

**“BRENDA’S GOT A BABY”  
SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN THE STREETS**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Black American Studies in Major with Distinction.

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## ABSTRACT

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

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION: WHO IS BRENDA<sup>1</sup>?

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

Although single motherhood in the Black community is amongst the highest in the nation, the authentic voices of these women and their children are often silenced in the academic realm. This analysis seeks to examine the lives of low-income, street-life oriented Black women and their experiences with “fatherless” homes both in childhood and adulthood. This idea of “fatherless” homes and single motherhood often connotes a Black woman raising her children without a significant male partner or biological father (Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998; Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001; Alexander, 2010). The social stigma of the “Black single mother” has become a crippling symbol of the state of African American affairs, specifically for women living in urban or street-life oriented environments. With this stigma comes a litany of stereotypes that suggest a dependent, inept, and uneducated

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



Black woman who falls short in comparison to her White counterpart (Moynihan, 1965). However, this paper also argues that such monolithic and Eurocentric conceptualizations are not always accurate, as the African family structure has always been an extended-family network of support (Collins, 1987). Often these women depend on extended family members and “fictive kin” (Collins, 1987:7) or non-kin relations for help in child rearing, and the Black community has a long tradition of such African-centered ideology. In addition, “othermothers” (Collins, 1987:5), or women who support biological mothers in child rearing responsibilities, are also central to the African American and African diasporic family institution. Indeed, “it takes a village to raise a child,” and in this vein, this research calls for a fundamental shift in the cultural assumptions and social biases surrounding Black women and their children.

Black women, particularly those who are vulnerable to adverse living situations, poor socioeconomic conditions, and urban or street-life environments, view motherhood from a particular vantage point. This study makes the argument that while Black motherhood styles are passed on through generations, motherhood must be viewed with a phenomenological perspective in mind. These Black women are raising their children in oftentimes egregious and challenging settings that influence their child-rearing tactics. Additionally, these women adapt their roles in the home and larger community according to specific codes and principles that are unique to the streets.

Ultimately, this study seeks to address relational issues on the alarming presence of single motherhood in the African American community, through the eyes of the single mothers and women themselves in a sample of street life oriented Black women from Wilmington, Delaware. Rather than examining these women as objects from a distance, this analysis gives an Afrocentric voice to these women and their situations, framed from their own perspectives and experiences.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW: “Just Womens without Mens<sup>2</sup>”

#### *Demographic Profile*

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

Locally, single motherhood in Delaware reflects the startling numbers found on the national level. According to the Delaware Health Statistics Center, 58% of Black births in New Castle Country are born to teenage single Black mothers

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<sup>2</sup> Quote from Fox Butterfield’s *All God’s Children* (1995) in reference to the lack of men and fathers in many of the homes in Augusta, GA

(Delaware Health Statistics, 2009). In addition, 71.6% of Black babies born in New Castle County are born to single Black mothers (Delaware Health Statistics Center, 2007). New Castle County is the northernmost county in the state of Delaware, and includes the city of Wilmington. Finally, 85.7% of Black births in Wilmington, Delaware are reportedly to single mothers (Delaware Health Statistics, 2009).

Although admittedly, there are grave issues pertaining to Black single motherhood, it is imperative to analyze this data in the full context of the phenomena, and the numbers that encompass these so-called “single mothers.” As aforementioned, the African American family and household composition is historically diverse, and thus a mere percentage cannot accurately reflect the lived experiences of these women or the social outcomes of their children. Thus, the same Westernized framework used to fit middle-class European Americans cannot also be used to categorize low-income African Americans.

In addition, Black single motherhood often focuses on the absence of the biological father from the household, rather than the bond between children and father outside of the home (Livingston and Parker, 2011). Furthermore, this data often shuts out the possibility of male cohabitation, co-residence or “kinship networks” (Collins, 1990) of other family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins) or family friends. This varied family structure suggests that a complex social network of support surrounds these Black mothers, and that they are not always raising their children alone.

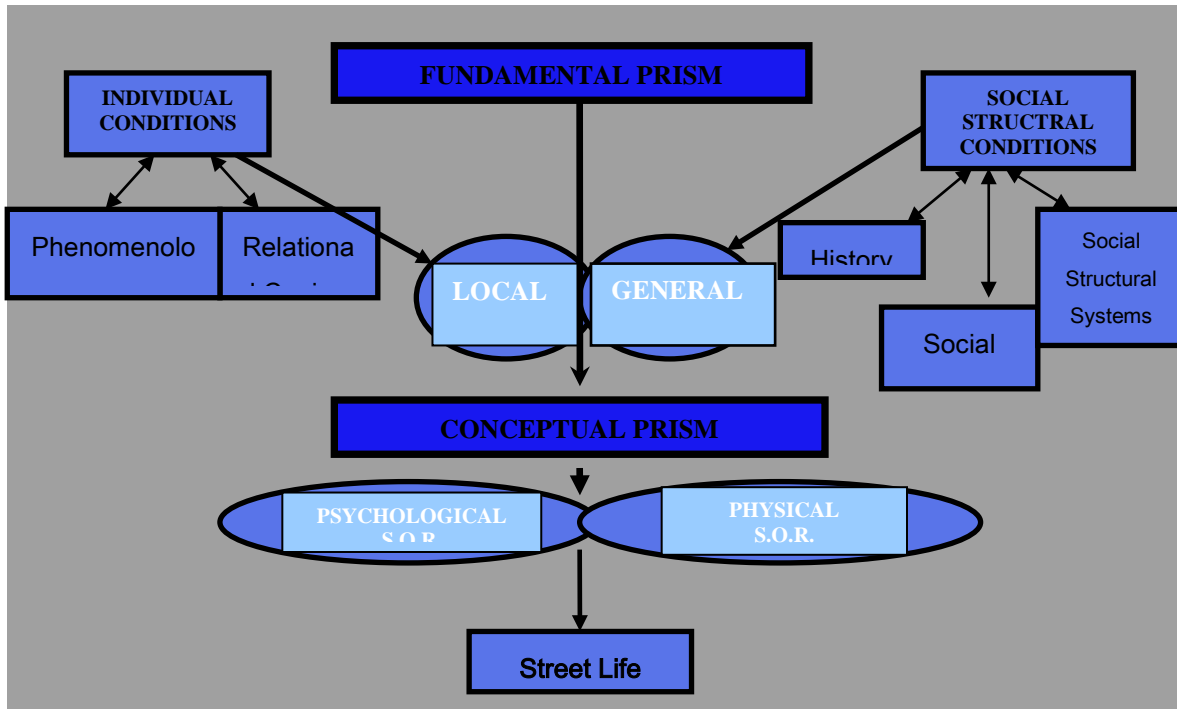
Critically, much of the literature grounded in these data does not move from sites of resiliency theory (Payne, 2008), or from the premise that these low-income, street-life oriented Black women and children can overcome their adversity and cope with environmental, economic, and social stressors. In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

### ***Theoretical Framing***

This study conceptualizes street life as a “site of resilience” in street-life oriented Black women and mothers (Payne, 2008 & 2011). While this particular sites-of-resilience theoretical analysis argues that street ideology is passed on by older Black males, this argument contends that such analysis can be extended to Black women, particularly those in low-income and street environments. It must be noted that Black low-income girls and women “come of age in the same distressed neighborhoods as those of [their] male counterparts” (Jones, 2010:20), and thus have similar lived experiences. As such, this theoretical analysis argues that the streets offer particular

psychological and physical spaces that operate concurrently to produce sites of strength on both the individual and group/community levels. In turn, these sites ultimately create resilience for street-life oriented Black women. Street life is a phenomenological term viewed as an ideology centered on personal and economic survival (Payne, 2008 & 2001). Black men and women also understand street life as a system of behaviors maintained through bonding and illegal activities. For Black women in particular, bonding activities include interpersonal acts such as “hanging on the block” or street corner, rhyming or rapping, playing basketball, or organizing and sponsoring local events in the community. Illegal activities for Black women are generally employed to confront the effects of economic poverty, and include interpersonal violence, prostitution, preparing drugs for sale, selling or holding drugs or drug money for others, gambling, and bookkeeping (Jones, 2010). It is important to understand that this theory assumes that low-income Black women acquire a street-life orientation primarily as a means for economic survival, due to a lack of equal opportunity in education and employment sectors (Payne & Brown, 2010). Figure 1 explains the Sites of Resilience Theoretical Model in greater detail.

**Figure 1 Sites of Resilience Theoretical Model** (Payne, (Brown, Payne, Green & Dressner, 2010; Payne, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2011)



This particular sites-of-resilience model theorizes that street life is passed on through intergenerational transmission, in which attitudes and behaviors are transmitted by the older Black male generation through the “code of the streets” (Anderson, 1999). This study argues that inner-city Black women are also affected by this code, as well as intergenerational patterns of single motherhood and street-life orientation. Butterfield (1995) writes that 25% to 40% of temperament can be passed on to subsequent generations, especially when the living environment and conditions remain the same. In this light, low-income Black mothers face a particular challenge of raising their children beneath the same or similar conditions as their own mothers

and grandmothers. However, rather than viewing these women as “culturally pathological,” (Rowley, 2002; Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton & Garret-Peters, 2008; Sharp & Ispa, 2009) or somehow to blame for their socioeconomic conditions, this analysis calls for more useful methods in the study of low-income Black women and mothers. Furthermore, this study argues that these women are not pathological, but they are instead trapped in a cycle wherein structural inequality, violence, and crime play a significant role in their conditions and lived experiences. Thus, this role creates scenarios that are conducive to street-lifestyles and are predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood in low-income Black communities.

Finally, this study is also grounded in standpoint epistemology as conceptualized by Black feminists (Collins, 2000), and argues that “a Black woman’s standpoint should reflect the convergence of [being Black and female]” (Collins, 2000: 269), and that this connection gives Black women a certain group perspective. In addition, this epistemology demands that Black women’s experience should be at the center of the analysis (Richie, 2002) rather than as an afterthought. Crenshaw (1991) built on the standpoint theory, suggesting that the intersectionality of race, gender, and class create marginalized conditions for women of color and shape the social world and identities of these women.

Much of the literature found on single motherhood in the African American community frames such motherhood as a contemporary phenomenon, one plagued by urban poverty, welfare-dependent mothers, and absentee fathers (Moynihan, 1965; Lewis, 1966; Anderson, 1999; Nadasen, 2007; Cherlin et al. 2008; Burton & Tucker,



2009). However, single motherhood in street-life oriented populations is no new circumstance, as racism, and structural and economic inequalities are fundamental in creating high numbers of teenage and unwed Black mothers. Black single motherhood is best understood in “the gender, race, and class inequities wherein poor, Black women are positioned at the bottom of the labor market [and social ladder]” (Kaplan, 1996:428). It is in this dynamic that the Black woman dwells, oppressed by European standards of motherhood and childbearing, and battling with societal perceptions of her race, her gender, and her social class.

Can street-life oriented single mothers still be “good” mothers in light of their situations? Instead of questioning issues related to Black women’s agency and resilience, much of social science literature characterizes low-income Black girls and women in terms of individual pathology and social deviance, wherein “sexually promiscuous young girls, turn into irresponsible young pregnant women and then recklessly dangerous Black mothers” (Richie, 2012:6). This presumed pathology suggests that the Black community sensationalizes motherhood as a primary goal for females, and condones single motherhood in light of the “endangered Black male” or “missing Black father” argument. Studies infer that “young women...are unwilling to postpone childbearing because of the high value they place on children, even though it is difficult for them to find suitable young men to marry” (Cherlin et al. 2008:920). Moreover, this idea of social deviance implies that Black women exhibit wild and uncivilized behavior while raising their children, and are not only a threat to cultural norms of motherhood but are also to blame for their plight.

Such literature reveals the “criminalization of poverty” (Chunn & Gavigan, 2004; Richie, 2012) that points the finger at low-income Black women for their poor socioeconomic conditions, lack of a father figure for their children, and criminal experiences. Blamed for their supposed “moral failings, faulty decision-making, negative cultural values, and errant behavior” (Richie, 2002:112), low-income Black women supposedly seek significance and achievement in motherhood (McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Rowley, 2002; Sharp & Ispa, 2009).

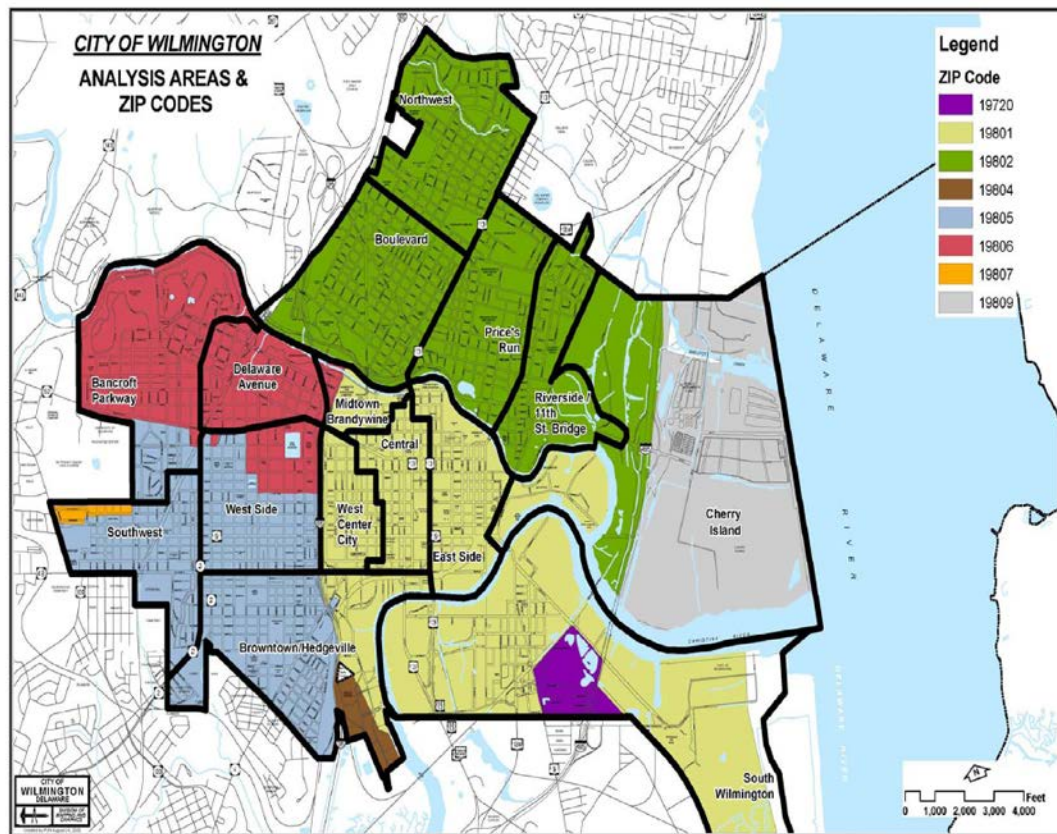
Literature negating and condemning Black women saturates the academy, however, it is imperative to contextualize the experiences of low-income, street-life oriented Black women, and this study analyzes the lived experiences of these women in ways that can be useful and progressive. This analysis argues that structural conditions of extreme poverty, the prison industrial complex, external oppression, physical violence, poor educational and economic systems, inadequate healthcare, disinvestment, and lack of equal opportunity create conditions of single motherhood over time in urban communities. This study is guided by the following question: *To what extent are family composition, criminal record or street activity, and educational level predictive of intergenerational notions of single motherhood?*

### **Chapter 3**

## **METHODS**

This paper is a secondary analysis on the data gathered from the Wilmington Street Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project. PAR includes members of the population under study on the research team and gives members the opportunity to participate in all phases of the research project. Also, PAR projects require a social justice-based analysis to be organized in response to the data collected by the study. The Wilmington Street PAR Project was a pilot study which will lead to a larger citywide study in Wilmington, Delaware. This community-based project organized fifteen individuals, formerly involved in the criminal justice system, from low-income neighborhoods in Wilmington into a PAR team to document and study physical violence in their neighborhoods. Wilmington is organized by approximately 6 neighborhoods, including Northside, Edgemoor, Northeast/Eastside, Westside, Riverside, and Southbridge. This PAR project specifically explored the Eastside and Southbridge sections of Wilmington, Delaware, collecting data from street-identified Black men and women between the ages of 18-35. Figure 2 shows a map of Wilmington, Delaware separated by these neighborhoods.

**Figure 2 Map of Wilmington, Delaware**



Mixed methods were employed to collect data in the form of (a) 520 surveys; (b) 26 individual interviews; (c) 3 dual interviews; (d) 3 group interviews; and (e) extensive ethnographic field observations. Also, a fourth group interview, not initially proposed or planned, was conducted with a group of mostly older men (ages 41-53) who were formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system. All data was collected in the actual streets of Wilmington, Delaware (e.g. street corners, local parks, barbershops, local record/DVD stores, etc.). Table 1 shows the methodological design of the larger PAR Study.

**Table 1 Methodological Design of Larger PAR Study**

<b>Community Sample (age range)</b>	<b>Community Survey Packet</b>	<b>Individual Interviews</b>	<b>Group Interviews</b>
18 – 21	173	12	1 (5 participants)
22 – 29	205	12	1 (5 participants)
30 – 35	142	12	1 (5 participants)
41 – 53	----	-----	1 (7 participants) <i>United Brothers of 9<sup>th</sup> Street</i>

This secondary analysis solely examines street-identified Black women between the ages of 18 to 35 from the larger study. The design for this analysis drew from 310 female surveys, 6 female individual interviews, 3 dual interviews, 2 female group interviews, and extensive field observations. Table 2 shows the Project Design for the qualitative data.

**Table 2 Project Design for Qualitative Data**

<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Individual Interviews</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Dual Interviews</b>	<b>Group Interviews</b>
18-21	1	18-22	---	---
22-29	3	27-29	---	1 (3 participants)
30-35	2	28-35	3 (6 participants)	1 (2 females and 1 male)

*Survey Subsample*

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

### *Individual Interview Subsample*

Individual interviews were used to explore intimate or extremely personal subject matter. Six individual interviews were conducted with street-life-oriented Black women living in the Southbridge, Eastside, and Riverside sections of Wilmington, Delaware. The average age for this subsample was 26.3 years while ages ranged from 18 to 35 years.

### *Dual Interview Subsample*

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

### *Group Interview Subsample*

Group interviews were the least intimate and offer a group analysis. Two group interviews were conducted with both street-life-oriented men and women living in the Southbridge section of Wilmington, Delaware. One group interview had three female participants between the ages of 27-29 years, and one group interview had two female and one male participant. The females in the second group interview ranged between the ages of 28-30 years, and the male in the second group interview was 29 years. The average age for this subsample was 28.6 years. Table 3 shows the survey sample of the participants.

**Table 3 Survey Sample by Gender**

<b>Age Cohort</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
18 - 21	75	98
22 – 29	83	122
30 – 35	52	90

*Procedure*

*Organizing the Wilmington Street PAR Team*

The Wilmington Street Participatory Action Research (PAR) team is made up of 15 Wilmington residents formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system who were between the ages of 21 to 48. Twelve of the Street PAR members were male and three were female. The fifteen member Street PAR team was joined by a robust institutional partnership that included: (a) three academic project partners (University of Delaware, Delaware State University, and Wilmington University), and (b) four nonprofit project partners (Wilmington HOPE Commission, Christina Cultural Arts Center, Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League, and United Way of Delaware). The street-life oriented Black men and women were selected through a citywide search and were rigorously trained in all phases of research for a two month period. PAR team members met 3-4 times per week for 3-5 hours per session, and completed 18 research method workshops in total. Research methods training centered



on research theory, method and analysis, and social activism. Upon successful completion of the training, responsibilities for the research team included (a) literature reviews, (b) data collection, (c) qualitative and quantitative analysis, (d) writing contributions, and (e) professional presentations. All street PAR researchers were monetarily compensated for all time contributed.

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

### *Instrumentation*

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

with law enforcement; and a (9) demographic inventory. Surveys took about 30-45 minutes to complete.

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

#### *Qualitative Data Coding Process*

The principal investigator along with the co-author used content analysis to generate codes for this study. The coding session was centered on the frameworks of Sites of Resilience (Payne, 2011) and Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The data analyst coded transcripts of qualitative interviews in relation to these theories.

Two domains were developed from the data coding: (a) Childhood Home Experiences and (b) Present Home Experiences, broken down into Core Codes of (a) Non-residential biological fathers and (b) Non-residential biological fathers of children; Sub Codes of (a) Substance Abuse and use and sale of drugs, (b) Incarceration; and Sub Themes of (a) Entrenched anger and (b) Attitudes towards the personal safety of their children. Table 3 explains this coding scheme in more detail.

**Table 4. Qualitative Coding Scheme: Data Analysis Process**

<b>1<sup>st</sup> Phase of Qualitative Coding</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Phase of Qualitative Coding</b>	<b>3rd Phase of Qualitative Coding</b>
<b>Broad Domain</b>	<b>Core Code</b>	<b>Sub Codes</b>
(1) Childhood Home Experiences	Non-residential biological fathers	(1) Substance Abuse - Sales and Use - Anger (2) Incarceration - Anger
(2) Present Home Experiences	Non-residential biological fathers of children	(1) Substance Abuse - Sales and Use - Anger (2) Incarceration - Anger (3) Childhood/personal safety

## Chapter 4

### RESULTS

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

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

#### **Descriptive Analysis: Childhood Home Experiences**

According to survey data most women were raised in the Southbridge and Eastside sections of Wilmington, Delaware (N=248). In fact, almost 40% of the women lived in Eastside during their childhood, while over 22% of the women report living in Southbridge as a child. However, according to interview data (N=12), less than 1% of the women report living in Eastside or Southbridge as a child, but instead lived largely in urban communities in the Northside or Riverside sections of

Wilmington, or the Philadelphia and Chester sections of Pennsylvania<sup>3</sup>. Overall, women in both survey and interview data report that they grew up around violence and criminal activity in their neighborhood as children. Almost 75% of the women surveyed claim that street activity was widespread where they grew up (N=310).

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

**Brandy<sup>4</sup> (29)** lost her mother to complications from HIV, and dropped out in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade due to her embarrassment of her mother's condition. Her father was in prison for the majority of her life, and although he kept in contact with her as a child, Brandy now refuses to keep in contact or financially support him because of the entrenched anger, bitterness or resentment she still holds. She believes that her father loves her, but she never received child support from him and her mother was a single-parent on welfare.

*Dual interview participant*

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

---

<sup>3</sup> Chester, Pennsylvania is approximately 15 miles from Wilmington, Delaware

<sup>4</sup> These names are not pseudonyms. All participants signed a consent form that allows their real names to be used. Participants are fine with releasing their names for the purposes of this study.

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

*Dual interview participant*

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

Over 50% of the women in the qualitative data hold negative attitudes about their biological father (N=11). These negative attitudes vary in severity, but many of the women reflect on growing up in female-headed homes with little or no financial support from their biological fathers. In addition, several women in the interviews express an entrenched level of anger towards their non-residential biological fathers. This anger can be contextualized by hurtful childhood experiences due to a lack of a father figure, and the yearning for acceptance from both the absent parent and the biological mother. Interestingly, 25% of women in the interview data grew up without a biological mother consistently in the home (N=12). In some cases, the women were raised solely by their biological father and in other cases a grandparent raised them as children.

*Dual interview participant*

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

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

It must also be noted, that while the majority of women in the qualitative sample report their father was not in the home, several of the women maintained positive relationships with their fathers as children. The women provide examples of being able to communicate with and receive advice from their fathers, spend time outside of the home with their fathers, and feel a level of connectedness with their fathers even while outside the mother's home. The women overall recognize the significance of their fathers in childhood, and many of the women maintain positive relationships with their fathers in adulthood. These experiences provide an interesting commentary on the presence of fathers in the home and the relationship therein between the father and child. Black men outside of the home can provide both emotional and financial support, as well as be positive role models for their children.

*Group interview participant*

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

*Dual interview participant*

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

*Individual interview participant*

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

*Why weren't their fathers in the home?*

*Substance Abuse.* The majority of women interviewed report not having a biological father or parent living in the home as a child due to substance abuse, which includes both use and sale of narcotics and excessive use of alcohol (N=5). Nearly 30% of the women said their parent was not in the home due to substance abuse.

*Dual interview participant*

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

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

*Individual interview participant*

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

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

*Individual interview participant*

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

The women in the interviews reflect on the drug and alcohol use in their childhood homes, and reveal how "fatherless" homes emerge as a function of substance abuse. The women reflect on the volatile relationship between their parents as a result of such substance abuse, and the way drug and alcohol use often pushed fathers and mothers out of the home. For example, a father's alcohol use might cause family members to remove him from the physical home. Interestingly, many of the



women interviewed report that both substance abuse and incarceration worked in tandem to remove their fathers from the home. For example, a father might use and sell drugs and get incarcerated due to his substance abuse.

*Incarceration.* “Fatherless” homes also emerge as a function of incarceration. Thirteen percent of the women interviewed report not having a biological father in the home due to incarceration (N=2). Biological fathers were incarcerated for extended periods of time due to crimes such as armed robbery or sale and use of narcotics. Women interviewed reflect on instable relationships with fathers due to recidivism and repeat encounters with law enforcement.

*Individual Interview Participant*

**Dionne (29):** [My relationship with my father] has always been the same...Just in and out... [I see] him sometimes. He stays in and out of jail. He’s still in jail.

*Group Interview Participant*

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

In fact, over 76% of the women surveyed agree that parents returning home from prison find it challenging to emotionally reconnect with their children (N=306). Over 82% of the women surveyed agree that it is difficult for fathers, returning home from prison, to provide for their children (N=308). These women recognize the economic and emotional strain that incarceration has on family composition and share similar attitudes on their relationships with their incarcerated parent. Overall, the

incarceration of their fathers in their childhood has influenced their perceptions of fatherhood and men in their present adulthood.

### **Descriptive Analysis: Present Home Experiences**

The majority of women in both the survey and interview data report that they currently live in the Southbridge and Eastside sections of Wilmington, Delaware. In fact, over 88% of the women in the survey data currently live in either Southbridge or Eastside (N=281) and almost 95% of the women in the interview currently live in either Southbridge or Eastside (N=17). A large majority of the women reside in low-income housing. According to survey data, at least 65% of the women report residing in low-income housing, and 15% note living in mid-income apartment complexes. Approximately, 95% of the women interviewed report living in the Wilmington Housing Authority and/or low-income housing.

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

college BA (N=310). About 20% of the women received a high school diploma and 33.3% have obtained a GED (N=15) in the qualitative sub-sample. Lack of education limits employment opportunities and stifles the women's ability to maintain financial stability as single mothers. Nearly two-thirds of the women in the survey data (N=303) and about 66% of women whom were interviewed report being unemployed but looking for work. Thus, many of the women in the interview and survey samples struggle to provide for their children without a father in home and break the cycle of single motherhood in their own children's lives. Many of the women grew up with teenage single mothers and later became teenage and/or single mothers of their own, demonstrating the intergenerational transmission of notions of single motherhood in street-life oriented populations.

*Street or Criminal Activity.* In addition, most women in both qualitative and quantitative data were presently or formerly street-identified. Approximately, 80% of the women interviewed report having criminal charges and 34% of the women surveyed (N=209) report being incarcerated. According to survey results, of those incarcerated, about 55% report selling drugs/narcotics as their primary hustle before being incarcerated. Other street activities included prostitution, theft, and robbery.

*Dual interview participant*

**Yasser:** What drew you to the streets?

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

*Group interview participant*

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

These Black women became street-identified due to issues surrounding personal and economic survival. Some of the women tried drugs to cope with being single mothers during distressed economic periods and some women sold drugs to help feed their children. Criminal activity must be contextualized not as “social deviance” but as adaptive to what these Black women would call a “means to an end,” “necessary at that time,” or “a way to survive.” Many of them grew up around criminal activity in their homes and communities and participated in such activity in their youth and adult lives.

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

*Individual interview participant*

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

**Yasser:** Arrested for what?

**Toni (18):** Assault.

*Dual interview participant*

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

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

*Group interview participant*

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

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

Many of these women are single and live in homes without a male figure present. In fact, almost 53% of the women surveyed are single without significant partners, and only 2.9% of the women are legally married (N=300). In addition, none of the women interviewed are married, and only 14% of the women have significant partners (N=17). By and large the women in both the survey and interview data are unwed without significant partners. Over 64% of women surveyed have children (N=300), and of those women almost 47% have between one to three children (N=174). All the women interviewed have children, and most have between one to three children, as well.

The issue of teen motherhood echoed in the interviews. Over 47% of the women interviewed had their first child before the age of eighteen (N=17), some as young as age fourteen. Subsequently, these same teen mothers became single mothers without a consistent father figure in the home for their children.

**Camille (24)** never met her birth father and her stepfather left the home at age 12. Although she was an honor roll student, she had her first child at age 14, and dropped out of school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

*Dual interview participant*

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

While **Camille (24)**'s response reflects a stereotypical depiction of Black youth and their supposed disinterest in school, her response must be put into context. **Camille (24)** experienced not only a fatherless home, but a detachment from her birth

father and neglect from her stepfather. Thus, these adverse home conditions played a significant role in not only Camille's attitude towards parenting and motherhood but also education and graduating from school.

Interview responses indicate that almost 77% of the women in the qualitative sample are raising their children without their children's father present in the home (N=13). The women hold both positive and negative attitudes towards the fathers of their children, and reflect on the struggle of single motherhood in their communities.

*Group interview participant*

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

*Individual interview participant*

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

*Group interview participant*

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

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

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

*Group interview participant*

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

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

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

*Substance Abuse.* The majority of women interviewed attribute their own non-residential fatherless homes to substance abuse, which includes the use and sale of narcotics (N=5). Nearly a quarter of the women interviewed report the fathers of their children sell drugs, and nearly 12% report that the fathers use drugs.

*Group interview participant*

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

The father of **Brandy's (29)** children is not in the home due to his substance abuse in the sale of narcotics. **Brandy (29)** is clearly angry about this and the fact that



he does not come visit his children often. This lack of a father figure due to substance abuse creates intergenerational notions of single motherhood because **Brandy (29)** is forced to raise her children alone without male support. Anger and the negative relationship towards the father of her children echoed through the female interviews. Several of the women believe that if the father is not currently involved emotionally or intimately with the mother, then the father will not provide for or be present in the lives of his children: “Some fathers feel like these days, if they're not with...the mother of their child then they don't want nothing to do with the child.”

*Incarceration.* “Fatherless” homes as a function of incarceration are also apparent in the women’s home experiences. Nearly 12% of the women surveyed report that the biological father of their children is removed from the home due to incarceration (N=2). Over 75% of the women surveyed believe that fathers sometimes leave the home when they are unable to provide for their families (N=309). Women also reflect on the instable relationships between fathers and their children due to this removal.

*Dual interview participant*

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

**Yadira (31)** discusses the contentious relationship between her son and his father due to his father’s incarceration. “Fatherless” homes are created as a function of incarceration of Black men, and almost two-thirds of women surveyed believe that

having a mother and father in the home would help reduce rates of incarceration  
(N=271).

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION

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

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

To a larger extent, substance abuse and incarceration were primary reasons why fathers weren’t in the home of the mothers as children and adults. Substance

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

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

#### *Future Direction*

Black single motherhood in street-life oriented communities moves through spaces of structural and social inequalities that both predicate and influence the lives of the mothers and their children. Thus, it is imperative to reshape the framework in the categorization and victimization of these individuals, and address the primary

issues that lead to the development of unwed, street-life oriented Black women with children. It is important to analyze these women in the context of their social phenomena and the societal forces that negatively affect their social well-being and progress. Structural issues such as the mass incarceration of Black men, welfare policy that make it financially beneficial for Black women to remain single and reside in low-income conditions and high-crime environments all make single motherhood conducive for Black women. Social and governmental policy must be remedied before there can be a decrease in female-headed homes. Most importantly, subsequent discourse on Black single mothers should not merely add to the literary dialogue without action, but discourse should advocate for social change and advancement for these women and their families, including the men.

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