African American churches did their best to enact programs that addressed prominent issues within the black community, such as single mothers raising multiple children and unemployment. While these programs did not make a significant impact in reducing criminal activity amongst black youth, they did indicate a willingness on the part of the black church to accept a new role as a social safety net. In this role, churches attempted to support families and schools by providing programs that would aid parents and educators. Churches would provide scholarships to aid families unable to financially send their children to school. Programs such as tutoring would help students succeed academically and keep them engaged with their schoolwork.¹⁰⁴ In this role as a social “shield,” churches were successful in enacting programs that would aid African American families and youth financially and psychologically and attempt to decrease the likelihood of young African Americans becoming involved in criminal activity.

To gain a better understanding of African American family structure it is beneficial to look at the varying compositions of black families. The age of a head of household and the number of parents present within a family was just some of the information available within the National Survey of Black Americans. The survey also included valuable statistics covering the average age of heads of households, family income, as well as more detailed information on families with

¹⁰⁴ Shirley et al, 70.

children. Surveying the average age of black heads of household is important because it creates more insight into marriage and living patterns of young African Americans. Moreover, an understanding of the average age individuals are when they decide to form families and how early mothers give birth can help provide greater insight into the relationship family structure and early childhood have with criminal behaviour later on in the lives of youth. According to the NSBA survey, roughly 68% of households studied were headed by persons less than 55 years of age and 29% of households studied were headed by persons between the ages of 18-34.¹⁰⁵ Within these younger demographics, the likelihood of children being in the household was much higher. Approximately 37% of households with heads aged 18-34 and 43% of those with heads aged 35-54 reported having at least one child in their home. Households with single parents were also found more likely to have a child in the home. This was much more likely for a single female-headed household than a male-headed household. Within the age bracket of 18-34 heads of households, roughly 33% of households surveyed were headed by a single female parent, while males of the same age raising children alone only accounted for 0.8% of households.¹⁰⁶ These numbers seem to indicate that not only were households being formed at a young age, but that a substantial percentage of young women were being left to raise children in their late teens to early twenties. In comparison, caucasian single parent households accounted for only 8% of households surveyed in the 1980 U.S Census of Population.¹⁰⁷ While these numbers indicate that a large number of young black women were raising children without a spouse or partner, they do not indicate whether these households are economically at risk or whether these mothers were

¹⁰⁵ Shirley et al, 270.

¹⁰⁶ Jackson and Guin, *National Survey of Black Americans 1979-1980*.

¹⁰⁷ U.S Bureau of Census. *1980 Census of Population: Subject Reports. Persons by Family Characteristics*. Washington D.C: U.S Government Printing Office, 1983.

without any kind of social support (either from state or federal government assistance or through extended kinship networks).

A separate section of the NBSA report provided information about the family income of the different households surveyed. Unfortunately, this data is not linked to the earlier section on the age of a head of household. So it is difficult to narrow down exactly what particular family structures/types can be seen as at risk of creating conditions that would lead to criminal activity amongst youth. More than 50% of the households surveyed had a family income of less than \$10,000 per year. At the time this survey was conducted (1980), the poverty line for a two-person family within the United States was \$5,537. For a single income earner this number decreased to \$4,190.¹⁰⁸ While 50% of African American families surveyed were well above the poverty line, the other half was dangerously close. Households that fell within the lowest income bracket (< \$4,000) this accounted for roughly 17% of those within the survey. What is discouraging is the overwhelming number of households within the lower income brackets that were headed by a single female with dependent children. Within the under \$4,000 income bracket, families headed by single females accounted for nearly 60% of households surveyed. This number dropped to 41% in the next income bracket for families earning between \$4,000 and \$9,999. Households with a male head, spouse or partner, and children had the greatest chance of earning over \$20,000 per year.¹⁰⁹ Looking at this information doesn't give an immediate answer as to whether family structure has any concrete links towards understanding criminal activity amongst male youth. However, what is seen is a large number of economically at-risk households that are either below or bordering the poverty line. The majority of these households had only one parent and

¹⁰⁸ United States of America, United States Census Bureau, *Poverty Thresholds for 1980 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years*.

¹⁰⁹ Jackson and Guin, *National Survey of Black Americans 1979-1980*.

income earner as well, making it necessary for this individual to share time as a caregiver and financial provider for their family. Besides suffering economically African American single parents faced various stereotypes and biases about the nature of their households and the potential effects it could be having on their children.

Single-parent female families had long been the target of various social stigmas created by social scientists or the national media. The most popular of these theories was the “culture of poverty” thesis, popularized by Daniel Moynihan in the early 1970s. This thesis asserted that the poor shared a distinct set of values, which included resignation to the conditions of poverty. Moynihan’s study was based on a model that considered two-parent families to be a more stable and superior situation compared to other variations of family structure. Single female-headed families were particularly stigmatized because of the belief that they acted as a cultural mechanism that transmitted poverty to subsequent generations.¹¹⁰ The “culture of poverty” thesis had been challenged repeatedly since its conception. The most common criticism directed towards this thesis argues that African-American women and teenagers do not account for the majority of out-of-wedlock-births. In actuality, European American women (women of primarily Eastern European descent) had the majority of such births.¹¹¹ Why were African-American mothers targeted so frequently by social scientists as being perpetual contributors to poverty? The most common answer to this question lies in the belief that African American families are often judged according to a cultural approach that views African American families as abnormal or dysfunctional. As Bette J Dickerson noted in *African American Single Mothers*, “Variants of

¹¹⁰ Bette J. Dickerson. *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families* (London: Sage Publications, 1995) xiv.

¹¹¹ National Center for Health Statistics. *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*. (Washington D.C: U.S Government Printing Office, 1989) 38.

African American households are judged against the ideals of the dominant American culture: the nuclear family unit composed of mother-father-child, with the man heading the home, and the woman bearing children, caring for them, and maintaining the home.”¹¹² While most African American families conformed to this perspective of how families should be structured, others did not.

The view that African American single female households are culturally deviant ignores socio-historic developments around African American households. This paper will not attempt to enter into a discussion of the African diaspora and the impact that slavery had on variations of African American households. However, some analysis of early African American households provides perspective as to why female-headed households were so common amongst African Americans. Several explanations have emerged attempting to explain the higher frequency of female-headed households amongst black Americans. Historian Edward Franklin Fraser, suggested that the higher mortality rates that black males under slavery contributed to the large number of households headed by a single parent.¹¹³ If women did find partners for marriage and the unfortunate situation arose that her spouse passed away, remarrying was a difficult proposition.¹¹⁴ This theory was challenged by those who argued that slavery was not the destructive force towards marriage that was initially believed. A more recent study published on the topic would be Jacqueline Jones’ *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (1985). Jones argues it wasn’t until the 1930s, when welfare rules began to shift, that the number of black female head of households began to greatly outpace

¹¹² Dickerson. *African American Single Mothers*, 2.

¹¹³ Edward Franklin Frazier. *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939) 11.

¹¹⁴ Dickerson. *African American Single Mothers*, 32.

their white counterparts. In fact, Jones argues that, regardless of their married status African-American females often occupied dominant roles out of economic necessity. Many black women maintained jobs despite their married status. A second popular theory argued that black female households were an economically motivated phenomenon.¹¹⁵ This theory proposed that the volatile economic realities that black males faced historically made it difficult for black women to find marriage partners. Critics of this theory argue that it wasn't family structure itself that was the issue, but rather it is the accompanying poverty that often emerged within families headed by single females that troubled social scientists.

By 1990, the number of African-American children living with one parent had risen to 55%, up from 46% a decade earlier.¹¹⁶ With such a large number of children living within this style of household, it created a level of curiosity as to how children developed within these households in comparison to those living within a nuclear family unit. Currently, there exists no overwhelming evidence in either direction that indicates whether children living with one parent are more vulnerable to criminal activity than those living with two parents. A study of mother-only families conducted by Sara McLanahan and Karen Booth (1991) found that, "children raised in single parent families were more likely to have poorer academic achievement, lower earnings in early adulthood, higher rates of delinquent acts, and higher rates of drug and alcohol use."¹¹⁷ Explanations for these negative factors attributed to mother-only families often focused on the economic status of the mother. Two major economic stressors for single mothers were work interruption and unemployment. Single mothers that struggled economically were frequently

¹¹⁵ Dickerson. *African American Single Mothers*, 32.

¹¹⁶ U.S Census Bureau. *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1991* (Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No.450) Washington D.C: U.S Government Printing Office, 5.

¹¹⁷ K. Booth and S. McLanahan. "Mother-Only Families" in *Contemporary Families: Looking Forward, Looking Back*. (Minneapolis:National Council on Family Relations, 1991)

placed in situations that created enormous amounts of stress for themselves. This stress could frequently manifest itself in negative feedback to children or reoccurring maternal punishment.¹¹⁸ Maternal punishment took the form of discipline that occurred frequently enough that it caused anxiety and distress amongst children.

Children in single-parent households were also more likely to play different roles in the household out of economic necessity. If the mother was occupied with her job, children were expected to complete household tasks and management duties. Here, children do not assume the roles of dependents but rather as equals or friends with their parent. As Bette Dickerson argues, “Because the children are seen by the mother as having a major responsibility in the household functioning, they also serve as friends and confidants, with whom the mother shares her worries and problems.”¹¹⁹ According to Dickerson, a common adage about the child rearing practices of African American mothers is that, “they raise their daughters and love their sons.”¹²⁰ Here, Dickerson implies that African American mothers raise their daughters to be proficient in running a household. At the same time young African-American males are raised more leniently with less emphasis on household responsibility. Dickerson’s assertion that young black males were raised differently from a young age is not unique. This popular theory amongst social scientists and child therapists refers to the idea of gender role socialization. This term refers to the discouragement or encouragement of certain traits or behaviours related to one’s gender.¹²¹ During early development, it is expected the child would learn from his or her parents the proper expectations to function successfully in adult roles. Young black girls were taught by their

¹¹⁸ Dickerson. *African American Single Mothers*, 120.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 120.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 121.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 120.

mothers to properly manage a household and take on responsibility at home. The development of young boys was seen as troubling because of the lack of father figures and positive male influences in their lives.

The lack of presence of a male figure within a household made it more likely that a child would look towards their mother for both economic, emotional and social support. This assumption was tested in a study led by psychologist Vonnie C. McLeod and sociologist Leon Wilson who found that a complex interrelationship existed amongst family structure, maternal functioning, and adolescent functioning.¹²² Wilson and McLeod argued that, “economic hardship was unrelated to a child’s psychological functioning but it was positively related to a mother’s psychological distress, which in turn was positively related to a child’s psychological distress.”¹²³ Mothers had to take on the dual role of both caregiver and provider which could lead to the mother becoming overwhelmed. Due to this increased burden on the single parent, it could become more difficult to find time for educational or emotional support for the child. This could potentially lead to young males finding the need to find social and emotional support from other sources that could often become negative influences such as gangs.

As mentioned earlier African American churches became involved in child adoption, which was intended to take at-risk youth out of the foster care system and into more stable black families. While these churches were able to reduce the number of children within the local foster care systems, they brought light to the larger issue of the over-representation of African American youth within the American foster care system. Social scientists, public servants and children’s rights activists have all sought to determine why black youth are so disproportionately

¹²² Vonnie C. McLeod and Leon Wilson, “Maternal Behaviour, social support, and economic conditions as predictors of distress in children.”. *New Directions for Child Development* no 46 (1990) 49-69.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

represented within the system.¹²⁴ This issue is significant towards the overall goals of this paper because of the link between at-risk youth within the child welfare system and the overall likelihood that these children may end up pursuing criminal activity while included in foster care programs or later in life as a young adult. By 1999, African American children only accounted for 15% of the child population of the United States. In comparison, Caucasian children accounted for 60% of this population. However, Caucasian children accounted for only 36% of those involved in out-of-home foster care, while African American youth accounted for 45%.¹²⁵ Looking at these statistics brings forth the question of whether or not a child's racial background made it more or less likely that he or she would become part of the child welfare system at some point in time? If so, was this due to specific cultural traits on the part of the child's parents or inequalities within the system that placed certain minorities at a disadvantage?

There are several popular theories that exist that attempt to explain why black children were over-represented within the child welfare system. One of the most prominent explanations involves the community in which a child matures. The belief here is that in every community there are factors that could attribute towards a child becoming involved in the foster care system (poverty, drug/substance abuse problems among parents, criminal activity) however, these factors could be offset by other factors that reduce the risk of maltreatment of children(family

¹²⁴Claudia Lawrence-Webb, "African American Children in the Modern Child Welfare System:A legacy of the Flemming Rule" in *Race Matters in Child Welfare* ed. Dennette M. Derezotes and John Poertner, 3 (Washington D.C: CWLA Press, 2005)

An early study published on this topic is *Children, Problems and Services in Child Welfare Programs*(1963) written by Helen Rankin Jeter and the Child Welfare League of America. This study discussed the problems that child welfare agencies had and the proper measures the federal government could adopt to fix this problem. A second study released roughly thirty years later by the National Black Child Development Fund titled, *The Status of African American Children (1990)* discussed why black children were so over-represented within the American child welfare system.

¹²⁵ U.S Department of Health and Human Services. *How many children entered foster care during the period 10/1/97 through 3/31/98* (June 18, 1999) <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/stats/ar0199.htm>. (accessed December 18 2012).

support, kinship support, support at school).¹²⁶ These positive factors could include anything from proactive community programs, aid from extended family or church programs aimed at aiding at risk families. If no positive factors existed or they were overwhelmed by negative features within a community(high levels of crime or poverty), it could be surmised that it was more likely that a child could become involved in the child welfare system. This theory essentially argued that the environment in which a child developed was crucial as to whether or not the child or child's family would become unstable later on. In *Race Matters in Child Welfare*, Dennette M. Derezotes and John Poertner contributed a chapter that explores the effects that community solidarity and trust can have on improving community services and overall vitality within the neighborhood. They argue, "The differential ability of neighbourhoods to realize the common values of residents and maintain both social cohesion among neighbours and neighbours' willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good is a major source of neighbourhood variation of violence."¹²⁷ The economic vitality of a community also influenced whether families would become at risk of losing their children to the child welfare system. Neighbourhoods with greater economic opportunity or jobs available to those who lived locally were less likely to have frequent acts of violence within the area.

A second prominent theory involved the stability of the family in which a child was living. If the parents or parent of a child were faced with severe economic or personal hardships, it was seen as more likely that the child would end up within the child welfare system. Several factors existed that impacted whether certain families could become at risk of losing custody of their

¹²⁶ Dennette M. Derezotes and John Poertner, "Factors Contributing to the Overrepresentation of African American Children in the Child Welfare System" in *Race Matters in Child Welfare* ed. Dennette M. Derezotes and John Poertner, 3 (Washington D.C: CWLA Press, 2005)

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

children. In 1996, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services conducted the third National Incidence Study, which demonstrated that incidences of child abuse and neglect were more than twenty-six times higher in low-income families.¹²⁸ For every 1,000 families surveyed that were earning less than \$15,000 per year, there were forty-seven cases of child maltreatment reported. This number dropped to roughly two cases per year for households earning more than \$30,000 per year.¹²⁹ Child neglect cases were also common in neighbourhoods with high poverty rates. A common ground for neglect cases was leaving children unattended for extended periods of time. The likelihood of a child encountering an issue related to environmental dangers within the home while unattended increases when the child is in a low-income neighbourhood.¹³⁰ While child abuse occurs in households within every income level, it is more likely to occur in households that fall below the poverty line.¹³¹ As seen earlier, the majority of single female headed households fall within this demographic, which makes it more likely that these households will become involved with the child welfare system at some point.

African American children were found to be frequently placed in out-of-home care because of substantiated reports of child maltreatment or in some cases outright abuse. Once they entered the system, African-American children were also more likely to stay within the child welfare system for an extended period of time. The main feature of the out-of-home foster care system is

¹²⁸ Dorothy Roberts. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002) 29.

The federal government has funded three National Incidence Studies (NIS-1, NIS-2, NIS-3) to try to determine the incidence of child abuse and neglect. These studies were intended to provide the best estimates available about the incidence of child abuse and neglect and are the only studies that provide national figures about the proportion of children who are abused and neglected. The comparisons made within the NIS were between caucasian, black, and other children (including Hispanics, Asian and other minorities).

¹²⁹ A. J Sedlak and D.D Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, Final Report* (Washington D.C: U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 1996)

¹³⁰ Roberts. *Shattered Bonds*, 36.

¹³¹ Chapman and Jackson eds, *Serving African American Children: Child Welfare Perspectives*, 67

the placement of an “at-risk” child within another household that has received state or federal funds to care for foster children. Each individual case of a child being removed from his or her biological parents would be reviewed every six months with the goal of finding the child a permanent home. An emphasis was also placed on the potential for reunifying a foster child with his or her biological parents if the original conditions for the child being removed from their parents care were no longer present.¹³² Problems that existed within the out-of-home care system usually revolved around lack of funding and subsequent lack of training for personnel as well as low morale and poor communication amongst government appointed care workers and sponsor families for at-risk children. Before foster parents were eligible to participate in the foster care program and take possession of children, they were expected to complete training and educational courses that would provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to care for foster children.¹³³ Foster family services became increasingly crucial as state and federal resources for child welfare programs were unable to keep up with the pace of children entering into the system.

As resources decreased, employees of the child welfare system were faced with wage and hiring freezes. Less experienced and less educated caeworkers were hired, which led to a high turnover rates amongst child welfare workers. It is difficult to ascertain as to whether these negative working conditions affected the lives of children in the welfare system. A study released by social workers John G. Orme and Cheryl Buehler reviewed the literature on the characteristics of foster families that were thought to have contributed to emotional and behavioural problems amongst foster children. This study made note of the existing weaknesses of analyzing the

¹³² Chapman and Jackson eds, *Serving African American Children:Child Welfare Perspectives*, 67.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 69.

emotional and behavioral impact that foster care can have on children. Among the most frequent lapses in the literature on the relationship between foster parents and foster children was the failure to distinguish between kin foster parents and non-kin foster parents and the underrepresentation of certain segments of foster families.¹³⁴ The parental strategy of foster parents tended to vary based on what each individual parent or couple believed to be the most effective method of raising a child. While a child could be removed from their biological parents or parent by the state due to the home being deemed unfit for a child, the possibility still existed for a child to be faced with emotional or physical abuse from a foster parent. As Buehler and Orme note, “Based on a sample of 106 former foster children, roughly 25% of those surveyed reported that they were physically punished severely while in foster care.”¹³⁵ The overall adjustment of a child into the foster care system is based upon several factors, such as parental acceptance, authoritative parenting style, and an affinity for children as motivation for fostering.¹³⁶ The majority of these factors are controlled by the behaviours and attitudes of the foster parents. Poor treatment or emotional or physical abuse could become harmful towards the mental and physical well-being of the foster child. Most of the studies released on this topic seem to echo the idea that poor treatment from foster parents towards their children could impact

¹³⁴ John G. Orme and Cheryl Buehler, “Foster Family Characteristics and Behavioural and Emotional Problems of Foster Children: A Narrative Review”, *Family Relations*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Jan 2001) 3.

This article refers to the underrepresented segments of foster families, such as single parent foster fathers and foster family applicants. Studying foster fathers is seen as crucial because of what the information would mean towards the overall understanding of the differences that foster mothers and fathers have towards the emotional development of foster children. Studying foster family applicants is crucial when attempting to identify gaps in the screening and training processes. Understanding what prerequisites are required for foster applicants to become parents can lend itself to a greater overall insight towards what type of individuals are being placed in charge of at-risk children.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

the emotional development of foster children and in some cases emotional trauma could develop as a child matures.

Two subjects that were frequently addressed in studies relating to foster care were family functioning and home environment. Examining the topic of family functioning involves discussing the relationship between the actions of foster children and the attitudes and beliefs that motivate the decisions made by foster parents. The adjustment of foster children to their new environment within foster care is important when attempting to understand whether the actions of foster parents drive youth towards criminal activities. In their discussion of literature on the foster care system, Buehler and Orne found that a trend existed within studies looking at the effects that family functioning had towards the social and emotional adjustment of foster children. Buehler and Orne found that “higher levels of family functioning were related to lower levels of emotional and behavioural problems in foster children.”¹³⁷ When family functioning impeded the emotional development of a child it was usually due to circumstances arising that required the child being placed in a new foster home on short notice.

Reports that studied the home environment that foster children were placed surveyed two forms of environment; the physical environment that the child was placed in, as well as the social environment of which the child faced. When authors discussed the physical environment within foster homes they looked at issues regarding the safety of the home, the quality of the neighbourhood the home was located, as well as the degree of privacy that foster children had within the home. Buehler and Orne found that the majority of studies on the physical environments of foster homes found that the majority of the homes surveyed were found to be

¹³⁷ Orne and Buehler, “Foster Family Characteristics”, 8.

safe. However, a study released in 1996, by Michael Simms and Susan Horwitz was more critical of the physical environment of foster homes. This study found that, “54 percent of the homes had three or four children in addition to the foster child, 14% were cluttered and disorganized, 57% of the homes were not owned, and 50% were in low-income neighbourhoods.”¹³⁸ This study did not make any immediate conclusions as to what these factors meant towards the immediate well-being of a foster child. However, it did show that several factors existed as warning signs within the home of the child’s biological parents and could also exist and frequently did exist within foster homes as well.

Studies concerning the social well-being of foster children often focused on how well the foster child had adapted to his or her new environment. Several factors were found to positively influence the social and emotional development of foster children: if there were fewer children present within the foster home, higher income levels among foster parents, higher levels of education amongst foster parents, and being un-related to a foster child as a foster parent, as opposed to foster parents who are kin.¹³⁹ All of the above mentioned factors were found to positively influence the likelihood that a child’s emotional development and social skills would develop regularly. This is not to say that these factors are solely responsible for the social development of foster children, as many children enter the foster system with pre-existing emotional and mental issues, relating to their genetics or family of origin. Regardless, foster parents play a significant role in creating the proper conditions for the physical, mental and emotional development of foster children.

¹³⁸ Orme and Buehler, “Foster Family Characteristics”, 7.

¹³⁹ ibid, 7.

While there is a strong correlation between poverty and child neglect, the data does not necessarily prove that poverty causes child abuse. Other factors exist within lower income families that put children at risk. These factors include poor nutrition, health problems (involving either the parent or child), neighbourhood crime, incarceration of a parent or guardian, drug or substance abuse, and hazardous housing. Many of these factors involve cases of parental neglect that could lead to the endangerment of a child's welfare. Obviously, poverty is a factor in child neglect as poor living conditions can lead to health and safety issues for a child within a home.

The relationship between family structure, criminal activity, and the emotional and mental development of youth is quite complex. As a child matures, they are exposed to several different external and internal factors that affect how they develop. African American families took forms that were adopted less frequently in Caucasian or Hispanic households. Single female headed households were common amongst African Americans, although these homes faced a great deal of scrutiny from social commentators. The lack of a second income and a positive male presence within the house were seen as negative consequences of single female-headed households. These negative side effects were seen as particularly troubling when male children were present in the household. The emotional, social, and mental development of black youth is largely linked to the conditions in which the child matures. This chapter has studied some of the factors related to black family structure that could influence the development of a child. Certain aspects of how black families operated could lend themselves to circumstances where youth were placed in situations that would disrupt the normal development of a child. Increased stress placed on single mothers to serve as both the caregiver and sole financial provider within the household sometimes led to situations where children were placed into roles that required greater levels of

responsibility and leadership than would be expected for a child raised in more ideal circumstances. These pressures could increase if the income a single mother earned was sub standard. As mentioned earlier in the 1980 Census, roughly 60% of African American single mothers reported incomes below the poverty line. African American youth were often placed in household management roles at a young age where normally a balance between schoolwork and youthful activity alone existed, not along side the added stresses and responsibilities that came with maintaining a household.

Issues related to African-American family structure often led to increased stress placed upon existing support structures such as kinship networks, the child welfare system, and African American churches. When a child's biological parents were unable to continue caring for them, it was not uncommon for kinship networks, churches or the welfare system to fill the parental void left behind. None of these institutions could be blamed directly for criminal activities committed by African-American male youth. These institutions should be viewed as part of a system that created the conditions that encouraged young African American males to fall into negative habits and behaviours. As America advanced socially and technologically from the early 20th Century onward, kinship networks and black churches became less capable of dealing with the increasingly complex problems troubling African American families. Kinship networks became strained by the increased stress that extra children would have on relatives who in some cases had only recently had children themselves. While churches were greatly influential decades earlier in influencing the day-to-day lives of African American families, their influence amongst

lower-income families declined as America changed socially and became more secularized.¹⁴⁰ Increased stress in the form of budget cuts and increased usage led to a decline in efficiency within the child welfare system. This led to many children being placed in foster families that in some cases provided less structure, balance, and security, than they had with their biological families from which they had been previously removed.

African American family structure cannot solely be blamed for criminal behaviour amongst black youth. Critics such as Daniel Monihayan asserted that African American family structure was critically flawed and had led to generations of African Americans growing up impoverished and vulnerable to poverty and criminal activity. This is not entirely true. It is difficult to make any direct judgments on the effects that single-female households have had on the development of black male youth. The lack of a male presence during the childhood development of young men has been seen as largely negative. However, there is no overwhelming evidence that provides a direct link that this lack of a male presence has led to criminal activity amongst African American male youth. What the evidence does tell us is that certain forms of family structure had the potential to place black youth in situations where they were vulnerable towards potential negative influences. This may mean that family structure can indirectly lead to instances where young black males can become involved in criminal activity. However, family structure cannot be seen as a stand-alone factor in attributing to criminal behaviour amongst

¹⁴⁰ While there hasn't been a great deal of research done on this topic. There are a few studies that look at the relationship between social class and religious belief. Sociologist Cardell K. Jacobson author of the study "Religiosity In a Black Community: An Examination of Secularization and Political Variables"(1992), found that participation in organized religion was positively linked to community involvement and those with higher education or higher incomes were more likely to show interest in becoming involved within their community. These results were similar to those of a study, "The Correlates of Religiosity Amongst White and Black Americans"(1981), conducted by sociologists Leonard Beeghly, Ellen Van Velsor, and E. Wilbur Bock. Here, the authors found that high socioeconomic status to be positively related to church attendance for black and white Methodists and Catholics.

black youth. When families do become at risk and children are removed from their biological parents, it does not necessarily indicate a cultural weakness or a breakdown within the family. When issues related to the composition of African American families exist, they seem to do so because of related structural issues such as lack of employment, limited success in education, and limited access to welfare benefits. This is not to say that some children do not resort to criminal activity due to poor relations with their parents or guardians or an overall lack of structure at home. However, studying impoverished African American families and the different forms they could take shows that while black families can experience issues relating to absentee parents and lack of social support, African American family structures can only be seen as an indirect factor towards influencing black male youth towards criminal activity. Family structure can be seen as one of three indirect factors that could influence the development of African American boys. The next chapter will look at how in some instances elements of the American educational system can interact with breakdowns in black family structures and lack of employment, to potentially create circumstances where young black males could turn to criminal activity.

Chapter 4: Education

Issues in the sphere of education have existed in the African-American community for several decades. While problems involving segregation and equal access to schooling have largely disappeared, African American students still face several issues regarding education. This chapter will explore the relationship between African-American boys and key education variables such as teachers, curriculum, and the atmosphere within public schools. The goal of this chapter will be to determine whether flaws within the educational system have driven African American students out of schools or into the streets or if other issues exist that prevent black students from succeeding academically. To better understand the relationship between criminal activity, young black men, and education, this section explore several different factors. These factors include curriculum, differences in discipline and punishment, and family support towards education. In addition to the previously mentioned factors, this section will also focus on the Student Life in High Schools Project funded by the University of Chicago. This study examined how several young black male students fared in their transition from elementary school to high school. This study should be crucial in helping to determine what changes occur during the transition from elementary school to high school that cause young black males to withdraw from their studies and pursue other activities. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, African-American students were faced with an academic achievement gap that saw their grades, attendance records, and overall success in school drop far below their caucasian counterparts. This achievement gap was determined by studying the scores of African American students in comparison to those from other ethnicities. The most frequent judge of a student's success was studying how the student

scored on standardized testing exams administered at the age of 13.¹⁴¹ This section will explore the American elementary and secondary schooling systems in the United States and their successes and failures at reaching African American male youth. While African Americans did face issues within post-secondary education as well, those issues will not be discussed in this section as most post-secondary students are outside of the age bracket of this paper.

From 1990 to 2010, the number of black students enrolled in public schools across the United States comprised roughly 16% of all students. Whites accounted for 60% of public school students, while Hispanics was roughly 20%. The number of caucasian students had been steadily decreasing from the late 1970s through to the 1990s as more parents enrolled their children into private schools.¹⁴² This became problematic when related to public school funding. Public schools received federal funding from the Elementary and Secondary Schooling Act of 1965. The bill was meant to provide equal access to education to all American children and reduce the achievement gap. Title I of the Act provided schools with high percentages of students from low-income families with federal funding. There were two types of assistance provided by Title I funding, “school-wide” programs and targeted assistance programs. School-wide programs enabled school boards to dispense resources in a flexible manner, while targeted assistance programs allowed schools to identify students who were academically at risk.¹⁴³ Under the

¹⁴¹ Art Munn. *Colour by Number* (Sterling Virginia, Stylus Publishing, 2012) 70.

The idea of an achievement gap has been challenged by various scholars. The main critique placed against the idea of an achievement gap is that the means to measure it (standardized testing) usually benefits caucasian students. The majority of standardized tests gather information on the skill levels of students in the subjects of reading, writing, and math. A focus on standardized testing would seem to only value a student’s ability to memorize and analyze information quickly, whereas other skills that value creativity and artistic talent are largely ignored.

¹⁴² Paul H. Carmichael. “Who Receives Federal Title I Assistance? Examination of Program Funding by School Poverty Rate in New York State”. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* Vol 19 No 4, (Winter, 1997) 355.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 355.

Reagan Administration, Congress passed the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) in 1981 to reduce federal regulations of Title I. This left resource allocation to the responsibility of individual states rather than the federal government. However, it left many public schools at a disadvantage, as each state had the power to restrict funding to schools if academic improvements were not seen. In 1994, the Improving America's Schools Act(IASA) was passed which again revised the original Elementary and Secondary Schooling Act. The IASA intended to coordinate federal resources and policies with the preexisting efforts at the state and local levels in order to improve instruction for all students. This reform made three major changes to Title I. It added math and reading/language arts standards to be used to assess student progress and provide accountability. It reduced the threshold for schools to implement school-wide programs from 75% poverty to 50% and gave schools a longer reign to use federal funding from multiple programs to dispense funds at a school wide level. Lastly, the IASA gave more local control overall so that federal officials and states could waive federal requirements that interfered with school improvements.¹⁴⁴ These changes were met with mixed reaction, as those who called for more state control over educational funding were pleased. Contrasting those individuals were those who believed that some states would attempt to pull funding from schools within more impoverished areas that had higher levels of ethnic students.¹⁴⁵ Schools that were located in low-income neighbourhoods were often dependent upon government funding for building maintenance and the continued upkeep of classrooms and learning materials. Many of these schools were located in inner-city environments and had demographics that were heavily African American or Hispanic, while in more suburban areas that were heavily caucasian, private

¹⁴⁴ Carmichael. "Who Receives Federal Title I Assistance?", 356.

¹⁴⁵ ibid, 356.

schools were more common that could operate independently of government funding. This created a divide in opinion between those who advocated state-controlled funding of schooling that could potentially reduce the funding allocated to at-risk schools and those who believed that federal funding was crucial to preserving educational resources in low-income neighbourhoods.

While schools in low-income neighbourhoods struggled with issues of funding and resource allocation, they also faced an ongoing dilemma of how to properly reach African American male students. One of the major crises facing educators in inner-city schools was how to remedy the high drop-out and expulsion rates amongst African American students. By 1990, black students made up only 17% of the total school population in the United States, yet roughly 12% of all African American students dropped out by the age of 18 without receiving any kind of high school credential.¹⁴⁶ Many of those who remained in school faced multiple disciplinary issues. A 2002 study that gathered data from a Mid Western school district(The Decatur Public School District encompassing over 9,000 students in Illinois) found that African American students made up roughly 56% of the total student body. In this same district, African American students accounted for 66% of discipline referrals, 69% of all suspensions, and roughly 81% of expulsions.¹⁴⁷ When cited for discipline referrals, black students were often reported for “disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering.”¹⁴⁸ In similar situations that involved white students reasons cited were smoking, leaving school grounds without permission, vandalism, and obscene language.¹⁴⁹ While it is difficult to determine the severity of incidents between students and teachers the whether the punishments handed out for these disturbances actually fit the

¹⁴⁶ Munn. *Colour by Number*, 82.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 83.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 83.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 83.

incident reported. When white students were punished, it usually stemmed from quantifiable behaviour, where the teacher or principal witnessed actions that required little interpretation (e.g., there can be little debate over what smoking entails). By contrast, when black students were punished, it usually stemmed from incidents where authority figures were faced with judgment calls based on what they believed constituted excessive noise or disrespectful behaviour. It is difficult to ascertain what the authority figures may have heard or saw in any of these cases, but the circumstances in which black students were disciplined seemed to be of a far less severe manner than similar incidents involving caucasian students. Without being aware of the exact circumstances of the incidents, it is difficult to judge whether the differences in how caucasian and black students are punished indicates racial bias or simply misinterpretations of behaviour and actions between teachers and students.

Published studies on the broader subject of African American education often probed which issues could be related to high dropout rates amongst African American male students. One such study, published in 1998, looked at the transition from eighth to twelfth grade for 32 African American students in a Chicago school district.¹⁵⁰ Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago conducted the study. The high school chosen for the study was the vocational magnet school, South Side High School. Magnet schools taught specialized curriculum and were intended to

¹⁵⁰ M.Roderick, J. Chiong & K. DaCosta. *The Student Life in High School Project: A Longitudinal Study of the Transition to High School*. (Chicago: School of Social Services Administration University of Chicago, 1998). 101.

This study was conducted as part of the Student Life in High Schools Project. This project consisted of a longitudinal study of 98 students in the transition to high school in Chicago. Both public and high schools that were studied consisted entirely of African American students. Every three months students participated in semi-structured interviews. Students were asked a variety of questions ranging from their future aspirations and plans to a discussion of the activities they had completed in class. Students also discussed their relationships with teachers, peers, and parents and their involvement within and outside of school. Transcripts were collected at the end of each calendar year to assess how each student was progressing academically during their transition from elementary school to high school. Data was collected from 1995 to 1996.

draw children from different districts. These schools were originally conceived to dispel racial segregation from public schools. However as white flight from urban areas increased, it became difficult to bus African American children to schools with increasingly varied racial demographics. Schools such as South Side only accepted African American students but attempted to maintain the high standards and selectivity of private schools in suburban areas. Students in the South Side High sample size were slightly higher academic achievers than the average Chicago High School student.¹⁵¹ Roughly 78% of the parents of South Side students were employed with 21% reporting dual incomes. However, about half of the students surveyed reported they were living in single parent households.

The purpose behind the study was to determine what schools, communities, and families could do to better assist children in making the jump from elementary to secondary schools. The report also included interviews with several students who had taken part in the study but had dropped out of high school before receiving their diploma. Roderick found that both male and female students experienced dramatic declines in their academic performances upon graduating elementary school. On the Grade Point Average scale (1-4), the median GPA of the students studied during eighth grade was 2.5, placing them slightly above average. Attendance amongst black males was roughly 95%.¹⁵² The behaviour of students at the eighth-grade level was reported as in line with the average number of disciplinary actions or suspensions reported across the district. As students graduated to South Side High these trends accelerated and more students found their grades and attendance dropping. Roderick also found that as the students grew older,

¹⁵¹ Roderick et al. *The Student Life in High School Project*, 160.

While South Side students did achieve higher grades than the average student, this may be due to the selectivity of the school that excludes those with lower academic skills from being accepted.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 102.

they clashed with their teachers frequently resulting in more severe disciplinary actions such as suspensions or expulsions. In some cases, this could be explained by a change in how teachers responded to students' behaviour. Upon reaching ninth grade many students were viewed more negatively by their high school teachers than their elementary teachers. Roderick found that "eighth grade teachers assessed males and females similarly on their engagement in class and completion of homework, ninth grade teachers reported that males displayed significantly less effort and engagement than females."¹⁵³ A similar trend developed in academics as the grades of boys dropped tremendously from grade eight to grade nine. Using data that measured the average performance of students in core classes (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies), black males averaged a 2.48 GPA in eighth grade; by the second semester of ninth grade, this number had dropped to 1.1. Attendance numbers shrank as well with 89% of the students surveyed attending class regularly down from 98% the year prior.¹⁵⁴ While these numbers and reports do not conflict with changes occurring nationwide, it is still surprising that such discrepancies in behaviour and academics occur across a calendar year.

Dropout rates and graduation outcomes proceeded to decline as students progressed through high school. By the twelfth grade nearly 60% of those originally sampled had dropped out of South Side High. Of those who did graduate only one male was able to graduate in the top third of his class, while the remaining students graduated in the bottom third. Graduating in the bottom third granted the student his high school diploma but left him without the requisite courses or grades to progress to college. While these numbers are disappointing, Roderick notes that, "National data indicates that African American males equalize their high school outcomes

¹⁵³ Roderick et al. *The Student Life in High School Project*, 106.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

through the completion of programs later in life.”¹⁵⁵ Of the nine dropouts in the South Side sample, seven attended alternative schools or GED programs.

In attempting to discover the root causes for these sudden changes in attendance, academics, and overall behaviour in school, Roderick conducted several interviews with male students from her original sample that had dropped out of high school. She separated those interviewed into three subcategories, which she classified based on the students behaviour and approach towards school, these categories were the “withdrawers,” the “disengaged,” and the “resilient.” Those who were classified as withdrawers made an early exit from high school usually as a result from expulsion or withdrawal after a violent incident. Roderick noted that all of these students exhibited similarities in behaviour and experiences. All of the students who were classified as withdrawers had low academic skills before entering high school. Even with high levels of support at the high school level, these students struggled to complete their work. Students adopted avoidance as a coping mechanism, these students would still go to school and fraternize with their peers but would avoid completing actual work while present. Roderick notes, “parents in this group lost their children to negative peer groups who provided an alternative to school.”¹⁵⁶ As young black males became more involved with negative peer groups the level of involvement from their parents tends to steadily decrease. This change could simply reflect confusion on the part of a child’s parents to understand how to respond to a child that is struggling in school and becoming increasingly involved in negative behaviour through their peers. In spite of these negative behaviours, Roderick found that these “withdrawn” students still possessed high academic inspirations and a commitment to finishing school at some point. Students belonging to

¹⁵⁵ Roderick et al. *The Student Life in High School Project*, 84.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 172.

this group had low academic skills and steadily decreasing support at home; the lack of opportunity they experienced in finding relationships and activities where they could be successful led to their isolation from school.

The second group, described as the “disengaged,” had experienced relative academic success prior to high school. Like the previous group, these students were not able to graduate with their peers. However, this was not due to suspension or fraternization with gangs but rather the failure to accumulate the credits needed to graduate while these students attended school between grades nine through twelve. Academically they found the new work they faced in high school more challenging, but it was their approach to schoolwork that was detrimental to their overall success.¹⁵⁷ A frequent criticism from teachers involved in the project was that the work effort of the young men surveyed was poor and that schoolwork would be frequently neglected in the first quarter of the school year if the student believed he would be able to compensate by scoring higher grades in the second half of the school year.¹⁵⁸ Class cutting was also a major factor that undermined the grades of these boys. These students also faced issues at home. These young men came from single parent households and were often faced with changing residences during the school year. This stress from constantly moving during a school year could have manifested itself into poor academic performance. What differentiates these young men from the “withdrawers” is that rather than placing the blame on the young men for their actions and choices made, Roderick places guilt towards the employees of the school.

Roderick saw elements of disorganization in the school as allowing students to struggle to progress through school. This disorganization was referred to as benign neglect by Roderick on

¹⁵⁷ Roderick, et al. *The Student Life in High School Project*, 173.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 165.

the part of the teachers and administrators.¹⁵⁹ Students were able to pick and choose the classes where they exhibited effort and others in which they rarely tried. These students were not academically at risk before entering high school but were met with little adult intervention when they adopted immature study and work habits. Teachers that did create boundaries and placed high standards for their students were often rewarded with excellent work habits, as students would work hard if the teacher in question provided them with positive reinforcement and genuine concern for the quality of their work.¹⁶⁰ Students were also allowed to remain in school while accumulating few of the necessary credits needed to graduate. Certainly blame can be placed on the students as well, as they were surely aware that their behaviour was inappropriate. However, students belonging to this particular group displayed proof that they could put forth efficient effort in their school work, if they were properly motivated by their teachers.

The last group documented by Roderick in her study was the “Resilient,” the young men that graduated from high school. Before entering high school, these young men possessed similar academic skills to the previously mentioned groups. They were described by their teachers as bright and committed students that would succeed in high school and while others failed these boys succeeded. Roderick saw three common characteristics amongst these young men that allowed them to successfully graduate from high school; strong family support, support from non-familial sources (such as teachers and community members), and the ability to demonstrate resilience in spite of the lack of effort put forward to motivate them by certain teachers. The first characteristic was strong family support. All of these students received strong support at home from a family member and this support was constant throughout their school years, as the young

¹⁵⁹ Roderick, et al. *The Student Life in High School Project*, 165.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 165.

men progressed through high school. It is worth noting that these children had similar living conditions to those from other groups (two lived with their grandparents, two with both their parents, and the remainder lived with their mothers).¹⁶¹ Families in this group also received non-familial help from the church, which Roderick saw as influential in providing positive male influences to motivate the students surveyed. Students in this group took more responsibility for their academic difficulty and were proactive in seeking support.¹⁶² This support took the form of after-school programs that were crucial in allowing those who were struggling in some subjects to complete the extra work they needed to graduate. The final characteristic that Roderick attributed to this group was the ability to transcend stereotypes and have their teachers recognize them as individuals. All of the students belonging to the “resilient” group were able to connect with their teachers in more meaningful ways than other boys in the survey sample. This ability to “reach out” took the form of meeting with teachers after school to review course material; in other instances, boys were comfortable sharing issues from their personal lives which provided teachers with potential context into the boy’s behaviour if they acted out. Unlike the boys from the first group, these young men adopted coping mechanisms that allowed teachers to get to know them. This created more understanding from the teachers towards these young men and may have played a role in influencing their chances of graduating.

The Student Life in High Schools Project provided some insight into the relationship between students, family, teachers, and academic progress. The data that Roderick and her cohorts collected indicated that there is no one set result in how male youth will react when transitioning from elementary school to high school. It is important to mention that while Roderick mentions

¹⁶¹ Roderick, et al. *The Student Life in High School Project*, 165.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 168.

that some students enter high school with relatively low academic skills, she never mentions this as a major factor in attributing to students struggling to transition into high school. However, Roderick makes compelling points about the relationship between teachers and students and how in some regards, disorganization within a school can breed neglect and lead to students becoming disengaged from learning. The majority of the students in the sample size were capable of completing work at the high school level. If however, they were placed in situations where a teacher created few boundaries or showed little interest in the work that students completed, then these students would take advantage of the situation and avoid completing schoolwork. The level of interaction between students and their parents was also crucial, as students with parents who were deeply involved in their schoolwork and overall academic progress tended to graduate. Whereas those who lived in households where the parent was unable to provide support frequently struggled to transition. Similar struggles developed when a child was forced to move frequently during the school year. According to the study, education, and to an extent family involvement, play an indirect role in leaving black male youths more susceptible to succumbing to criminal activity. Youth who struggle in school and find little support from teachers or their parents at home, can find themselves fraternizing with negative peer groups that often include gang members. While those who maintain focus in school can, with the help of support from home, maintain academic progress throughout high school and maintain success in spite of teachers who may not demonstrate complete support to these students.

Disciplinary issues were common throughout public schools, but determining the extent to which discipline was influenced by racial bias is difficult. Children enrolled in public schools were surveyed in 1999 by Professor Denise C. Gottfredson, psychologist Gary D. Gottfredson,

and Professor Allison Ann Payne and asked whether they believed that racial bias influenced how teachers had treated students? The results indicated that treatment varied greatly depending on the teacher. “Schools in which students report that the rules are fair and discipline is consistently managed experience less disorder, regardless of the type of school and community,” opined the authors.¹⁶³ This makes it possible that fair treatment from teachers towards students can make a significant impact towards the atmosphere within the school even when the school in question is located in a lower income area. Moreover, the survey data indicates is that in some instances individual teachers may be influenced by racial bias when making judgment calls based on what they determine to be disrespectful behaviour.¹⁶⁴ While this may not be the case for the majority of American teachers, it does create a troubling situation wherein the decisions made by certain teachers could lead to a resentment towards schooling amongst those facing discipline.

While disciplinary issues and delinquency are problems experienced by those educating African American males in secondary schools, African American male students could become disengaged from academics as early as elementary school. The majority of work written on this topic found that low academic achievement from young black males could reduce their interest in schooling at a young age. Professor James Earl Davis argues, “Black students fall behind other students in early school performance and lead their peers in school infractions and negative

¹⁶³ G.D Gottfredson, A.A Payne & N.C Gottfredson. “School Climate Predictors of School Disorder: Results from a National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools”. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol 42, 4, pg 418

Allison Payne is an associate Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Villanova University. She specializes in juvenile delinquency and school-based prevention programs. Denise C. Gottfredson is a Professor at the University of Maryland Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, her research interests include delinquency and delinquency prevention. Gary D. Gottfredson is the former President of the American Psychological Association and a former Professor at the University of Maryland Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education

¹⁶⁴Ibid, 418.

behaviours.”¹⁶⁵ However, the relationship between negative educational experiences and school disengagement are fairly unclear. The most influential theories proposed to account for low academic performance of African American boys centered on student attitudes, social organization, and the failures of school boards to properly stimulate African American young males. Theories relating to student attitudes focus on student resistance and cultural opposition to schooling and academic achievement.¹⁶⁶ Student attitudes are related to academic achievement based on what authors see as a cultural clash, between the culture of a school and the different cultural backgrounds of African Americans. These two separate cultures are seen as clashing frequently when young black males enter public schools.

The culture of the American educational system was seen as favouring personality traits, skills, and abilities that appear more frequently amongst caucasian families,¹⁶⁷ while cultural traits that were specific to African Americans were undervalued or ignored. Those who criticize the American public schooling system for failing to reach African American students, often cite the culture within public schools as failing to stimulate black students and approach African American culture in such a way that would engage students. Those who believe that this culture is antagonistic towards Black students and African-American culture in general, see the educational culture within American public schools as favouring caucasians. In his article, “Do African Americans Need Imersion Schools,” Kevin Brown studied the issues that African Americans faced within the American public schooling system.”Teachers and administrators are

¹⁶⁵ James Earl Davis, “Early Schooling and Academic Achievement of African American Males”, in *Educating African American Males:Voices From the Field*. ed. Olatokunbo S. Fashola, 136 (Thousand Oaks, California, 2005).

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

¹⁶⁷ Vernon C. Polite, “Reproduction and Resistance: An Analysis of African American Males Responses to Schooling” in *Too Much Schooling Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*. ed. Mwalimu J. Shujaa, 187 (Trenton, New Jersey:Africa World Press Inc, 1994).

generally reluctant to discuss race and race-related issues,” notes Brown. “The colour blind approach of educators is, in part, linked to uneasiness in discussing race, lack of knowledge of the African American culture and fears that open consideration of differences may incite racial discord.”¹⁶⁸ This idea of a clash between African American culture and the culture within public schools was discussed further in a study by Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu “Black Students’ School Success: Coping with the Burdens of Acting White.(1986)” “The American public schooling system,” observe Fordham and Ogbu, “is closely associated with a middle-class white culture of conformity and many black Americans have developed distinct cultural traits that oppose this. Black Americans developed a sense of collective identity in opposition to the social identity of white Americans, due to the way white Americans have treated them in economic, political, social, and psychological domains.”¹⁶⁹ Any behaviour or action that could be interpreted as acting “white” was strongly looked down upon by these students. Among the actions reported as falling under the banner of acting “white” were speaking standard English (without the use of Ebonics), working hard to obtain good grades or actually obtaining good grades, spending time studying, engaging in volunteer work, engaging in outdoor activities, and punctuality.¹⁷⁰ It is difficult to believe that these actions, that fell under the banner of acting

¹⁶⁸ Kevin Brown. “Do African-Americans Need Immersion Schools?: The Paradoxes Created by Legal Conceptualization of Race and Public Education”. *Iowa Law Review* vol 78, pg 844 (Dec-Jan 1992-1993).

¹⁶⁹ Signithia Fordham & John U. Ogbu. “Black Students School Success: Coping with the Burdens of Acting White”. *The Urban Review* Vol 18, No 3, 176 (1986).

¹⁷⁰ James E. Ryan. “Schools, Race, and Money”. *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol 109, No,2 (November 1999) 288.

The term Ebonics originally referred to the language of all those who descended from African slaves brought over to North America. It is also known as African American Vernacular English. It can be used to describe the distinct vocabulary, pronunciation and use of verb terms that are adapted by those who are of West African descent.

On December 18 1996, the Oakland, California School board passed a resolution recognizing the legitimacy of Ebonics. For black students who spoke primarily in Ebonics the resolution mandated that some instruction was to be done in the dialect. The resolution received mixed reactions nationwide. For an excellent article summarizing the resolution see: “School District Elevates Status of Black English” by Peter Applebome.

“white”, were always the standards that certain black students set when acting out against the educational culture within American schools.

It seems more likely that the above-mentioned factors from Fordham and Ogbu’s report were on the extreme end of an atmosphere of mutual distrust, between certain students whom felt threatened within academic settings and teachers who perceived this behaviour as disrespectful. More troubling, Fordham and Ogbu’s study seems to make the implication that if acting white involves studying hard, engaging in extracurricular activities, and achieving high marks in academics, then acting black would involve achieving just the opposite. Clearly a child’s desire for academic achievement should not be defined by his or her race or creed. The more likely conclusion to be made from this study is that the idea of acting white more than likely isn’t the issue at hand, rather segments of African American students become threatened when placed within an environment that does relatively little to acknowledge or value African American culture.

While Fordham and Ogbu’s study may reveal how some black students rebel against what they see as a schooling system that caters to a white culture and values, it does not demonstrate how these values and cultures exist within the day to day operations within a school. Critics of the educational system saw the beliefs and practices commonly held towards academic ability and intelligence within American public schools as hindering the mobility of African American male students. The social practices within schools were also criticized for the common practice of students being grouped based on race. “The structure and culture of a school plays a major role in reinforcing and maintaining racial categories and the stereotypes associated with them” argued

Professor Pedro A. Noguera.¹⁷¹ Schools have a tendency to sort out children at an early age, based on their perceived abilities in fields such as academics, the arts, or athletics, however by doing so implicit and explicit messages are sent to these children about the racial or gender identities that are conveyed. A similar process occurs when children are frequently disciplined or seen being disciplined. This social organization that takes place within American schools can be harmful towards the development of young black men. When students are grouped based on what their perceived skills and abilities are, it decreases the likelihood that they will attempt to achieve in areas outside of those they are placed in by educators.¹⁷² If these social placements occur over an extended period of time, it creates an atmosphere where black males may only relate certain activities with how they have been perceived.

If the majority of students belonging to a particular group (this could be a social or ethnic group, or even a club) take part in certain activities almost exclusively, it creates the belief amongst other members of this group that taking part in these activities is central to developing a sense of belonging within the group. In other words, in the environment of a public school, students were faced with the decision to take part in activities that were associated with their particular social groups or adopt those which were associated with other groups and risk ostracizing themselves. It is not uncommon that students would take part in activities outside of those associated with their groups and find themselves still associated with their initial social group. So the idea of “acting white” can be associated with taking on activities associated with a

¹⁷¹ Pedro A. Noguera, “The Trouble With Black Boys: The Role and Influence of Environmental and Cultural Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males”, in *Educating African American Males:Voices From the Field*. ed. Olatokunbo S. Fashola, 63 (Thousand Oaks,California:Corwin Press 2005).

Noguera is a Professor of Education at New York University.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 64.

different social group. It is difficult to say if social grouping is a conscious practice exhibited by teachers within American public schools or whether it takes place naturally, as a result of the practice being adopted for a prolonged period of time. What is clear, though, is that if educators were aware of the social and cultural pressures exerted on students, the demands placed on students to choose between forging a social identity or prepping for academic success would be largely eliminated.

While the social organization of American public schools played a crucial role in affecting the identities and activities forged and undertaken by students, a more significant influence on the early development of Black students may be the educators with whom they interacted with daily. The debate that occurred around the relationship between teachers and black students was largely focused upon whether the majority of teachers were positive or negative influences towards black students. Those who adopted a negative stance believed that teacher's perceptions, expectations, and behaviour were influenced by racial stereotypes. This view was reinforced by researchers such as Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, who argued, "Teachers use the dimensions of class, race, sex, ethnicity to bring order to their perception of the classroom environment."¹⁷³ In their study published in 1985 that looked at the roles social class, race, and sex played in influencing teacher perceptions of students, Harris M. Cooper and Reuben M. Baron argued, "The familiar operation of stereotypes takes place in that it becomes difficult for minority or disadvantaged students to distinguish themselves from the generalized expectation."¹⁷⁴ Those

¹⁷³ Sara Lawrence Lightfoot. *Worlds Apart: Relationships between Families and Schools*, (New York: Basic Books, 1978) 85.

¹⁷⁴ Reuben M. Baron and Harris M. Cooper. "Social Class, Race, and Teacher Expectations", in *Teacher Expectancies*, ed. J. B Dusek, 251 (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1985).

Reuben M. Baron is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut in the Department of Social Psychology. Harris M. Cooper is a Professor in the Department of Education at Duke University as well as the Chair of the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience.

who took on a more positive view such as Professor Ronald F. Ferguson of Duke University, saw teachers as a stabilizing force faced with an extremely difficult task of balancing different personalities from different races and ethnicities, all while teaching curriculum that may not appeal to everyone.¹⁷⁵ To properly understand if bias may be rooted in the expectations and perceptions of public school teachers, one must look more closely at what racial bias may entail and whether it directly influences the actions or behaviour of young black male students.

In regards to race, there are three types of neutrality benchmarks as defined by Ronald F. Ferguson, “unconditional” race neutrality which is based on the idea that someone would expect the same result from every student regardless of the situation or context. Conditional race neutrality is based on the concept that one can maintain neutrality if a decision is made based on expectations and conditions that are grounded in measurable standards. The third benchmark is conditioned on potential. It requires neutrality and equal expectations and aspirations for those who have equal “potential.”. This third benchmark can be difficult to define as it requires one to place a label on potential and prove how it can be measured in relation to school performance.¹⁷⁶ There are relatively few studies released that directly approached whether teachers treat students differently based on race. The most recent study was released by M.C Taylor in 1979 and looked at whether teachers treated black students differently than their white counterparts. Taylor set up an experiment where a 6-year-old student watched from behind a screen as students in teachers college taught a prescribed lesson. The screen was set up in such a manner that the student viewing the experiment could see the teacher but not the participants. Taylor found that when the

¹⁷⁵ Ronald F. Ferguson, “Teachers’ Perceptions and Expectations and the Black-White Test Score Gap”, in *Educating African American Males:Voices From the Field*. ed. Olatokunbo S. Fashola, 81 (Thousand Oaks,California:Corwin Press 2005).

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 83.

students were black they received less feedback from the teacher when mistakes were made.

Taylor concluded that “some teachers may be helping whites more than black students and that the differences may be large enough to have non-trivial effects on the student’s performance.”¹⁷⁷

This study does not represent the manner in which the majority of teachers approach their students. But it does indicate that racial bias can exist in such a subtle manner and still affect the academic prospects of students.

The approach certain teachers take to educating young African American males has sometimes resulted in higher-than-normal instances of children being placed in special education programs. Educators disproportionately refer children of colour to special education services. A popular theory that accounts for these disproportionate numbers is that teachers compare the academic skills, behaviour, and social skills of black students to their White counterparts. Racial discrimination can be found on subjective measures that rest on the judgement of teachers. A study conducted in an Atlanta school district led by sociologists Bhasin T. Karapurka, Avchen R. Nonkin and Kim Van Naarden Braun found that black students were more than twice as likely to be found mentally retarded as White students.¹⁷⁸ These statistics were troubling in that they also provided disturbing implications for inner-city school systems. If black students were being classified as mentally challenged, at such disproportionately high rates in comparison to other ethnicities, it would mean that teachers seemed to be misinterpreting the academic ability of African American students. The same study also found that roughly 17% of the 1000 black 8

¹⁷⁷ M.C Taylor. “Race, Sex, and the Expression of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies in a Laboratory Teaching Situation”. *Personality and Social Psychology* no 6, pg 904.

¹⁷⁸ Bhasin T. Karapurkar, Avchen R. Nonkin & K Van Naarden Braun. “Prevalence of Four Developmental Disabilities among Children Aged 8 Years: Metropolitan Atlanta Developmental Disabilities Surveillance Program, 1996-2000”. *Surveillance Summaries*, 55 (No. SS-1,2006) 4.

year olds surveyed were diagnosed with learning disabilities.¹⁷⁹ While those numbers could be accurate, they may also have indicated that teachers may have misjudged whether these students suffered from mental disabilities or simply struggled to grasp the material as quickly as other students. This could occur because of less focus on school work at home or in some cases the curriculum in subjects such as English or History could be offensive to some students.

In other occasions, students could be diagnosed with emotional conditions such as depression, anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Research funded by the U.S. Department of Education found a similar level of racial overrepresentation, when students were diagnosed with emotional disorders. Among elementary and middle school students, roughly 27% of African American students were diagnosed with some type of emotional disturbance.¹⁸⁰ In these cases, students would be transferred into a special education class, along with those whom had legitimate learning disorders. It is difficult to determine whether or not these emotional disturbances originated within the environment of a public school. That is to say, that the conditions that a student has grown up in at home may influence their emotional well-being more-so than a school environment. This is not to suggest that teachers have no impact over the diagnosis of a child because, as mentioned earlier, in some cases they may make judgement errors based on what constitutes a learning disability. However, it is more likely that emotional disturbances originate within the home environment of a student, then in the classroom.

Potential negative effects that teachers could have on students attitudes and behaviours towards learning could often come as a result from the behaviour or actions exhibited from

¹⁷⁹ Karapurkar, Nonkin & Braun. "Prevalence of Four Developmental Disabilities among Children Aged 8 Years", 5.

¹⁸⁰ U.S Department of Education. *2006 National and State Projections*. Retrieved from http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Projections_2006.aspx.

teachers themselves, as well as, the methods in which material that could be considered racially volatile was taught. The argument that African-American male students struggled in school because of outdated or racially insensitive curriculum that was forced upon them, was popular amongst those who believed that the American public schooling system hindered the academic progress of black students. Those who positioned themselves on the extreme end of this position saw the need for Afrocentric schools that would cater only to African American students and promote the unique cultural and social positions that are seen as African American.¹⁸¹ The belief behind this theory is that certain black students are turned off of school because they initially struggle to relate to what they learn. While African American culture is not ignored within the curriculum, it is largely treated as an afterthought in comparison to the emphasis on the actions of white men in subjects such as History. Figures, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Booker T. Washington, are seen as pivotal to both African American History and the history of America as well. By finding a middle ground between maintaining curriculum that has been taught in American schools for decades and incorporating new material that takes into account America's ever changing demographics, it may be possible to maintain the interest of young black students while appealing to those who desire continuity within the educational system. By taking on a more multi-ethnic approach to teaching, the hope is that more young African American males will stay in school.

Curriculum problems in schools are not limited to what is being taught but also how it is being taught. Pedro A. Noguera a professor from New York University described an experience he

¹⁸¹ This view is adopted by a few authors mentioned earlier, Kevin Brown, Signithia Fordham and Jonathan Ogbu. An excellent source for the philosophy of those advocating Afrocentric education see, *Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum: Proceedings of the First National Conference*, October 1989, ed A.G. Hilliard III.

had in a Bay Area high school English class. During an exercise that required reading *Huckleberry Finn*, Noguera was approached for help from a black student. After reading what the student had written, Noguera, “had asked why he had not discussed the plight of Jim, a central character to the novel who is a runaway slave. The student informed me that the class was to focus on the plot and not get into issues about race.”¹⁸² Noguera continued by explaining, “Two students had objected to the use of the term “nigger” throughout the novel and had been told by the teacher if they wished to make it an issue they could leave the course. Both of the students opted to take another course that did not meet college preparatory requirements.¹⁸³ It is difficult to understand if this situation could have been avoided if the teacher in question was more comfortable approaching sensitive racial issues within his or her class. The students in this case also remained within the school, in spite of the reluctance of their teacher to approach issues that they saw as culturally relevant. This particular case demonstrates that in certain circumstances teachers can negatively influence their students by refusing to take into account the delicate racial contexts that surround certain subjects and topics.

The academic achievement of African American male students can be influenced by how the curriculum is assessed and measured by teachers. The majority of scholarship on this topic now focuses on what schools can do to make the educational experience more equitable. Educators must understand the needs of different groups within schools, not to develop negative ideas about the weaknesses that some black students possess academically, but rather to understand how to best serve all groups equally. Even in subjects such as math where no clear racial bias exists, authors have looked at ways in which the current method of teaching the subject benefits

¹⁸² Noguera, “The Trouble With Black Boys”, 64 .

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 65.

some groups of students over others. A study by Erna Yackel and Paul Cobb explores the notion of social norms occurring within the classroom. These norms include actions such as knowing when to take notes during lectures and being able to ask questions when there is confusion about the material being taught. However, these norms were formed around white middle class ideals of what behaviour should be tolerated in the classroom. Teachers that were able to overcome these cultural differences relied on keeping all students involved in classroom discussions and directly involving their input on the material being taught. This allowed students who had previously been struggling to complete the work individually to succeed by receiving greater support from the group or teacher.¹⁸⁴ A more structured environment seemed more beneficial in allowing black students to learn along with the rest of a class. In her article, “Learning From Teaching,” Jo Boaler argued that, “Black students were more likely to expect facts and rules to be communicated directly. Whereas, white students were used to interpreting indirect statements from their parents.”¹⁸⁵ These differences in learning styles came in part from a difference in cultures at home, where young African American boys and girls were used to receiving orders directly from their parents. This made it more likely that teachers could reach these students if they adopted similar methods.

The relationship between education and criminal activity amongst black male youth is similar to that between criminal activity and family structure. There is no evidence that weaknesses in the American education system directly contributed to criminal activity amongst black youth. However, there were several indirect ways in which teachers, educators, and in some instances

¹⁸⁴ Erna Yackel and Paul Cobb. “Socio-mathematical Norms, Argumentation, and Autonomy in Mathematics”, *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*. Vol 27, no 1 (1996) 460.

¹⁸⁵ Jo Boaler. “Learning From Teaching: Exploring the Relationship between Reform Curriculum and Equity”. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*. Vol 33. No 4 (Jul 2002) 247.

family members turned young black men away from schools and into gangs. The relationship between students and teachers seemed to be the most troublesome. In some cases, teachers placed little care in how they taught the curriculum; this could manifest itself as insensitivity towards racially sensitive topics, benign neglect of students who need academic support, or excessive discipline motivated by racism. Teachers were hardly the only guilty party in these relationships. When students became aware of which classes they could invest less effort, they seldom wasted the chance to do so. This led to a disorganized atmosphere within school. Some students were able to cope with teachers who were not overly attentive and were able to progress through school and graduate successfully. Others struggled to do so and would either clash with their teachers or cut class. Both of these behaviours could end up in the suspension or eventual expulsion of a student. Students who struggled in class often found ways to cope by finding like-minded peers, whom they could emulate. Often times, these like-minded peers were a negative influence on the student and could undermine support at home. In a similar manner, a lack of support at home decreased the likelihood that a child would succeed in academics. This could occur due to a child moving frequently due to a mother's economic situation. Or in other cases, a lack of parental support or interest in the young males grades could discourage him from putting forth a maximum effort in school work. While these factors were not guaranteed to lead young men towards criminal activity, the occurrence of several of these factors at one time made education an indirect influence towards the relationship between crime and young African American males.

Chapter 5: Employment

As young African-American males transitioned towards adulthood in the late twentieth century, they often found great difficulty obtaining steady employment. From the late 1970s through the 1990s, young African American men often struggled to obtain or keep regular jobs. This chapter will examine the relationship between employment and criminal activity amongst young black males. The goal will be to survey debates occurring around the broader topic of the African American job market and determine whether the lack of jobs available to young black men increase the likelihood they will become involved in criminal activity. If young black men did hold jobs and continued to take part in criminal activity, what motivated them to do so? Moreover, could a lack of employment affect other aspects of life for African American males such as family structure or education. To gain a better understanding of the relationship between employment and criminal activity, this chapter will look at economic restructuring within the United States, the relationship between education and employment, and the persistence of the racial unemployment gap. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth will be utilized here to provide better context into why black youth who hold jobs commit crimes.

From the mid 1960s through the 1970s African Americans made large gains in the job market in comparison to whites. This was due in large part to the importance of court decisions such as Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the implantation of affirmative action programs under

the Nixon Administration.¹⁸⁶ Affirmative action programs emerged in 1965 under Lyndon Johnson's administration. But, it wasn't until Richard Nixon took office that it became a federal mandate. Affirmative actions programs existed within the United States to end discrimination, these programs were used most frequently in relation to employment. In 1969, Nixon enacted the Philadelphia Plan which required all contractors receiving federal contracts or federal money to hire minority workers.¹⁸⁷ There was significant fear that affirmative action programs in the United States would drive employers to utilize racial quotas when hiring minority workers. This was criticized as a racist act as employees would be hired solely on the basis of race rather than any real qualifications for the available position.¹⁸⁸ This fear was realized in the landmark court case *Griggs V. Duke Power co.* The *Griggs v Duke Power* case revolved around the issue of whether or not tests or qualifications were unfair hiring practices prohibited by Title VII, even if these tests were related to the position being filled. The outcome of this case decided that if tests were found to disparately impact minority groups, the onus was on the employer to prove that the test or qualification was "reasonably related" to the job for which the test was required.¹⁸⁹ By 1991, the Civil Rights Act was amended by the Bush administration. This amendment was

¹⁸⁶ The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was meant to outlaw discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, and ethnicity in a variety of public and private settings. Of the major changes that this Act created was to legally outlawed segregation within public places such as schools and businesses that served the general public such as restaurants. Voting was also affected by the Act as it legally ended the use of voter registration requirements that had created difficulties for Southern blacks to file ballots in elections. For an overview of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, see Susan Wright, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964* (The Rosen Publishing Group, 2005)

¹⁸⁷ Gary A. Moore & Michael K. Braswell. " "Quotas" and the Codification of the Disparate Impact Theory: What Did Griggs Really Say and Not Say?" *Albany Law Review*, Vol 459, no 55 (1991) pg 458.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 458.

¹⁸⁹ L. Ngov. "When "The Evil Day" Comes, Will Title VII's Disparate Impact Provision be Narrowly Tailored to Survive an Equal Protection Clause Challenge?", *American University Law Review*. Vol 60, no 3, 2011, pg 16.

deemed necessary due to the outcome of several court cases similar to *Griggs v Duke Power* that continually challenged aspects of Title VII.

Several changes were made to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that involved circumstances in which an employee was justified in suing their employer for discrimination. The 1991 Civil Rights Act shifted the “burden of proof” to the employee making he or she responsible for proving that an individual or group of practices resulted in a disparate impact based on race, colour, religion, sex or ethnicity. Also new to the Civil Rights Act of 1991 was the stipulation that the existence of statistical imbalance within a workplace on account of race, religion, or sex was not sufficient evidence to prove that a disparate impact existed.¹⁹⁰ In an attempt to find balance while shifting the burden of proof to the employee, another change was made with the Act that allowed for the plaintiff to be reimbursed their legal fees if they received no remedy from the courts even if they had proved that an employer had discriminated. The changes made by this Act effectively limited the power of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However, this Act had been steadily chipped away at by conservative Supreme Court decisions such as *Griggs V Duke Power*.¹⁹¹ The Civil Rights Act of 1991 was more of a response to these court decisions than an attempt by the government to limit the power of women, minorities, or any disenfranchised party to challenge the discriminatory practices of an employer.

In the following years after the *Griggs* decision, economic growth began to slacken for some, and the environment that once fostered advancement for Black workers began to fade. The Reagan administration opposed affirmative action before the courts and debated eliminating compliance measures that served as safeguards. Similarly, the Bush administration and the

¹⁹⁰ United States of America. *The Civil Rights Act of 1991*. Sec 102.

¹⁹¹ See *Wards Cove Packing v. Antonio*(1989).

Supreme Court took several measures that limited the leverage that plaintiffs had in challenging employment practices that could be considered discriminatory. A study that utilized data from the Current Population Survey found that while the black white income gap shrunk in 1985 it began to rise again in the following years. The income gap tended to fluctuate wildly from year to year when studying black and white workers with less than 10 years of work experience.¹⁹² Regional differences were negligible as most states encountered similar wage divides. Differences did occur between metropolitan, rural, and suburban areas throughout the country. The relative earnings of young black men within metropolitan areas dropped steadily from year to year, this erosion accounted for any overall increase within the black and white income gap.¹⁹³

Unsurprisingly areas with the highest concentration of African Americans with lower incomes accounted for the greatest rise in disparity between the incomes of black and white Americans.

In their article “What Went Wrong,” John Bound and Richard Freeman studied institutional shifts within the United States that affected the relative earnings of African American workers, changes that applied specifically to the labour market. Bound and Freeman saw the most significant shift occurring as the decline in the real value of the minimum wage. The real value of minimum wage refers to the amount minimum wage earners are making when compared to inflation and the overall cost of living. This was especially significant for African American workers as they were more likely to be earning a minimum wage than their counterparts.

Freeman and Bound estimated the effects of the declining real minimum wage in 1989, by simulating the distribution of earnings in 1989 and holding the real minimum wage constant

¹⁹² John Bound and Richard B. Freeman. “What Went Wrong? The Erosion of Relative Earnings and Employment Among Young Black Men in the 1980s.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. Vol, 107, No, 1 (Feb 1992) 206.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, 207.

from 1981 to 1989. The purpose of this experiment was to determine whether minimum wage workers were at economically at risk, due to rising costs and inflation within the United States. Minimum wage was set at \$3.35 per hour, which was the average rate of minimum wage rates nationwide. This rate was gradually adjusted to \$4.57 per hour by 1989 to adjust for the rate of inflation, which was 36%. Workers who were making less than minimum wage also had their rates adjusted by a similar percentage to keep the numbers constant with minimum wage earners. Bound and Freeman concluded that, “minimum wage had a reduced importance in the 1980s, any raise in the rate of minimum wage would have been unable to offset the adverse factors that lowered the relative employment of young black men.”¹⁹⁴ These adverse factors that affected the employment of young Black men could include a lack of education, criminal background, or a lack of qualifications or relevant experience.

Much of the changing job market within the United States can be linked to industrial restructuring that took place in the decades following World War II. Previously, it was possible to obtain blue-collar manufacturing and industrial jobs within a close proximity to major metropolitan centers. This began to change as manufacturing plants either closed down, were moved to more sparsely populated areas, or moved out of the country altogether. Industrial restructuring took place for a variety of different reasons. Advances in transportation, communication, and industrial technologies combined with the changing structure of international and national economies created conditions that led to the gradual decrease of blue-collar jobs.¹⁹⁵ These jobs became replaced by in part by white collar jobs that were knowledge intensive and virtually disqualified those who had substandard education for these positions.

¹⁹⁴ Bound and Freeman. “What Went Wrong?”, 217.

¹⁹⁵ John D. Kasarda. “Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass.” *American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol 501, no 1, (Jan 1989) 28.

These transitions occurred simultaneously with the movement of thousands of white workers to suburban areas. Metropolitan areas in the North became hubs for the financial, technological, and service industries while suburban areas experienced growth in the service industry to accommodate the rapid growth within the suburbs. This trend coincided with a decline of organized labour in the United States. A majority of manufacturing or heavy industry jobs were unionized and had employed many black Americans. In 1973, roughly 31% of young black workers were unionized compared to 23% of white workers of a similar age. By 1989, black workers were no more likely to be unionized than white workers. The loss of low-skilled jobs within urban areas accelerated the growth of ghettos which in turn kept new businesses wary of moving into these areas.

Industrial restructuring in the United States brought forward the issue of space and how it related to the job market. The notion of space, when related to the job market, referred to the idea that an individual's ability to pursue a career or job is influenced by where they live. If a person lives in close proximity to available jobs, he or she would have a much easier time obtaining employment in their desired field.¹⁹⁶ A critical article written on this topic was David Ellwood's 1968 study, "The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis: Are There Teenage Jobs Missing in the Ghetto?" Ellwood's study attacked the notion that space influences an individual's ability to pursue employment. Ellwood believed that race was the deciding factor towards job applicants. In his study, Ellwood utilized three different methods to determine whether space was a factor in influencing an individual job prospects while studying out of school youth aged 16-21 in Chicago in 1970. His three methods of determining the influence of space towards the job market

¹⁹⁶ David Ellwood, "The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis: Are There Teenage Jobs Missing in the Ghetto" in *Black Youth Employment Crisis*. ed. Richard Freeman and H.J. Holzer. pg 151 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

consisted of “a multiple regression analysis of the census tract and local community employment rates, comparison of unemployment rates of blacks in two different sections of Chicago that had different degrees of job accessibility, and comparison of black and white employment rates in the same section of the city.”¹⁹⁷ Ellwood found that the inclusion of variables that were related to job proximity did not have any significant effect on the census employment rate. He then concluded that there was insufficient evidence to claim that space influenced the job market for African Americans.

More recently, studies have been released that refute Ellwood’s conclusions. In his article, “Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass,” John D. Kasarda argues, “The farther the establishment is from the ghetto, the fewer blacks it employs and the more slowly it adds black employees over time.” Kasarda goes on to argue that, “Because most new job growth in metropolitan areas is toward their peripheries, those concentrated in the urban core are spatially disadvantaged.”¹⁹⁸ Transportation was associated with space as factors that could negatively affect the likelihood of African Americans maintaining jobs outside of urban areas. The commute times of African Americans was roughly twice that of Caucasian workers this made owning a car crucial to those who wanted to find gainful employment. In areas where fewer African Americans owned cars joblessness spiked. Kasarda to concluded, “Residential confinement of black Americans in areas of blue collar job decline combined with limited automobile ownership which became increasingly necessary to obtain employment in a dispersing metropolitan economy would surely seem to contribute to high rates of unemployment.”¹⁹⁹ While race undoubtedly played and still does play a role in influencing the job prospects of African

¹⁹⁷ Ellwood, “The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis.” 151.

¹⁹⁸ Kasarda. “Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass”, 40.

¹⁹⁹ ibid, 43.

Americans. The concept of space and the influence it has on the mobility of African Americans has become important as well, especially as the American economy has restructured and moved towards more white-collar employment.

The location of jobs in relation to the youth's place of residence can help or hinder the employment prospects of that individual. The proximity of low-income jobs to low-educated workers may influence their decision to accept these jobs. If for example a minimum wage job was available within a suburban area that was an hour commute from an individual it would be less likely that the individual would greatly profit from taking this job as travel costs would eat into a portion of the individual's wage. This is less likely to occur in more white collar positions that involve travel as the wages are high enough that they outweigh the potential financial losses occurred during travel. A study led by economists Keith R. Ihlanfeldt and David L. Sjoquist using data from the Public Use Sample of the 1980 U.S Census of Population looked at the relationship between race, space, and job prospects for white and black youth. Philadelphia was chosen because Philadelphia contained enough black and white Americans living in both metropolitan areas and suburban areas to properly measure how the differences in location affect job availability and travel time.²⁰⁰ The data gathered from the study found that young black males had worse access to employment opportunities than white teenagers. Black males were faced with travel times of roughly 26 minutes in comparison to the 18-minute average travel time that white teenagers had. What the data also indicated is that white youth were able to overcome the geographic differences in job markets. White youth who lived in similar low income areas as black youth were able to overcome their disadvantage through greater access to informal job

²⁰⁰ Keith R. Ihlanfeldt and David L. Sjoquist. "Job Accessibility and Racial Differences in Youth Employment". *The American Economic Review*. Vol 80, No.1 (March 1990) 26.

networks.²⁰¹ These informal job networks took the form of friends or family informing a job seeker of available positions outside of the immediate proximity of their neighbourhoods. These networks appeared less often amongst black job seekers. While there is no one set reason why this occurred some have blamed this on, family fragmentation and limited economic solidarity amongst African Americans.

This lack of informal job networks within the African American community was also believed to be the reason why African Americans struggled to obtain jobs while new immigrants to the United States were able to find relative success obtaining jobs due to preexisting informal networks. Kinship and household structures within immigrant families were able to facilitate a great deal of entrepreneurial success. Within Asian or South-East Asian families extended family members enabled households to function more efficiently as economic units by sharing household costs and providing insurance in case of loss of employment.²⁰² New immigrants were also likely to work for or in other cases be hired by others belonging to the same racial group. African American owned businesses struggled to grow during the early 1980s. Between the years of 1977 and 1982, the number of Asian owned businesses with paid employment increased by 160% whereas the number of black owned businesses with paid employees decreased by 3%.²⁰³ This large gap in growth between Asian owned businesses and African American owned businesses is difficult to explain. Certainly, differences in informal job networks and available workers through kinship networks make a difference. However, African Americans also possessed large extended families, so did a significant difference exist within these kinship networks that could attribute towards joblessness amongst black Americans.

²⁰¹ Ihlanfeldt and Sjoquist. "Job Accessibility and Racial Differences in Youth Employment", 29.

²⁰² Kasarda. "Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass", 43.

²⁰³ ibid, 43.

Black Americans also possessed large extended families but the nature of their inter-familial relationships was largely different from those belonging to other ethnicities. African American kinship networks were not as well equipped as others to properly provide economic security. In his book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson looked at the kinship networks of African American families earning lower incomes in Chicago. Within his book, Wilson argued that, “Two-thirds of black homes in Chicago were mother-only households. These households had only one wage earner, and on average were making only a third of the income that two parent family households were making.”²⁰⁴ Wilson continued by stating, “financial weakness and family fragmentation amongst the Black underclass did not only preclude capital mobilization for self employment but it also created barriers to their children’s mobility”.²⁰⁵ Wilson’s argument, is that the lack of financial resources within certain segments of the Black community combined with family fragmentation create contexts that decreased the necessity for children to work. However, Wilson’s argument is in essence a take on the “Culture of Poverty” thesis in the Moynihan Report. This leads back to the old debate of whether those on welfare are motivated to find employment if they received monthly cheques from the government. In some cases, it is certainly true that individuals do take advantage of the welfare system and use it as their only source of income. On the other hand, a lack of financial capital within the African American community and sluggish growth of African American owned businesses may have played a more significant role in explaining the difficulties that young black men had in finding lasting employment.

²⁰⁴ William Julius Wilson. *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 40.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 40.

The relationship between the labour market and criminal activity is complex. Some authors believe that the collapse of the job market for young African American men in the late 1980s into the early 1990s created conditions where criminal activity was more financially viable than pursuing honest work. It is difficult to ascertain how profitable criminal activity could be as criminals don't report their incomes. However, what drives those into criminal activity is often the perception that such activity can generate greater profits than legal means. In 1980, the NBER Inner City Youth Survey asked young men in Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia whether they could make more on the street than in a legitimate job. A similar survey conducted only amongst Boston youth took place in 1989. In the nine-year gap between the surveys, the number of youth who indicated they could earn more on the street rose from 31% in 1980 to 63% in Boston by 1989.²⁰⁶ This perception that life on the street was more profitable to a young man was all too common. An estimate of the earnings of adult drug dealers by Reuter, MacCoun, and Murphy found that dealers within the Washington D.C area in 1990 earned roughly \$2000 a month net of expenses.²⁰⁷ This averaged out to \$30 an hour, which was a wage that was very unlikely to be available to poorly educated young men. While the penalties were quite high for these young men if they were caught committing crimes, the profit made dealing drugs seemed to outweigh the overall risk involved.

In his article "Why Do So Many Young American Men Commit Crimes and What Might We Do About It," Richard B. Freeman looks at why young black Americans become involved in criminal activity from an economic perspective. Freeman takes a unique stance on the topic by

²⁰⁶ Richard B. Freeman. "Why Do So Many Young American Men Commit Crimes and What Might We Do About It", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol.10, No.1 (Winter 1996) pg 31.

²⁰⁷ P. Reuter, R. MacCoun, and P. Murphy. *Money From Crime: A Study of the Economics of Drug Dealing in Washington D.C.* Santa Monica, California: Rand Drug Policy Center, 1990) 10.

looking at the drug trade from an economic perspective with drugs as a product and drug dealers and producers as part of the labour market. Drugs, more specifically heroin and crack cocaine were readily available in the United States throughout 1980s and 1990s. This brought forward the War on Drugs which greatly increased the penalties involved after being arrested for a drug trafficking offense. Freeman argued that the changing face of prisons (i.e the high number of African American inmates), “would make it less likely that someone contemplating involvement in the drug trade would be intimidated by the possibility of jail time.”²⁰⁸ This argument hinges around the idea that with the prison population becoming overwhelming African American, younger black youth would not be immediately dissuaded from obtaining a criminal record, as it would be unlikely that a friend or relative would stigmatize the individual. Using data from the National Bureau of Economic Research Inner City Youth Survey, Freeman found that young African American males had lower perceptions of the riskiness of committing a crime and higher perceptions of the possible profits to be made by committing a crime.²⁰⁹ This could be influenced by the likelihood that many young African American males may have been jobless or working low income positions. This may make it more enticing to pursue criminal activity that would allow them to make a quick profit while working fewer hours.

Crime and unemployment are frequently linked together in a cyclical relationship. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth also looked at the relationship between employment status and propensity to commit crime. The data gathered indicated that youth involved in criminal activity were much more unlikely to have a job than those not involved in crime. The employment gap was fairly small (3%) for those who had low levels of criminal involvement.

²⁰⁸ Freeman. “Why Do So Many Young American Men Commit Crimes”, 33.

²⁰⁹ ibid, 34.

This gap rose to dramatically to 13% for those who frequently took part in criminal activity and were charged with a crime.²¹⁰ What the data indicated is that those who committed crime were not unlikely to pursue profit through legal means as well. What this indicated was a type of moral grey area where if a youth was presented with an opportunity to make profit outside of his or her legal job than he or she may take this opportunity if it grants the individual the opportunity to make a profit without significant risk. Freeman opined that, “Someone may need help selling stolen goods; a car with a stereo may be parked on a deserted street; the local fast-food franchise or supermarket may be hiring. If the opportunity is there and the likely gain outweighs the risk, someone will act on it.”²¹¹ While unemployment and joblessness certainly increase the likelihood of a youth pursuing criminal activity as there are no other options available. Even when youth do possess jobs (albeit low paying jobs) they can be motivated to pursue criminal activity if they feel the risk taken will be outweighed by the potential profit made by committing the criminal act. The only existing deterrent in this situation could be jail time.

The idea of mobility and how it relates to the job market can also be related back to education. If an individual has higher levels of education this usually makes it easier for he or she to obtain a higher paying job. The likelihood of higher education becoming a prerequisite for employment has grown from the 1950s through to the 1980s and 1990s. Skills that were once valued in the skilled trades or industrial jobs have decreased in worth due to the lack of growth in

²¹⁰ Bureau of Labour Statistics, U.S Department of Labour. National Longitudinal Survey of Young Men, 1979-2002. (Columbus Ohio:Center for Human Resource Research, The Ohio State University, 2002).

This is a longitudinal survey which means that it collects data throughout a specific time period which in the case is from 1979 to 2002. The survey collected data throughout the course of the lives of the young men surveyed. This was done by completing several interviews during a 23-year period. In addition to the interviews conducted, researchers also gathered information from high school transcripts and an aptitude test. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth contains a diverse array of questions ranging on topics from labour force behaviour, educational advancement, and criminal activity.

²¹¹ Freeman. “Why Do So Many Young American Men Commit Crimes,” 33

these industries. Whereas skills that involved mathematics, reading and writing, finance, or computers and technology have become increasingly valued. Jobs that require these skills tend to require not only a high school diploma but in many cases a college diploma or University degree. The average wage for a young black man without a high school diploma in 1989 was \$7.22 an hour. The majority of African American young men (16-24) who had not finished high school had wages that fell below their peers. Roughly 69% of those who had not completed a high school degree made less than other workers in the same age bracket.²¹² The employment rates for African American men who had dropped out of high school had been steadily declining from 1979 onward. In 1979, of all black young men who were high school drop outs roughly 73% were employed, this number dropped to 66% by 1989 and to 56% by 1999.²¹³ This drop in the employment rate could be explained by the gradual industrial restructuring in the United States. Certainly, education or a lack thereof could influence the career path of a young man, if he is unable to find a job because of his lack of qualification or education then it is likely he would attempt to generate profit through other measures.

The relationship between employment and criminal activity amongst young black men is a complex one. As the United States changed from an industrial hub towards a service and technological centered economy this left many Americans searching for alternative forms of employment. Industrial restructuring also affected the proximity of jobs to the inner city, which had previously been plentiful. Young black men who once may have been able to secure some

²¹² Ronald B. Mincy, Charles E. Lewis Jr and Wen-Jui Han. "Less-Educated Young Black Men in the Economic Boom of the 1990s" in *Black Males Left Behind*, ed. Ronald B. Mincy pg 5 (Washington D.C:The Urban Institute Press, 2006).

²¹³ Harry J. Holzer and Paul Offner. "Trends in the Employment Outcomes of Young Black Men, 1979-2000" in *Black Males Left Behind*, ed. Ronald B. Mincy pg 30 (Washington D.C:The Urban Institute Press, 2006).

kind of employment near their homes now found themselves facing a lengthy commute for an entry-level job in the service sector. Education became more important as those who found themselves unemployed were often the same individuals who dropped out of high school prematurely. In some cases individuals who were suffering from unemployment could rely on kinship networks or extended family to provide them with jobs or provide them with contacts or references that could be useful. This was a rare occurrence amongst African Americans who as mentioned early possessed several structural inequities within their family structure which made it difficult to raise capital to start businesses or provide young black men with contacts within industries.

What seemed to be the most troublesome problem facing young black men was the perception that more profit could be generated from illegal means than from legal employment. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth coupled with Freeman's article indicated that young black men would be willing to take part in criminal activity if the risk involved was not outweighed by the potential profits gained. In many ways, this way of thinking is not uncommon amongst most investors or venture capitalists. Decisions are made based on weighing the possible risks involved against the profit to be made. Unfortunately in the case of many young Black men the decisions made are not based around what stock or investment to pursue but whether the potential profit made trafficking drugs is worth the risk of obtaining a criminal record or being sent to prison. Ultimately, employment can be seen as an indirect factor leading towards criminal activity amongst young black males. When coupled with breakdowns within African American family structure and disengagement from the schooling system, a lack of available jobs can lead to young black men seeking alternative methods to making a profit.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

As the United States progressed throughout the 20th century, rapid changes occurred in industry, education, family structure, and popular culture. These changes were the most visible within the African American community. Changes that had occurred within in and manufacturing led to a shift in population towards more suburban areas in addition to this, jobs available in heavy industry largely dissipated, replaced by white-collar jobs in the service and tech industries. Many of these jobs required college degrees or greater levels of technological expertise than preexisting blue-collar jobs. Lack of employment lent itself to poor living conditions and greater instances of poverty amongst certain segments of the African American community. In some cases these segments could include single mothers raising multiple children on a low-income job, in other cases it could be a young high school drop out who only qualifies for a minimum wage job. At the same time, the United States was becoming gradually more Conservative which was reflected in the changing approaches that lawmakers took towards crime and poverty. The War on Drugs and later Bill Clinton's War on Poverty were distinctly Conservative responses to structural issues within the United States. The former created drug enforcement laws that placed draconian penalties on drugs that were known as being more prevalent amongst certain demographics. The latter shifted the responsibility for welfare programs from the federal government to the individual states. In some cases the changes were relatively minimal. In other cases this resulted in drastic reductions of aid given to single mothers and other economically at-risk families juggling the responsibilities of work and caregiving simultaneously.

This paper attempted to explore the relationship that pop culture, employment, education, and family structure had towards criminal activity amongst young black men during the 1980s and 1990s. Employment, education, and family structure, were labelled as co-dependent factors that contributed to criminal behaviour amongst young men. When these factors were isolated and analyzed on their own, no real evidence that existed to show that they solely caused young black men to commit criminal acts. However, when any of these three factors existed together they created conditions that were likely to lead young black men down a criminal path. It is difficult to isolate any one particular factor as being the catalyst for these conditions that led to criminal behaviour. In the majority of cases described within the paper where employment, education, or family structure have led to criminal activity, when one of these factors has emerged to influence young black males towards criminal activity, it does so in junction with another of the above mentioned factors. Lack of employment could be troublesome for young black Americans but troubles increased when a lack of employment was accompanied by limited education or a lack of family or kinship support. Popular culture was the lone factor examined that did not seem to significantly influence criminal activity amongst African American male youth. While it is true that hip hop culture and “new jack” or “hood” films were widely demonized by the American media, in many of the cases studied the news response was particularly Conservative and chose to equate violence that occurred on the street with similar violence that was displayed on film or implied in rap lyrics. To make this comparison was in some cases simply lazy journalism, films like *Boyz n the Hood* were never meant to glorify violence but rather to showcase structural issues within the Black community such as absentee fathers and extreme poverty. Similarly, rap groups such as Public Enemy or N.W.A frequently discussed themes relating to their upbringing

within their lyrics. While the messages within these lyrics were often sandwiched within course lyrics, this should not dispel the fact that for the most part, these groups were not urging young Black males to go out and commit crimes.

Ultimately, the struggles facing the African American community were too complex to simply point at factors such as education or family structure in an attempt to explain why young African American males committed crimes at such high rates. What this paper has attempted to accomplish is to list four of the major historical factors relating to criminal activity amongst Black youth and analyze whether any factor had a greater impact on criminal activity than others. Popular culture was found to play a relatively minimal role in influencing criminal activity. Any notion of popular culture playing a significant role was often exaggerated by the news media. Although it could be argued that popular culture was often the most visible target of critics of inner city violence, it did not warrant such attention. Employment, family structure, and education were the most likely factors attributing to criminal activity amongst black youth. They were described as co-dependent factors because if they existed alone they were much less likely to attribute to criminal activity amongst African American males. It wasn't enough for young black men to be jobless, or a high school drop out, or to come from a dysfunctional family. But when two or all three of these factors existed simultaneously it was more likely a young black male would become involved in criminal activity. From the 1980s through the 1990s, a second urban crisis emerged in the United States. African American males were found to be disproportionately involved in criminal activity due to a variety of factors including employment, education, and family structure. Looking at factors such as employment, education, and family structure have helped to determine what some of the potential causes were of increased criminal

activity amongst African American males. However, solutions to the issues of poverty, joblessness, underachievement in education, and absenteeism of black fathers are still difficult to come by. In time, solutions to the problems facing the African American community will be found, but for now one can only look at the history behind the structural inequities that exist within black America and hope that the future will bring change.

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